# A STUDY OF THE IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS'

# USE OF READING STRATEGIES

## SHOHREH RAFTARI

## Universiti Sains Malaysia

## 2015

**In the name of GOD**


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**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements**

**for the degree of doctor of philosophy**


**BY**

**SHOHREH RAFTARI**


**Supervised By:**

# Assoc. Prof. Dr. Shaik Abdul Malik Mohamed Ismail


**Universiti Sains Malaysia**

**School of Educational Studies**

**2015**

# DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my dearest family, my mum and dad for taking care of me since my childhood, in addition to my mother in law my brothers my brother in laws and my sister in laws whose continuous love and prayers have had profound impact on success in my life. I pray to Almighty GOD to protect them and bless them forever.

My deep appreciation and gratitude goes to my life reason, light of my life after my dearest GOD, my Husband, who has supported me in each and every step of my way. His love kept me going when going was tough. I wish him the longest, happiest, healthiest and most prosperous life possible.

My unconditional love goes to Iran, which is mingled with my soul and blood and I will be grateful to her as long as I live.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, all praises and thanks go to my Almighty GOD for his blessing, help, and guidance. Peace and blessing be upon his messengers, especially the final one, Mohammad. I acknowledge the countless blessings of my dear God in my life and thank HIM for giving me the strength and wisdom to complete this project.

My sincere gratitude goes to my academic supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Shaik Abdul Malik Mohamed Ismail, who is sincerely one of the best human beings I have ever known in my life. I am profoundly indebted to him for his guidance and assistance. He has always provided me with abundant patience, motivation, understanding, and encouragement and has never ceased advising and helping me in every step of this research. In fact, words are unable to describe my gratitude towards this real symbol of humanity (the real creatures' noble) of creation of him dear GOD should be proud. I cannot find adequate words to express my thanks to him and his snow white heart. I wish him and his lovely family the longest, happiest, healthiest and most prosperous life possible.

Finally I wish to express my thanks to all the staff members of school of educational studies, dear Dato Prof. Dr. Rashid, the dean, for his kindness and support, Dr. Ali Samsuddin for his wise comments regarding my statistics, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Malik's former (Ms. Norshaferah Che Ahmad) and current (Ms. Emmida Abdul Hamid) secretaries in the school of educational studies for their warm behaviour; in addition to all my friends in Iran and Malaysia (Narges Hosseinian, Sima Ahmadpoor, Maysoon Taher, Marzyeh Hashemi, Zohreh Toqraei, Maryam Sharafinejad and Hamid Mortazavi) whose kind attendance and support lit the way to the fulfilment of my work.

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

**EFL**      English as a Foreign Language

**ESL**      English as a Second Language

**$L_1$**      First Language

**$L_2$**      Second Language

**MARSI**      Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies' Inventory

**SORS**      Survey of Reading Strategies

**LTH**      Language Threshold Hypothesis

**LIH**      Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis

**ELT**      English Language Teaching

**LLSs**      Language Learning Strategies

**FL**      Foreign Language

**SILL**      Strategy Inventory for Language Learning

# SATU KAJIAN TENTANG PENGGUNAAN STRATEGI PEMBACAAN DALAM KALANGAN PELAJAR EFL IRAN

## ABSTRAK

Tujuan utama kajian ini adalah mengkaji faktor yang mempengaruhi penggunaan strategi pembacaan EFL dalam kalangan pelajar EFL Iran, dan untuk profil kekerapan penggunaan strategi pembacaan dengan melakukan suatu tinjauan. Sampel kajian terdiri daripada 200 orang pelajar lelaki dan perempuan dari universiti dan sekolah menengah tinggi, yang dipilih daripada empat buah sekolah menengah dan dua buah universiti di bandar Kerman yang terletak di tenggara Iran. Dalam pengumpulan data, tujuh instrument (soal selidik maklumat diri, tinjauan strategi pembacaan (SORS), ujian kecekapan EFL, ujian pemahaman pembacaan EFL, ujian kefahaman L1, temu bual dan latihan membaca (think aloud) digunakan.. Berdasarkan keputusan pekali korelasi Pearson, umur peserta secara signifikan berkorelasi dengan penggunaan strategi pembacaan EFL mereka. Di samping itu, Analisis data kuantitatif melalui ujian T menunjukkan bahawa tiada perbezaan yang signifikan dalam dua pendidikan, keupayaan memahami pembacaan EFL, kebolehan memahami bacaan EFL, kebolehan memahami bacaan L1 dan kecekapan kumpulan EFL dalam menggunakan strategi SORS mereka. Walau bagaimanapun, terdapat perbezaan yang signifikan di antara dua kumpulan pembaca harian EFL dan Parsi (bacaan harian, tiada bacaan harian) yang menggunakan strategi pembacaan EFL. Kekerapan penggunaan strategi SORS EFL diprodil melalui ujian T dan spesifikasi min. Hasil analisis data kualitatif menyokong keputusan fasa kuantitatif dan strategi bacaan tambahan yang tidak tersenarai dalam SORS, diprofil berdasarkan temu bual dan analisis latihan membaca (think aloud). Implikasi kajian yang merupakan faktor terpenting dalam penggunaan strategi pembacaan adalah penambahan pengalaman

yang diperoleh melalui bacaan ekstensif dan jangka masa. Kesimpulannya, kaedah terbaik untuk meningkatkan penggunaan strategi pembacaan EFL dalam kalangan pelajar EFL Iran boleh dilakukan dengan meminta pelajar membaca dalam bahasa pertama mereka dan bahasa asing atau bahasa kedua.

# A STUDY OF THE IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' USE OF READING STRATEGIES

## ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the factors that influence the use of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading strategies by the Iranian EFL learners, and to profile their most and least frequently used reading strategies through conducting a survey. The study sample consisted of 200 male and female university and high school students, who were selected conveniently from 4 high schools and 2 universities in the city of Kerman in south east Iran. In collecting the data, 7 instruments (Personal information questionnaire, survey of reading strategies (SORS), an EFL proficiency test, an EFL reading comprehension test, an $L_1$ reading comprehension test, interview and think aloud) were used. Based on Pearson correlation coefficient results, the age of the participants was significantly correlated with their use of the EFL reading strategies. Furthermore, the quantitative data analysis through T-test showed that there existed no significant difference in the two educational, EFL reading comprehension ability, L1 reading comprehension ability and EFL proficiency groups in their use of SORS strategies. However, there existed a significant difference between the two daily EFL and the two daily Persian reading groups (some daily reading, no daily reading) in their use of EFL reading strategies. The high and low EFL proficiency participants' most and least frequently used SORS EFL reading strategies were profiled through T-test and mean specification. The qualitative data were collected through interview and think aloud. The results of the qualitative data analysis supported the quantitative phase results and extra reading strategies, which were not listed in SORS, were profiled based on interview and think aloud analysis. The study implications were that the most important factor in

the use of reading strategies is experience which increases through extensive reading and length of time. As a result, the best method to increase the Iranian EFL learners' use of EFL reading strategies can be persuading them to read in both their first and foreign or second languages.

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

## 1.0 Introduction

Reading is a very valuable source of input which plays an important role in the language learning process and boosts learners in gaining information, broadening their understanding of different subjects, and thus achieving their academic goals (Renandya & Jacobs, 2002). A possible definition of reading activity can be the understanding of the written word through the translation of symbols, or letters into words and sentences that have meaning to the individual. To understand a text's meaning the reader should also make use of his knowledge and understanding to be able to make sense of the written word (Martinez, 2006). The ability to read is an indispensable element in life in every corner of the world. The illiterate does not experience individual and social life fully. The struggle against illiteracy is one of the most gigantic and demanding tasks of any generation which concerns everybody (Bracken & Malmquist, 1971). Rivers (1981) propounds reading as the most important activity in the language classes and looks at it as a source of information, a pleasurable activity and a means of consolidating and extending one's knowledge of the language. Strevens (1977) introduces two reasons for the great importance of reading to the learners; first, its providing the learners with access to a great quantity of further experience of the language, and second, its opening the window into the normal means of continuing the learners' personal education.

According to Candlin (1983) the comprehension of any reader while reading a second or foreign language text is affected by many factors such as the text type, the reader's background knowledge, cultural and social inheritance, age, preferred

reading strategies, linguistic competence, purposes behind reading the target text, reader's affective involvement with the text, the tasks the reader is pursuing, etc. He further emphasizes that comprehension of any text is the result of the interaction between the reader and the text and different readers' comprehension of the same text may be different as a result of the differences between the mentioned factors.

The present study's focus is on discovering the possible relationship between some of the emphasized EF/SL reader factors which are introduced as effective in reading comprehension ability, i.e., use of reading strategies, exposure to the first and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) texts, EFL language proficiency, first and EFL reading comprehension ability, age and gender.

## 1.1 Background of the Study

This study aimed to examine the Iranian EFL learners' use of reading strategies and shed light on the factors that might affect the Iranian EFL learners' use of EFL reading strategies. The study also attempted to profile the specific reading strategies which were used by the Iranian EFL learners of high and low EFL reading comprehension abilities.

The reading strategies are a sub branch of language learning strategies (Maolin & Xiaoxin, 2010); consequently, this section started with the general concept of language learning strategies and moved on to the reading strategies which are the focus of the present study.

### 1.1.1 Learning Strategies

The educators in the field, e.g., Cohen (1998), Oxford (1986), etc., have not differentiated the learning strategies and the second or foreign language learning

strategies; consequently, the present researcher has discussed both topics under the same title.

According to Nunan (1988), the shift of stress from teacher and teaching to learner and learning has resulted in awareness and interest increase toward learning strategies in second and foreign language learning and teaching; as a result, according to Oxford (1990), Cohen (1998) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990), one of the most important characteristics of any effective learner is using a variety of techniques and strategies to solve the problems s/he faces while acquiring or producing any new language.

Furthermore, learning strategies are defined by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) as "the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn or retain new information" (p.1). By the same token, Oxford (1990) has defined the learning strategies as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (p.1). Also, Oxford (1990) believed that efficient instructors provide the learners with different strategies to apply when encountering educational problems, and that might be why most of second/foreign language learning strategy theories and research have focused on identification and instruction of good language learning strategies. Thus, the implied assumption of work on language learning strategies was that the identification of good strategies is of principal benefit to weaker learners to improve their language abilities (Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1975; Wenden, 1991).

Actually, there are quite a lot of learning strategies and researchers, e.g., Cohen (1998), Oxford (1986), etc., have usually subdivided them into metacognitive and

cognitive strategies; however, O'Malley et al. (1985) have added a third group of social mediation strategies too (Loshak, 2009).

Toomaneejinda (2010) defines different categories of learning strategies as follows:

- **Metacognitive strategies** refer to higher order executive skills including planning for, monitoring or evaluating the achievement of learning activities.

- **Cognitive strategies** are those which directly operate on incoming information by manipulating the ways to enhance language learning.

- **Social/affective strategies** are a broad group of strategies used either while interacting with other people or controlling one's emotions.

### 1.1.2 Reading strategies

There has never existed any agreement among the researchers in the field over a common definition for reading strategies. This diversity has been the result of the way the term has been used in different contexts such as first, second, or foreign language learning. Even though, research in the field of second/foreign language reading strategies indicates that strategies refer to conscious reading behaviours (A. D. Cohen, 1998).

Reading researchers have identified a wide variety of strategies which are used by native and non-native language readers. These strategies include a wide range from traditional reading behaviours of skimming to get the general idea, scanning to find a specific piece of information, guessing the meanings of unknown words, skipping unknown words, tolerating ambiguity, making predictions, confirming or disconfirming inferences, identifying the main idea, rereading, and using cognates to comprehend, to more modern strategies such as activating prior background knowledge and recognizing text structure (Carrell, 1998).

Many may think that since students 'can' read, they should know 'how to read' and that they must learn the necessary reading skills along their academic path. However, the reality is that although some students may pick up some of these skills, this does not necessarily make them strategic readers (Rivers, 1981). As Lau (2006) claims, good readers are those who use better strategies, and poor readers are those who give up easily or use inefficient strategies when they face problems. According to Alderson and Urquhart (1984), if the strategies used by efficient readers are discovered, general elements are found across different texts which can lead to reading improvement through teachers' focus on those strategies.

While reading comprehension is of grand importance in both first and second/foreign language learning, reading strategies, as the most important shortcut to enhance reading comprehension are of specific interest in the field of reading research (Zare & Mobarakeh, 2011).

### 1.1.3 Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension plays a basic role in second/foreign language teaching and learning. Richards and Renandya (2002) pointed to the reasons why reading comprehension receives a special focus in many second or foreign language teaching situations. They introduced reading as one of the most important goals of many EFL/ESL students who want to be able to read for pleasure, information, career, study purposes, etc. Moreover, according to Richards and Renandya (2002), by extensive reading, students can accelerate the process of language acquisition. In addition, reading provides good models for writing, introduces novel topics for discussion and introduces new vocabularies, expressions and new grammatical rules. And these are some of the reasons why reading comprehension is a skill which is highly valued by the students and teachers alike.

Anderson (2003) defines reading as the interaction of four things. He believes that together with the reader and the text there must also be fluent reading, or the reader's ability to read at an appropriate rate with adequate comprehension and strategic reading or the ability of the reader to use a wide variety of reading strategies to accomplish the purpose of reading.

Strategic reading is a prime characteristic of expert comprehenders because it is an indispensable building block of 'reading for meaning'. Reading strategies allow readers to elaborate, organize, and evaluate information derived from a text. Because of strategies' being controllable by readers, they are personal cognitive tools that can be used selectively and flexibly. Also, reading strategy use reflects both metacognition and motivation, because readers need to have both the knowledge and the inclination to use strategies (Carrell, 1998).

In the process of reading, one needs to understand both the text's direct and implied meaning and ideas. If students comprehend what they are reading through a variety of strategies, they will create an interested and self-regulative attitude toward the path of academic achievement (Amoli & Karbalaei, 2011).

## 1.2 Background of the Setting

In this section, the setting of the study (Iran) is introduced geographically. Also, some information about reading, education and English language in Iran are discussed.

### 1.2.1 Iran

The term 'Iran' is a derivative of the word 'Aryan' (the noble). What is called Iran today is part of a much greater geographical area that once was home to a great culture and civilization. Today, traces of Iranian culture can be seen outside modern

Iranian boarders in places such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, central Asia, the Caucasus, eastern Turkey, Iraq, and the southern Persian Gulf coastal region. These are all areas that historically were part of the Persian empire and therefore have been influenced by Persian culture (Kheirabadi, 2003).

Unlike much of the rest of the Middle East, Iran is not Arab. Iranians or Persians -as they were once called- are Indo-European rather than Semitic people. While Iranians speak a variety of local languages and dialects, the lingua franca is Persian, which is sometimes also called Farsi. Although, Persian today is written with the same script as Arabic, the language itself has roots closer to Latin or French than to Arabic or Turkish. For example *madar* is the Persian word for mother, *pedar* means father and *dokhtar* daughter (Clawson & Rubin, 2005).

Iran is a culturally diverse society, and interethnic relations are generally close and friendly. The predominant ethnic and cultural group in the country consists of native speakers of Persian. But the people who are generally known as Persians are of mixed ancestry, and the country has important Turkic and Arab elements in addition to the Kurds, Baloches, Bakhtyaris, Lurs and other smaller minorities -Armenians, Assyrians, Jews, Brahuis and others (Etheredge, 2011).

Iran is bounded to the north by Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkmenistan, and the Caspian Sea, to the east by Pakistan and Afghanistan, to the south by the Persian Gulf and the gulf of Oman and to the west by turkey and Iraq. Iran also controls about a dozen islands in the Persian Gulf. About one third of Iran's 4770 mile (7680 km) boundary is seacoasts (ibid).

**Figure 1.1 Iran's map (www.google.com, 2012)**

### 1.2.2 Reading in Iran

For the Iranian society which is very young ("more than half of the population of Iran is under the age of seventeen" (Friedl & Meader, 2004)) and in favour of keeping the pace with the developing world, reading can be an important activity helping this society not to lag.

Iran has invested heavily in literacy campaigns over the past 30 years; however, some Iranian officials and high-ranking clerics suggest: Iranians aren't embracing books after all. They warned recently that 'the culture of reading books' among Iranians is dwindling and, in a string of public speeches during a book event, called for the launching of campaigns to increase reading nationwide. "The society places greater value on sandwiches than it does on books," Iran's semi-official Mehr news agency quoted the high-ranking cleric Ayatollah Yusef Tabatabainejad saying in a

speech he delivered in Isfahan continuing as "Some only read and study books for financial gain and consider book reading a profession, which is a pity. We need to promote reading in a way to develop logical and rational thinking" (Mostaghim & Sandels, 2010).

According to the studies and surveys in Iran, the average period of time spent on reading by Iranians is very low in comparison to other developed or developing countries. The 1975 edition of Iran almanac reported that the average Iranians spend only two seconds a year on reading books (Deckert, 1982).

The results of a public survey conducted in May 2003 by the morning Daily newspaper 'Iran' shows that the reading time is an average of one hour and 49 minutes (Seifkashani, 2003). Statistical figures in many countries show that over seven hours a day are devoted to this activity; this average in Iran is likewise below the standard set by the world's cultural institutions, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Sepehrfar (2009) in his article, refers to the reading period of Iranians as being 20 minutes: "the 20 minutes spent on average by every Iranian citizen for reading books every day is a pitiful outcome of proliferation of internet connections in the country among other reasons".

### 1.2.3 English Language in Iran

English language was introduced to the Iranian society in 1873, at the time of Qajar dynasty whose kings enjoyed travelling to European countries and getting familiar with their cultures and languages. The first king of Iran after Islamic period who travelled to European countries including England was Naser Aldin Shah. Also, after the oil discovery in Iran in 1908, many English engineers traveled to Iran for oil

extraction. And that was why the interaction of Iranians with English was very widespread in that era in all fields specifically economic and political relations (Khajavi & Abbasian, 2011).

After the United States developed into a new powerful country, the economic, cultural, and political relationships between Iran and America increased. As a matter of the large demand for learning English in Iran, a lot of foreign schools were founded by the institutes and missionaries, government and foreign cultural associations. During Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979), Iran and America's relationship increased. That was the time when relationships and trips of imperial family to European countries increased and much value was assigned to English language as a result of the king and his family's interest toward western, and mostly the English-speaking countries' cultural values. Attempts were made to expand the English language in the country, and finally, English instruction was established in the Iranian educational system in 1934 (Hayati, 2009; Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010).

Afterwards, English language found its status in Iranian society as a foreign language which dominated over other languages taught in educational settings and became nationwide as the only foreign language with primary importance in academic environment. Later on, some students were sent to English speaking countries to pursue their studies for graduate and post-graduate levels (Sadeqi, 1993).

It was also in 1962 that a contract between Pahlavi University in Shiraz and the University of Pennsylvania was signed. The objective of this contract was the establishment of a bilingual institution for promoting western technologies in the country. The University of Pennsylvania recruited graduate Iranian students as faculty members in Pahlavi University. In this institution, all of the materials taught

were presented in English. These attempts made a great contribution to English language teaching and learning in Iran. The English teaching programs in the country lasted up to the Islamic revolution in 1979 (Khajavi & Abbasian, 2011). Since 1979, the educational system of the country has undergone extensive changes (Tajadini, 2002).

Iran is an old country with a long history exceeding 2500 years. There are many historical sites and museums in the country which attract the attention of tourists. By the advancement of tourism Industry, some of the gift sellers in big historical cities attend English language classes in order to learn English. This is one of the English language roles in the Iranian society after the Islamic revolution, which is mostly vital in business market. English language also has found its way in media in Iran. Recently a channel has been founded called Press TV which broadcasts Iran and the world news in English (Khajavi & Abbasian, 2011).

So far, English has found its way to the hearts of Iranians. It has proven itself to be a necessity and not a mere school subject. Just as the other parts of the world, English language is the dominant language of foreign trade, international conferences, air traffic in international airports and sea navigation all around Iran. Iran's relation with the world is mainly through English (Aliakbari, 2004).

### 1.2.4 Iran's Educational System

According to Fatemi (2008) the education system in Iran is structurally divided into five cycles, i.e., pre-school, primary, middle/guidance, secondary and post-secondary. The Iranian education system has got three outstanding characteristics:

1. Elementary education is mandatory.

2. Admission to post-secondary institutions is through a nation-wide entrance examination and only the most qualified students are admitted to universities.

3. Education is in the main free, though private schools and universities authorized by law are allowed to charge tuition fees.

The responsibility for education is divided between two major ministries; 1) the Ministry of Education and Training, and 2) the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education. The structure of the educational system under the Ministry of Education and Training is divided into four components:

1) Pre-school Education which is a one-year program for five year old children.

2) Primary Education which covers grades 1-5 for children aged 6 to 11. At the end of grade 5, students sit for a nation-wide examination. Those who pass this exam are eligible to proceed to the next cycle.

3) Middle/Guidance Cycle (junior high school) which covers grades 6 to 8 for children aged 11 to 13. At the end of the guidance cycle (junior high school), students take a regional examination under the supervision of provincial boards of education. Those who pass the examination are eligible to proceed to the next cycle, i.e. the secondary cycle.

4) The Secondary Education, which consists of three years, covers Grades 9 to 11 for the students aged 14 to 16. Students are required to complete 96 units in order to be awarded the High School Diploma.

The secondary graduates who are interested in post-secondary education must complete a one year preparatory program to be eligible to sit for the university

entrance examination known as Konkur. This nation-wide examination serves as the general National Entrance Examination for admission to universities.

Based on their scores in the National Entrance Examination, students are allowed to pursue their courses of the study as undergraduates. For higher degrees of masters and doctorial levels, students are supposed to sit for other exams and pass interviews.

### 1.2.5 English Language in Iran's Educational System

The study of English as a major subject in Iranian schools begins in the second year of junior high school (secondary or guidance school). After that, English is studied at the rate of three to four hours a week up to pre-university level (Fallahi, 1991).

Basically, the textbooks used for teaching English, predominantly, utilize reading activities and grammar with minimal focus on oral-based or writing skills (Tajadini, 2002).

Apart from public schools, English is also taught in private language institutes. In these institutes, English is taught to different age groups ranging from three-year-olds to adults. Most of the courses offered at different levels in private language institutes focus on the four language skills (Yarmohammadi, 1995).

Although, most private institutes offer English courses of similar content, the teaching standards are higher in some due to the utilization of contemporary teaching methodologies and the employment of graduate teachers. Moreover, they benefit from well-equipped language laboratories and libraries (Moghimizadeh, 2008).

Many universities and colleges in Iran also offer specialized courses at B.A., M.A., and PhD levels in English literature, teaching, linguistics, and translation. The goal of these courses is to produce experts in teaching English and linguistics as well as

competent translators. One significant impact of these courses is the production of experts who possess expertise in teaching and designing English materials (Jahani, 2006; Manzari, 2001; Tajadini, 2002).

### 1.2.6 The Status of Reading in Iranian ELT Classes

In EFL settings, reading can be substituted for the lack of oral interaction and contact with the target language, an advantage which supports language learning in ESL environments. As a result, among the four language skills, reading is the skill through which Iranian EFL learners can keep contact with the outside world (Rashtchi & Hajihassani, 2010).

Before the 1990's, English education in Iran focused on specifically reading skill in order to help students read and translate materials written in English. The curriculum in general, thus, was aimed at promoting students' grammar knowledge, reading and translation. Consequently, high school English teachers essentially used grammar translation method of instruction to meet the expectations of the national curriculum. The revised curriculum for high school English education in the recent decades, however, seems to have put more emphasis on communicative competence. Nevertheless, it is still far from being called 'communicative'. Teachers continue to use the grammar translation method through textbooks which lack listening and speaking activities and deploy reading and grammatical exercises which disguise 'writing' activities. They do so because the standardized national exams are still largely structural in orientation (Ghorbani, 2009; Hosseini, 2007).

Consequently, in the books where the emphasis is on reading, translation and grammar, the reading section is mainly composed of a substantial passage which is followed by some questions about the text. These questions are basically true/false

items, multiple choice items as well as open ended or short answer questions (Dahmardeh, 2009).

## 1.3 Statement of the Problem

According to Zare and Davoudi Mobarakrh (2011), in spite of the fact that the major focus of all high school English syllabus in Iran is on the reading skill, the performance of learners on reading section, both in final exams and Iran university entrance examination, is disappointing. Also, Bastanfar and Hashemi (2010) assert 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 really difficult task for Iranian students; furthermore, Marzban (2008) suggests that 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.

This is in condition that Kamran and Maftoon (2012) refer to EFL reading comprehension ability as the main facilitator of EFL learning at all language learning stages due to the large amount of input –in the form of reading texts- to which EFL learners are exposed. They further discuss reading strategies (deliberate, conscious procedures used by readers to enhance text comprehension whose application contributes to efficient reading (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001)) as the most important enhancers of reading comprehension ability which have attracted a lot of researchers' attention in the recent two decades. Moreover, Ghyasi, Safdarian, and Farsani (2011) introduce conscious, on time attendance to reading strategies as one of the most useful methods of reading comprehension improvement. In addition, Amiri and

Maftoon (2010) discussing the fundamental difficulties of Iranian students in EFL reading skill, point to the lack of strategy awareness in the Iranian students and awareness raising in the Iranian educational system as the problem sources.

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; Yin & Agnes, 2001; Zhang, 2001); also, despite the great emphasis on usefulness and teachability of reading strategies and the positive outcomes of the studies in this field (Aghaei & Pillaie, 2011; Aghaei & Zhang, 2011; Amoli & Karbalaei, 2011; Carrell, 1998; Fotovatian & Shokrpour, 2007; Macaro & Erler, 2008; Nourzadeh, 2005; Zhang, 2008), instruction of reading strategies is still being neglected by the Iranian educational system (Fotovatian & Shokrpour, 2007); consequently, the focus of the present study is on the use of reading strategies as a fundamental enhancer of reading comprehension by the Iranian students.

Fotovatian and Shokrpour (2007) argue that in addition to the strategies that facilitate reading comprehension, there exist strategies that hinder the improvement of EFL learners in this skill. Accordingly, they believe that the successful readers' strategies must be extracted to be taught to lower level learners and the unsuccessful readers' strategies must also be extracted to be rejected by the instructors and learners.

Parallel with Fotovatian and Shokrpour (2007), Zhang (2001) asserts the importance of successful readers' strategy elicitation to be imparted to unsuccessful readers. This is what on which Rubin (1975) emphasizes too: "Our knowledge of what successful

learners do (strategies they employ) can help us teach those techniques to weaker students and consequently enhance their learning" (p.11).

Also, according to Liyanage et al. (2010), Oxford (1996b), Oxford and Nyikos (1989) and Candlin (1983) the learners' use of strategies is affected by their geographical, cultural, ethnic, social and even religious background. Furthermore, Oxford (1990) emphasizes that, people of different cultures approach learning tasks differently; therefore, discovering and analysing their specific strategies will help teachers, learners and material and curriculum developers in a given culture to maximize the efficiency of teaching and learning in the language programs.

Consequently, there may be strategies which are specifically used more or used less only by Iranian EFL readers either to pave the path to success in comprehending EFL texts for them or derange it. So, what is first of all needed to establish a strategy centred curriculum for EFL reading programs (which is the core of EFL instruction in Iran) is a comprehensible list of 'must' and 'must not' strategies to ask the teachers to teach, to remove, to reinforce or to prevent, which is a total lack in the Iranian educational curriculum to date.

Up to this point, it is clarified that first, although the main focus of EFL instruction in Iranian schools is on reading, Iranian students have got basic problems in EFL reading comprehension (Bastanfar & Hashemi, 2010; Marzban, 2008; Zare & Davoudi Mobarakrh, 2011); second, a very useful enhancer of EFL reading comprehension is the use of reading strategies which are easily teachable (Aghaei & Pillaie, 2011; Aghaei & Zhang, 2011; Amiri & Maftoon, 2010; Amoli & Karbalaei, 2011; Carrell, 1998; Fotovatian & Shokrpour, 2007; Ghyasi et al., 2011; Kamran & Maftoon, 2012; Macaro & Erler, 2008; Nourzadeh, 2005; Zhang, 2008); third,

reading strategy instruction is greatly disregarded in the Iranian educational system (Fotovatian & Shokrpour, 2007); fourth, there exist both facilitating (strategies used by successful EFL readers while reading EFL texts) and debilitating (strategies used by unsuccessful EFL readers while reading EFL texts) strategies, which have to be extracted to be reinforced or rejected by the students and instructors (Fotovatian & Shokrpour, 2007); fifth, strategy use is affected by the users' geographical, cultural, ethnic, social and even religious background (Candlin, 1983; Liyanage et al., 2010; Oxford, 1996b; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989); and sixth, the best strategies to be taught in a country's schools are the ones extracted from the students of the same country who share similar backgrounds (Oxford, 1990).

Based on these points, the present researcher aimed to profile the reading strategies of the Iranian EFL readers to shed light on the facilitating and debilitating reading strategies which are used by the Iranian EFL readers who are, to a great extent, of the same sociocultural background. These strategies, to the best of the researcher's knowledge have not been profiled to date.

## 1.4 Rationale of the Study

To classify the participants into successful (high EFL reading comprehension ability), and less successful or unsuccessful (low EFL reading comprehension ability) to profile their reading strategies accordingly, they had to first be tested on their EFL reading comprehension ability. As a result, the first variable in the present study which was studied in correlation with the participants' reading strategy use was their reading comprehension ability and parallel with this variable the period of time they spent on reading EFL texts as an enhancer of EFL reading comprehension ability.

Marzban (2006) has classified the research into L2/FL reading comprehension into two categories, i.e. product studies and process studies. The product studies which are based on the linguistic interdependence hypothesis (LIH) and the linguistic threshold hypothesis (LTH) (Clarke, 1979; Cummins, 1979) examine the interrelation between L1 reading, L2/FL reading and L2/FL proficiency. On the other hand, the process studies' focus is on the strategies that facilitate the comprehension of L2/FL passages.

As it was discussed earlier in the present chapter, Iranians are not active readers even in their first language (Deckert, 1982; Mostaghim & Sandels, 2010; Seifkashani, 2003; Sepehrfar, 2009). According to LIH (L1 reading ability and skills transfer into L2 reading (Clarke, 1979)), one of the possible reasons for iranian students' weakness in EFL reading strategy use and consequently reading comprehension ability may be lack of enough exposure to first language reading. Consequently, the other two variables which were studied in correlation with reading strategy use in the present study were the period of time spent on reading in first language by the iranian students and their first language reading comprehension ability.

Furthermore, Iranian students are, on the whole, very weak in EFL general proficiency (Kalhor & Shakibaei, 2012; Mahboobi & Kaur, 2011). According to LTH (L1 reading ability is transfered to L2 reading, only when learners attain a certain level of L2 proficiency (Cummins, 1979)), one of the other possible reasons for iranian students' weakness in EFL reading strategy use and consequently EFL reading comprehension ability may be EFL low proficiency. As a result, the fifth variable which was studied in correlation with reading strategy use in the present study was the iranian students' EFL proficiency.

The majority of studies in the field of reading strategies (Cekiso, 2007; Harris, 2007; Klapwijk, 2011; Mehrpour, Sadighi, & Bagheri, 2012; Tamimi, 2006; Yousefvand & Lotfi, 2011), either outside or inside Iran, have concentrated on the outcomes of strategy instruction. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, the results of all these studies support the usefulness of strategy instruction with varying degrees. However, the most important matter disregarded, specifically in Iranian studies which is the focus of the present discussion, is the emphasis of scholars on the uniqueness of strategies used by the people of different nationalities. That is why the present researcher aimed to classify the strategies specifically used by the Iranian EFL learners which might, based on what the previous researchers claim, fall more useful to Iranian EFL learners to be taught.

With regard to these points, some still more important matters arise, firstly, according to what factors Iranian students' EFL reading strategies should be profiled and secondly, when should EFL reading strategy instruction start, also, thirdly, should strategy instruction be different for different students according to different factors such as age, gender and reading comprehension ability specifically in the Iranian educational setting, where many of the other basic factors (e.g. cultural and religious backgrounds) can be conceived the same for all the students?

Abraham and Vann (1987), Bialystok (1981), Rubin (1975), Oxford, Nyikos, and Ehrman (1988), Oxford and Nyikos (1989), Oxford (1989), Ellis (1994), Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995), Yildiz-Genc (2009), Wharton (2000), Teh, Embi, Yusoff, and Mahamod (2009), and many other researchers emphasize the basic role gender of the learners plays in their use of strategies while promoting other researchers to conduct further studies in this regard.

Although the gender factor has been undertaken in many Iranian studies in the field of reading strategies, it is a very controversial variable with some studies supporting its effectiveness (Nourzadeh, 2005),  and some others showing no priority of any gender over the other in the use of strategies or awareness towards them (Ghavam, Rastegar, & Razmi, 2011; Javadi, Keyvanara, Yaghoobbi, Hassanzade, & Ebadi, 2010; Yarahmadi, 2011).

As a result, the present study, in addition to the previously mentioned variables will investigate the correlation between the participants' EFL reading strategy use and their genders as the sixth independent variable of the study.

Age is the other emphasized variable in correlation with strategy use (Abraham & Vann, 1987; Bialystok, 1981; Ellis, 1994; Oxford, 1989; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Rubin, 1975; Su & Duo, 2012; Yang, 2007) which, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, has generally been disregarded in the Iranian studies (could only find a few studies which undertook age as a variable and mostly reported no significant difference in the use of reading strategies by the participants according to their ages, e.g. Javadi et al. (2010)).

Consequently, the present researcher aimed to undertake the age factor as the seventh independent variable to be studied in correlation with the individual dependent variable (Iranian students' use of reading strategies) of the present study.

Based on the discussed problems in section 1.3, and the logic at the back of chosen variables discussed in section 1.4, the present study aims to achieve the following objectives.

## 1.5 Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the common reading strategies of successful and less successful Iranian EFL readers and put forward a list of what must and must not be done by an Iranian EFL reader, while reading EFL texts, to succeed in achieving the goal of proficiency in EFL reading.

Specifically, the objectives of the study were as follows:

1. To examine the possible significance of the correlation between the age of the participants and their use of the EFL reading strategies.

2. To compare the two gender groups (male vs. female) in their use of the EFL reading strategies.

3. To compare the two EFL reading comprehension ability groups (high vs. low) in their use of the EFL reading strategies.

4. To compare the two L1 reading comprehension ability groups (high vs. low) in their use of the EFL reading strategies.

5. To compare the two EFL proficiency groups (high vs. low) in their use of the EFL reading strategies.

6. To compare the two EFL reading period (some daily EFL reading vs. no daily EFL reading) groups in their use of the EFL reading strategies.

7. To compare the two $L_1$ reading period (some daily $L_1$ reading vs. no daily $L_1$ reading) groups in their use of the EFL reading strategies.

8. To profile the participants' most and least frequently used EFL reading strategies.

Based on these objectives the following questions were formulated.

## 1.6 Research Questions

To fulfil the aims of the present study, the researcher attempted to find answers to the following questions.

1. Was there any significant correlation between the age of the participants and their use of the EFL reading strategies?

2. Was there any significant difference between the participants of the two genders (male vs. female) in their use of the EFL reading strategies?

3. Was there any significant difference between the two EFL reading comprehension ability groups (high vs. low) in their use of the EFL reading strategies?

4. Was there any significant difference between the two L1 reading comprehension ability groups (high vs. low) in their use of the EFL reading strategies?

5. Was there any significant difference between the two EFL proficiency groups (high vs. low) in their use of the EFL reading strategies?

6. Was there any significant difference between the two daily EFL reading period groups (some daily EFL reading vs. no daily EFL reading) in their use of the EFL reading strategies?

7. Was there any significant difference between the two daily $L_1$ reading period groups (some daily $L_1$ reading vs. no daily $L_1$ reading) in their use of the EFL reading strategies?

8. Which EFL reading strategies were used the most frequently by the participants?

The second research question was divided into three parts for data analysis, so that no ambiguity arouse related to the gender groups of different ages:

i. Difference of EFL reading strategy use between all the male and female students at both high school and university levels together

ii. Difference of EFL reading strategy use between male and female students at high school level alone

iii. Difference of EFL reading strategy use between male and female students at university level alone

Seven data collection instruments (4 questionnaires, SORS inventory, interview and think aloud) were used to collect the necessary data for answering these questions.

## 1.7 Significance of the Study

Based on the aforementioned facts in the previous sections, reading comprehension is one of the most important language skills that can further be reinforced through reading strategy instruction. This study is significant because:

1. The output of this study is aimed to offer insights to the Iranian curriculum designers and teachers to fill the gap related to the lack of EFL reading strategy instruction in Iran's educational system.