

An Investigation of Afghan EFL Learners' Reading Strategy Use

Arzoo Wsay

Istanbul Aydin University, Istanbul, Turkey
arzoowasy[at]stu.aydin.edu.tr

Abstract: *Reading is a complex skill which involves cognitive processes. The learners who use reading strategies as part of learning how to read, they improve their memory, thinking skills, creativity and imagination. They also develop their length of concentration. Reading is a dynamic skill that is important for learners to learn using a variety of sources. It is especially important for those who are learning academic English. The aim of this study is to identify the most and the least frequently used reading strategies by the learners so that the teachers would take action steps to guide Afghan language learners to learn and to practice those least frequently used reading strategies. This research was conducted with 49 female students at Maarif girls school through a questionnaire in Sheberghan city Jowzjan Afghanistan. The finding of this study is stated that majority of Afghan students rely on Top-down more than Bottom-up reading strategies which is explicit learning and unskilled learners are not able to use Top-down they use implicit learning which is bottom-up reading strategies therefore, this study is beneficial for those students who are learning English through exposure to traditional methods in EFL classrooms.*

Keywords: Learning English, reading comprehension, reading strategy use

1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is a skill that all individuals should acquire for their educational success, without having this skill students may face reading problems and struggle in many subject areas, and it is a significantly important skill in all areas of school subjects (Baier, 2005). Reading is one of four skills that every person needs to acquire in order to gain knowledge to become an educated person and it is especially a required skill for EFL/ESL learners. According to Hasibuan and Ansyari (2007), reading is an active process in which learners relate incoming information to their background knowledge. This is why it is argued that there is an interaction between the reader and the text during the reading comprehension process. Tankersly (2003) points out that the interaction between the readers and the author is the key to comprehension. Furthermore, it is stated that a reader uses his/her background and language knowledge, reading skills and strategies to understand the meaning of a text (Brown, 1994). Hence skilled readers use their background knowledge and experience to get the information and make sense of the passage while reading a text. Therefore, a reader uses his knowledge, skills and strategies to encode the meaning of a text which includes words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs. Numerous discussions and investigations have been done in related literature to find out the nature of reading comprehension. According to Silberstein (1994), the person who reads is a dynamic one that tries to construct meaning through the use of a variety of comprehension approaches and styles. This argument implies that reading comprehension involves collecting and connecting information about a topic. For this reason, Chamot (2005, cited in Brown 2007) highlights the importance of the readers' use of reading strategies consciously. Anderson (1991) also points out the same thing. Consequently, we may conclude that learning how to use reading strategies appropriately is important for language learners.

Teaching the learners how to use reading strategies in an English language classroom is a significant approach that enhances learners' reading comprehension; it helps them to get a plan on how to read and improve their reading skills; meanwhile by using reading strategies students overcome their reading difficulties. The person who reads a lot writes better and develops his/her vocabulary to be able to speak in the target language than the person who reads little. Oxford and Crookall (1989) defined reading strategies as problem-solving skills, behaviors, learning techniques, or study skills that can lead learners to learn more efficiently and effectively. Also, it has been clarified by O'Malley & Chamot (1990) that reading strategies are methods, actions, techniques, or behaviors that are conscious or unconscious; readers apply these strategies to their comprehension and perception problems. Reading strategies have been classified by many scholars in many categories. Bottom-up and top-down approaches are two types of strategies that are divided by Goodman (1970). According to him, bottom-up strategies involve linguistic components such as letters, morphemes, syllables, words, phrases, grammatical cues, and discourse markers. On the other hand, Top-down approaches rely on one's own knowledge and experience in order to interpret a text through a method of puzzle-solving, or through inferring significance in determining what to absorb and what not.

By reflecting on related literature, it becomes clear that different levels of cognitive processes are employed in the process of reading comprehension. These cognitive processes are illustrated in three primary reading models: top-down, bottom-up, and interactive methods. The basic goal of reading in the top-down method is to grasp the general connotation of the passage (Anderson, 1999; Carrell, 1984). That is, readers do not need to concentrate on all the textual signs, but they need to get the text's overall meaning. Top-down processing is about using contextual information in pattern recognition. This is because the meaning of the words around it offers a context to support comprehension. In bottom-up processing, the reader focuses at first on the

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smallest units of a language, letters, and sounds then moves from these to understand the text. The interactive approach assumes that there is a link between the top-down and the bottom-up approaches. It provides relations between the learners and the passage. Interactive reading involves connecting the textual details from the text to the background knowledge of the reader (Grabe, 1991). Hence, we assume English language teachers need to introduce and do some practice activities on reading strategies to improve learners' reading skills in a language classroom. The aim of the present study was to explore the most and the least used reading strategies by the learners. Therefore, the teachers would take action-steps to guide language learners to learn and to practice those least frequently used strategies in the process of reading comprehension. The following research questions guided the study:

- 1) Which reading strategies are used most frequently by the students?
- 2) Which reading strategies are used least frequently by the students?

2. Research Methodology

The study was carried out at Afghan-Turkish Maarif Okullari/ Fazilat/Vahab Girls High School, Sheberghan city of Jawzjan, Afghanistan in the 2019 academic year. The learners who participated in this study were 49 female high school students. The participant's age range was 14-16. The participants' English language proficiency level was intermediate. The students' native language was Persian and Uzbek. The data collection instrument that was used in this study was a reading strategy questionnaire which was originally developed by Oxford et al., (2004) and later adapted by Uzunçakmak (2005). The questionnaire is based on a 5-point Likert-type rating scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Almost always*). The reading strategy questionnaire involves a total of 45 items. Out of 45 items, 15 items are concerned with bottom up reading strategies and 30 items top down strategies (Appendix A). The reading strategy questionnaire has three parts. The first part of the questionnaire involves 6 items (Items 1-6). This pertains to elicit the pre-reading strategies used by the learners. For this reason, Items 1-6 are related to the pre-reading strategies such as setting purposes, making predictions, building knowledge, asking questions, previewing the vocabularies, skimming and scanning. The second part of the questionnaire involves Items 7-43. The questionnaire items in this part pertains to finding out the while-reading strategies such as attending to the organization of reading texts and/or the different elements in a text, guessing, reading silently together with searching for answers to pre-reading questions and confirmation of predictions. The third part of the questionnaire involves items 44 and 45. The questionnaire items in this part pertains to finding out the students' use of post-reading strategies such as evaluating, mapping, discussing, and returning to initial predictions. Descriptive analysis was used to analyze the data gathered from the questionnaire through SPSS software version 22 (SPSS Inc. USA).

3. Findings and Conclusions

The first research question of the study aimed at finding the types of reading strategies that the students use the most in comprehending reading materials. The findings of the present study showed that the most frequently used pre-reading strategies by the majority of the students in respective order are *Paying attention to visuals*, *Using the title and Prior knowledge for prediction and Underlining important parts*. The frequent use of these pre-reading strategies reveals that the students in this study are conscious of the contribution of these strategies to their reading comprehension. It may also be argued that their English language teachers are aware of the need to teach their students the pre-reading strategies to promote effective readers and this might be the reason why they have laid the grounds for their students to use these strategies in reading comprehension. As for the conclusions in relation to the while-reading strategy use, we found out that at this stage most of the students use top-down reading strategies the most. That is, out of five most frequently used while-reading strategies four of them are considered as top-down, while only one of the most frequently used while-reading strategies is categorized as bottom-up strategy. This conclusion is in line with that of Salatacı and Akyel (2002) who conducted a research on students' use of reading strategies. More specifically, the most frequently used strategy among the participants of the study is *I start reading from the first paragraph reading all the way through the last paragraph*. In fact, this is the most frequently cited strategy in use among all the strategies listed in the questionnaire. This finding indicates that the majority of the learners tend to read the whole reading passage to get an overall impression of the messages conveyed in a text. We also concluded that most of the students consider reading the first and the last sentences of the paragraph. The use of this strategy reveals that most of the students know where in a text they can find the topic sentence of a paragraph. The third most frequently used strategy among the participants of the study is *making the picture in their mind about the text*, while the fourth most frequently used strategy is *trying to understand the meaning of every word in a text*. The fifth most frequently used reading strategy by learners is *Underlining important parts*. All in all, we may conclude that most of the participants in this study use the top-down strategies more than the bottom-up ones in comprehending the written materials. On analyzing the responses given to the post-reading strategy use, we observed that more than half of students *summarize the reading texts using their own words* while only less than half of the students evaluate the messages conveyed in the reading materials and consider the author's point of view. Based on this finding, we may conclude that the participants' English language teachers spare time on summary writing while they don't focus on the evaluation of the messages conveyed in reading texts.

The second research question of the study aimed at finding the least frequently used strategies in the reading comprehension process. The findings of the present study revealed that the least frequently used pre-reading strategy by some of the students in respective order is: *first skimming and later reading for details*. Even though the usage of the

percentage is not very low. According to this finding it seems that students sometimes use this Top-down pre-reading strategy and they may not be aware of this strategy at all or they have not been taught through this strategy by their English language teachers.

As for the conclusions in relation to the while-reading strategy use, the findings showed that the least frequently used strategy by learners in respective order are *Skipping the unknown words*, *Paying attention to linking words*, *Predicting for the next parts of text*, *Checking what each pronoun refers to grammatically* and *Reading aloud the difficult parts of text*. Drawing on these findings, we may conclude that the students need explicit training on how to use the least frequently used while-reading strategies. For example, modeling ways of guessing the meanings of unknown vocabulary items using contextual clues and sparing a certain amount of time for its practice in the classroom would have a positive impact on the students' motivation for reading. Similarly, the students' attention should be drawn on the importance of linking words and the pronouns to highlight their contribution to the coherence of reading materials. These types of awareness raising activities, we believe, would contribute to the students reading efficacy. The findings on the least used strategy during post-reading showed that most of the students do not evaluate the text and the writer's viewpoint. This might mean the teachers neglect the use of this strategy in reading instruction.

The finding of the current study is in line with research of Kantarci (2006) and Wung (2016). The study conducted by Wung (2016) investigated the differences between more successful and less successful EFL learners in their comprehension performance and the reading strategy that they use in comprehending English texts. Yuksiler (2014) investigated the pre-intermediate learners reading strategy use. Anderson's (1991) research was about individual differences in strategy use in second language reading and testing similar to Yayli (2010). In all of the above studies, it is highlighted that learning reading strategy is an important approach that students should be aware of to enhance reading comprehension and they need to take straightforward steps to utilize these effective strategies to promote their reading skills and to be able to get enough input and produce output easily while learning the target language.

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