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An Investigation into the reading strategy use of EFL prep-class students

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Abstract

This study aims to reveal what kind of reading strategies are generally used by pre-intermediate level of students enrolled in the School of Foreign Languages, Osmaniye Korkut Ata University. Also, this study tries to find out whether there are gender and department differences among the participants. The population of this study consisted of 65 prep-class students. The data collected from the questionnaire was analyzed statistically. The results of the analysis indicated that students tend to report use of reading strategies with great frequency. However, these reading strategies do not differ in terms of their gender but their departments have an effect on the students' reading strategy use.

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1. Introduction

Reading is a complex skill which occurs with the combination of attention, memory, perceptual processes, and comprehension processes (Kern, 1989, p.135-149), and it is the mostly beneficial skill to obtain knowledge and raise information. Carrell (1989, p.121-134) regards reading as probably the most important skill in academic contexts because most students in academic settings learn a second language – especially English – to acquire

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information through reading. Therefore, understanding and performing a great amount of reading tasks in speed and with good comprehension becomes essential for students.

Many have stated that in the past fifteen years that reading is the important academic language skill for second language learners. In academic settings, reading is regarded to be the central means for learning new information and gaining access to alternative explanations and interpretations. Reading also provides the foundation for synthesis and ‘critical evaluation’ skills. In addition, reading is the primary means for independent learning whether the goal is performing better on academic tasks, learning more about subject matter, or improving language abilities (Grabe and Stoller, 2001, p.187).

1.1. Reading as a process

Reading is a psycholinguistic process. It requires partial use of available minimal language cues selected from perceptual input on the basis of the reader’s expectation. As this partial information is processed, tentative decisions are made to be verified, rejected or refined as reading progresses (Goodman, 1970, p.260). The definition claims that reading is an active process. The reader forms a preliminary expectation about the material, then, chooses the fewest, most productive cues compulsory to justify or reject that explanation. (Clarke and Silberstein, 1977, p.36) This is a sampling process in which the reader uses his knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, and the real world. Moreover, it assumes that reading must be regarded as a twofold phenomenon requiring process comprehending- and product-comprehension.

In another explanation, Nassaji (2003) identifies reading as a multi-factor process by focusing on the central parts placed in it. Nassaji states that there are various different skills in the complex process of reading composing of both lower-level and higher level ones. In this regard, lower-level ones are suggested to be identifying letters whereas higher-level ones are explained with the inclusion of background knowledge into the reading text.

According to Grabe and Stoller (2001), reading process requires that the reader draw knowledge from a text and combine it with information and expectations that the reader already has. It denotes “the ability to draw meaning from the printed page and interpret this information appropriately” (Grabe & Stoller, 2002, p.9). However, a good way to understand reading is to comprehend what is required for fluent reading.

In conclusion, reading comprehension has been seen increasingly to be the result of complex interactions between text, setting, reader, reader background, reading strategies, the L1 and the L2, the reader decision-making. Therefore, the reading strategy use has continued to be useful for conceptualizing reading research (Cohen and Macaro, 2007, p.188).

As a consequence, there is no doubt that the role of reading comprehension in English as a second language (ESL) and English as foreign language (EFL) settings has gained great importance over the last years. Carrell (1998a, p.1) claims that “...without solid reading proficiency, second language readers cannot perform at levels they must in order to succeed.” In second language learning, reading is regarded as one of the most challenging but necessary language skills, especially in academic settings which requires learners to get a fluent reading. One of the requirements for second language learners has been making use of effective reading strategies to improve their reading comprehension.

1.2. The definition and importance of reading strategies

In the literature, there have been a variety of attempts to provide a description for reading strategies; nevertheless, there has been a lack of consensus on the definition of reading strategies. Garner (1987) defined reading strategies as “Generally deliberate, playful activities undertaken by active learners, many times to remedy perceived cognitive failure” (p. 50). Moreover, Carrell (1998) stated that “Reading strategies are of interest not only for what they reveal about the ways readers manage interactions with written text but also for how the use of strategies is related to effective comprehension” (p.97).

According to Abbott (2006, p.637), reading strategies are “the mental operations or comprehension processes that readers select and apply in order to make sense of what they read”. The term of ‘reading strategy’ is specific tactics carried out by the reader in order to comprehend the intended meaning.

Another definition suggested by Barnett (1988, p.150-162) regards reading strategies as the mental operations included when the reader approaches the text effectively and makes sense of what he reads. Some examples of

problem solving techniques are skimming, scanning, reading for meaning, predicting, activating general information, making inferences, differentiating main ideas from supporting details, noticing cognates and word families, guessing word meanings from context and assessing those guesses, and following references.

Although the literature enables different definitions for the reading strategies, it is also important to make a distinction between reading strategies and reading skills. Alexander, Graham and Harris (1998) highlight two differences between strategies and skills: (a) “automaticity of performance” and (b) “learner awareness or intentionality” (p.135).

Research studies have demonstrated that language learners’ successful comprehension does not happen automatically. It depends mostly on the intentional reading strategy use. A successful learner is aware of his strategy use and why he uses strategies. They make use of strategies more frequently than less successful readers do. Moreover, they coordinate and shift those strategies when necessary. They can also distinguish between important information and details as they read (Duffy, 1993; Farrell, 2001). However, less competent readers are not well aware of selecting appropriate strategies or decide on how to connect them to have a useful strategy chain although he is able to describe his own strategies.

Therefore, since 1970s, second language theorists have suggested that the teaching of a variety of strategies helps students read fluently because it has been observed that different proficiency readers of all ages use many strategies in reading comprehension. Thus, overall improvement in reading comprehension is dependent on the improvement of skills and strategies and explicit training of strategies has often led to successful reading comprehension (Barnett, 1988, p.150-162).

However, not much research has been carried out to investigate the strategies used and recalled by second language learners. The purpose of this study is to determine the effect of the reading strategies used by the language learners on their reading comprehension achievement in second language learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Classification of reading strategies

Several scholars have attempted to classify reading strategies. Although their studies identify a variety of similar reading strategies, there have been significant differences in their strategy groups.

As one of the taxonomies of reading strategies, reading strategies are divided into two categories; cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies. Cognitive strategies are described as “mental steps or operations that learners use to process both linguistic and sociolinguistic content” (Wenden & Rubin, 1987, p.19). These strategies are used to construct associations between new and existing knowledge of the learners, and they operate on incoming information to enhance learning (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990). The prominent cognitive strategies are:

- Translation: Using the L1 as a base for understanding or producing a topic in the target language.
- Grouping: Reordering and reclassifying the material to be learned based on common attributes
- Note-taking: Writing down the main idea, important points, outline or summary.
- Deduction: Consciously applying rules to produce or understand the topic.
- Imagery: Relating new knowledge to visual concepts in memory via familiar, easily retrievable visualizations, phrases or locations
- Keyword: Remembering a new word in the second language by (1) identifying a familiar word in the first language that sounds like or otherwise resembles the new word and (2) generating easily recalled images of some relationship between the new word and the familiar word.
- Contextualization: Placing a word or phrase in a meaningful language sequence.
- Elaboration: Relating new information to other concepts in memory.
- Inferencing: Using available information to guess meanings of new items, predict outcomes. (Brown, 2007, p.35)

On the other hand, metacognitive strategies are higher critical thinking skills that help readers achieve awareness of whether they understand a reading text or not. Through the use of these strategies, learners identify available resources, decide which of these resources are important for the specific task they perform, and set goals for comprehension.

According to Bishop et al. (2005, p.207-208), metacognitive strategies are as follows:

- Imagine, using a variety of senses: This strategy enables readers to visualize the scenes in the texts and refer to their senses to predict the features of substances.
- Make connections: Readers connect their background with the information from the text.
- Analyze text structure: This strategy involves readers to discover the genre and also use other specific features in the text such as linking devices, table of contents, and subheadings.
- Recognize words and understand sentences: It refers to the familiarity with the lexical and grammatical knowledge and contextual cues to understand the sentences.
- Explore inferences: Readers are expected to recognize cause and effect relationship by using this strategy.
- Ask questions: Readers question themselves for instance on the author's message, or its relationship with the real life.
- Determine important ideas and themes: The introductory and concluding parts are the most important parts that readers need to pay attention in order to determine important ideas and themes.
- Evaluate, summarize and synthesize: This strategy contains the importance of pausing while or after reading to construct meaning.

As a matter of fact, the effectiveness of the use of those strategies does not rely on the strategy itself (Kern as cited in Farrell, 2001; Carrell, 1998). Instead, the factors which make a strategy effective can be sorted as: (a) who is employing it, (b) how consciously it is employed, (c) what kind of text is being read, (d) when it is being employed, and (d) why it is being used (Carrell, 1998; Farrell, 2001). What does one reader good may not do good for another reader. Similarly, whereas a strategy can be useful for a reader with a specific text, it may not be an appropriate tool with another text when the purpose of reading is different.

2.2. *Reading strategy research*

There has been a huge body of research on language learning strategies since the 1980's. This great amount of research has aimed to investigate the strategies that learners of a second language carry out when learning or using a language (Macaro, 2006). In terms of strategy use in reading, it has been suggested that learners employ different strategies to enable them to acquire, store, and retrieve the information (Rigney, 1978). Therefore, the use of these reading strategies are considered to be the indicators of how readers perceive a task, how they make sense of what they read, and what they do when they are unable to comprehend. In other words, as Singhal (2001) points out, such strategies are the techniques used by the learner to enhance reading comprehension and overcome comprehension errors, which has been confirmed by many different studies.

Akkakoson & Setobol (2009) explored the influences of metacognitive strategies instruction on Thai students' English reading comprehension. The findings yielded that the high and moderate reading proficiency participants employed more metacognitive strategies when reading texts than before. The mean scores of the post-test obtained by the participants of the high, moderate and low reading proficiency groups were statistically higher than those of the pre-test at the significance level of .05.

Additionally, Barnett (1988) investigated the impacts of metacognitive awareness and strategy use on reading comprehension. The participants consisted of 278 university students taking a French course. The results showed that there was a linear relationship between perceived strategy use and reading comprehension. The learners who used better strategies in reading displayed a better performance than the others who did not carry out those effective strategies. Metacognitive awareness was also observed to be correlated with reading ability. Students using effective reading strategies were seen to perform better on the reading comprehension tests in comparison with the readers who did not. That is to say, the relationships among perceived strategy use, actual strategy use and reading comprehension were positive.

3. **Methodology**

In this section, the study presents research design, research questions, the participants of the study, data collection instruments and data analysis.

3.1. Research design

The present study is a descriptive research which aims to examine reading strategy use of young adult Turkish learners in EFL classes. Following the design of a survey method, the study was mainly based on quantitative data. The research was carried out with Turkish EFL university students at Osmaniye Korkut Ata University, School of Foreign Languages. The participants voluntarily took part in the study. The questionnaire was administered to the students in English with Turkish translation as there would be some questions students would not comprehend. The research instrument included a questionnaire as quantitative data sources. The present study aims to answer;

1. What reading strategies do pre-intermediate level students report that they use?
2. Does gender affect the students' reading strategy use?
3. Do the students' departments affect their reading strategy use?

3.2. Participants

The participants are three classes of preparatory pre-intermediate level students in School of Foreign Languages at Osmaniye Korkut Ata University. Both classes consist of 20 students and the last class consists of 25 students. Thus, 65 students, enrolled in one-year intensive English course, offered at Osmaniye Korkut Ata University. The number of male students was 27, while the number of female students was 38. The average age of the participants was between 18-20.

3.3. Data collection instruments

The questionnaire, Oxford et al.'s (2004) "Reading Strategy Questionnaire", was given to 65 students. The questionnaire consisted of 35 items that were grouped under three categories: strategies used (a) before, (b) while, and (c) after reading. Items 1, 2, and 3 were concerned with the strategies used before reading. Items from 4 to 34 were related to the strategies used while reading. Finally, item 35 was a strategy appropriate to be used after reading. Information about the students' reported use of reading strategies was gathered through the use of a Likert scale (Brown & Rodgers, 2002). The questionnaire, which uses a 6-point Likert scale, provided the students with 6 possible answers that range from '0' (almost never) to '5' (almost always).

In order for the participants to comprehend the items in the questionnaire, the researchers themselves translated the items into Turkish and three other lecturers checked the validity and reliability of the questionnaire.

4. Data Analysis

This study was designed to investigate what reading strategies the students use in EFL classes and whether their reading strategy use changes according to their gender and department differences. Such analysis took place through the use of descriptive statistics and *t*-tests to see whether or not there were differences between male and female students and One-way ANOVA to find out whether or not there were differences in terms of students' departments. The result of Reading strategy Questionnaire, gender differences and department differences were explained in this section.

4.1. The research question 1: What reading strategies do pre-intermediate level students report that they use?

The data gathered from the instrument (the questionnaire) were analyzed quantitatively. The percentage ratio values of the data gathered from the questionnaire were computed by using Microsoft Office Excel and SPSS 16.0. The answers to Likert type questions were analyzed quantitatively using percentages and frequencies. The results gathered from the questionnaire provided knowledge about what reading strategies the pre-intermediate level students use in EFL classes and whether their strategy use varies according to their gender or department.

As a result of classification of items in the questionnaire, it was found that the questionnaire consists of three strategies employed 'before reading', 31 strategies used 'while reading', and one strategy employed 'after reading'. The strategies used before, during, and after reading represented in the questionnaire were distributed unevenly among the questionnaire items.

To explain the frequent, moderate, and infrequent use of these strategies, the scale was divided into three

segments. Since the questionnaire used a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from ‘0’ to ‘5’, 1.66 was accepted as the mean spread dividing the ranking into three parts. For the purpose of this analysis, the strategies whose means are between 0 and 1.66 were designated as being infrequently used, between 1.67 and 3.33 as moderately used, and between 3.34 and 5.00 as frequently used strategies as reported by the students. The mean scores were between 1.2 and 4.2 that means students do not use all of the strategies; however there is a high number of reading strategies used by students. The most frequently used strategies (14 strategies) and the least frequently used strategies (4 strategies) were presented in the tables below along with their percentages, mean and the strategy type: (before reading: B; while reading: W; after reading: A)

Table 1. The most frequently used reading strategies as reported by the students at Osmaniye Korkut Ata University, School of Foreign Languages:

Reading Strategies	SA/A %	N %	SD/D %	Mean	Type
1. I use the title to help predict the contents.	78.5	21.5	0.0	4.2	B
2. I consider what type of text it is, such as a newspaper article, a scientific paper, or a novel.	60.0	29.2	10.8	3.5	B
3. I skim it first, and later I read for details.	60.0	24.6	15.4	3.5	B
5. I pay attention to the beginning and the end of each paragraph.	53.9	33.9	12.4	3.4	W
7. I try to understand the meaning of every word in a text.	73.9	24.6	1.5	4.2	W
8. I translate each sentence into my native language.	67.6	23.1	9.2	3.7	W
9. I start reading from the first paragraph and read all the way through the last paragraph.	83.1	16.9	0.0	4.3	W
11. Continue reading even if I have difficulty.	69.3	24.7	6.2	3.8	W
12. I change reading speed depending on the difficulty of a text.	67.7	32.3	0.0	3.8	W
15. I link the content with what I already know.	58.5	32.3	9.2	3.5	W
17. If I don't understand something such as a word or phrase, I guess its meaning using clues from the text.	66.2	33.3	1.5	4.0	W
18. If I don't understand something such as a word or phrase, I guess its meaning using information I know about the topic.	61.5	36.9	1.5	3.7	W
24. I make a picture in my mind about what the text is saying.	60.0	32.3	7.7	3.6	W
33. I try to figure out the main idea of each paragraph.	55.4	38.5	6.2	3.6	W

Note: SA/A: Strongly Agree/Agree, N: Neutral, SD/D: Strongly Disagree/Disagree, M: Mean, T: Type, Number of Students: 65

Table 1 demonstrates 14 reading strategies that students most frequently use in their ELT classes. Three of these strategies belong to the ‘before reading’ part and the rest of the strategies belong to ‘while reading’ section. The most frequently reading strategies used by students (78%) are “I use the title to help predict the contents” and (73.9%) “I try to understand the meaning of every word in a text.”

Table 2. The least frequently used reading strategies as reported by the students at Osmaniye Korkut Ata University, School of Foreign Languages:

Reading Strategies	SA/A %	N %	SD/D %	Mean	Type
14. I skip unknown words.	10.8	26.1	63.1	1.4	W
27. I follow the line I am reading with my finger or my pen.	21.5	26.1	52.3	1.7	W
28. I use slashes to divide a sentence grammatically.	12.3	20.0	67.7	1.2	W
29. When I cannot understand a sentence even if I know every word, I skip that sentence.	21.5	21.5	56.9	1.6	W

Note: SA/A: Strongly Agree/Agree, N: Neutral, SD/D: Strongly Disagree/Disagree, M: Mean, T: Type, Number of Students: 65

Table 2 shows the least frequently used reading strategies used by students. All of these strategies belong to ‘while reading’ section. The lowest ranking strategy that students use (67.7%) has been “I use slashes to divide a sentence grammatically.”

4.2. The research question 2: Does gender affect the students' reading strategy use?

The second research question pertained to the differences between male and female EFL students' reading strategies: *Does gender affect the students' reading strategy use?* The results revealed that males and females did not significantly differ in their overall strategy use.

Table 3. Gender differences in reported reading strategy use

	N	M	SD	df	t	p-value
Male	27	103,30	19,062			
Female	38	110,08	14,511	63	-1,629	,135

Note: N: the number of the participants, M: Mean, SD: Standard deviation

As Table 3 demonstrates, there were no significant differences between male and female students in terms of using reading strategies. In other words, gender differences do not affect the students' reading strategy use. The average mean and standard deviation were calculated as 103,30±19,062 for males, and 110,08±14,511 for females. The 'p' value of 0,135 is higher than 0,05 ($p > 0,05$), which demonstrates that there is not a statistically significant difference between males and females.

4.3. The research question 3: Do department differences affect the students' reading strategy use?

The third research question pertained to the students' department differences: *Do the students' departments affect the students' reading strategy use?* The results revealed that there is a statically difference between their departments. The table 4 demonstrates departments (Business Administration, Management Information Systems, Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Energy Systems Engineering and Food Engineering) and the number of participants, mean, standard deviations and p-value are presented in detail.

Table 4. Department differences in reported reading strategy use

Departments	N	M	SD	F	p value
Business Administration	10	114,57	13,5		
Management Information Systems	15	106,00	20,9		
Electrical and Electronic Engineering	10	100,00	12,8	2.471	,019
Energy Systems Engineering	15	98,69	14,0		
Food Engineering	15	113,75	11,4		

As Table 4 demonstrates, there is a statistically significant difference according to the students' different departments in terms of using reading strategies. In other words, the department difference affects the students' reading strategy use. The 'p' value of 0,019 is smaller than 0,05 ($p > 0,05$), which demonstrates that there is a statistically significant difference between students that study in different departments. As a result, the reading strategies used by the pre-intermediate level students at Osmaniye Korkut Ata University, School of Foreign Languages differ in terms of their departments.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

In conclusion, this research was designed to investigate what reading strategies the students use in EFL classes and whether their reading strategy use changes according to their gender and department differences.

This study was conducted with 65 preparatory class students at Osmaniye Korkut Ata University, School of Foreign Languages. In the first stage of the study, it was investigated what reading strategies the pre-intermediate level students use in EFL classes. The findings of this study revealed that students tend to report use of reading strategies with great frequency. Fourteen reading strategies were most frequently used by the students. Three of these strategies belong to 'before reading' section and the rest of them belong to the 'while reading' part. However, four strategies were least frequently used by the students as belonging to the 'while reading' section.

In the second stage of the study, the research investigated whether or not there was a significant difference in using reading strategies in terms of the students' gender and department differences. As for the gender differences,

it was found that there was no statistically significant differences between male and female students in using reading strategy. Therefore, from this perspective it can be stated that the findings are different from that of the research conducted by Phakiti (2003) proposing that males tended to use significantly more metacognitive strategies than females. However, as for the department differences, the students from five different departments were conducted in the study. Findings revealed that there was a statistically difference in using reading strategies according to the students' different departments.

To sum up, the reading strategies were frequently used by the pre-intermediate level students at Osmaniye Korkut Ata University, School of Foreign Languages. However, these reading strategies do not differ in terms of their gender but their departments have an effect on the students' reading strategy use.

Therefore, based on the findings of the current study, the following implications could be of some sort of help to L2 curriculum designers and reading teachers: It is suggested that teachers should be aware of the reading strategies that their students use. Using some well-established inventories of reading strategies, they should introduce their students to useful reading strategies which could increase their comprehension when reading English academic materials. As Clarke and Silberstein (1977) mention, the goal of reading instruction should be "to provide students with a range of effective approaches to texts including helping students define goals and strategies for reading, to use pre-reading activities to enhance conceptual readiness and to provide students strategies to deal with difficult syntax, vocabulary and organizational structure" (cited in Grabe, 1991, p.377).

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