

# Reading Strategies of Iranian Postgraduate English Students Living at ESL Context in the First and Second Language

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**Abstract.** Usually, Iranian students are not good in English which is considered as their foreign language. In this study, the researcher tries to investigate L1 and L2 reading strategies of Iranian university students of different level of English proficiency. The students responded to a reading strategy questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The findings showed that advanced proficiency students used more strategies reading in L2 compared to the other group of students. There was an overlap in the types of strategies used for both L1 and L2 reading proficiency levels. At the end of this study, some implications for ESL/EFL reading strategy instruction are provided.

**Keywords:** first language, second language, reading strategies.

## 1. Introduction

The consensus among reading educators and experts is that reading is a complex, interactive process that involves features of readers, texts and tasks (Bernhardt, 1995; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Maarof, 1998; Rumelhart, 1977 in Singhal, 1998). In the reading process, the reader is an active participant, constructing meaning from clues found in printed text (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Bernhardt, 1991, Carrell, 1991; Grabe, 1991; Rumelhart, 1980). In other words, meaning is not inherent in texts, rather texts have the potential for meaning (Widdowson, 1984). Reading is also an individual process that often entails different interpretations for different readers. Till now, the focus of research revolves on whether reading in one's first language (L1) is similar or different; If similar strategies are used in reading in L1 and L2. Researchers try to examine any relationship between L1 and L2 reading processes. Another hot issue is whether reading in L2 is a reading or a language problem (Alderson, 1984). If the strategies used by proficient L1 readers are transferable to reading in the L2. Both reading in L1 and L2 involve the use of various strategies that assist readers in understanding what is read (Carrell, 1991; Bosser, 1992; Nambiar, 2009). Studies show that both readers' L1 reading ability and L2 language proficiency contribute to L2 reading comprehension (Carrell, 1991; Bosser, 1992). Researchers have proposed a number of hypotheses about the processes and relationship of reading in L1 and L2 (Bernhardt & Kamil, 1995). Clarke (1980) argues that when readers lack proficiency in the L2, the limitation "short-circuits" good learner strategy use of the L1 when reading L2. The assumption is that the reader's L2 proficiency should be beyond the linguistic threshold before good learner strategies are transferred to L2 reading (Alderson, 1984). Cummins (1979, 1983) proposes the idea of a common proficiency whereby it can be suggested that a proficient reader in the L1 should be able to read in the L2. Enright et al (2000, p. 7) describes L2 reading as different from L1 reading in three basic ways: 1. L2 readers build on prior L1 reading experience, 2. their reading processes are cross-linguistic, involving two or more languages, and 3. their reading instruction usually commences before adequate oral proficiency in the target language has developed. They point out that four other factors distinguish these readers from L1 readers: 1. transfer of L1 reading skills and strategies, 2. facilitation from L1 to L2 structural similarity, 3. crosslinguistic interactions during L2 reading, and 4. processing constraints imposed by limited linguistic knowledge.

Studies on L1 reading comprehension suggest that reading skills such as cognitive and meta-cognitive skills are transferable to other reading contexts (e.g., Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Guthrie, 1988). L2 acquisition studies show that linguistic and meta-linguistic factors are transferred from L1 to L2 oral and written production, communicative strategies, and pragmatics (e.g., Hakuta, 1976; Cohen, 1986; Irujo, 1986). Still, investigations on such issues on reading have continued to be research agendas. Although, findings have been inconclusive, many educators persist with the practice of teaching reading strategies in the effort to help learners read L2 texts with comprehension.

In Iran, English is a foreign language and reading English is crucial for academic purposes. Although English is learned as a subject at school, it continues to be relevant for university education. Reading instruction in educational settings includes teaching various reading skills and strategies to learners. Because the education system is in Persian, reading strategies acquired in the L1 can be an asset to learners learning English as an L2. It is important to examine the reading strategies used in reading L1 and L2 to help the language learners improve comprehension of L2 they deal with. If reading strategies used in reading a Persian text helps the reader to comprehend the message conveyed, then the strategies might be used for English texts as well. In addition, when students are aware of various reading strategies, they will be motivated to keep reading in L1 or L2. Thus, learners' reading strategies need to be examined to determine any similarities or differences of strategy use when reading in L1 and L2 to not only raise their awareness about strategy use, but also to assist them in enhancing their comprehension of L2 texts. Therefore, the study is conducted to address:

- What are the common reading strategies of advanced, intermediate, and low proficiency students when reading in L1?
- What are the common reading strategies of advanced, intermediate, and low proficiency students when reading in L2?
- What are the similarities or differences in strategy use among the learners reading in L1 and L2?

## 2. Review of Literature

Studies show that:

- Reading strategies assist understanding of texts read (Mi-Jeong Song, 1998; Brown & Palincsar, 1984; Oxford, 1990; Reinhart and Isabell, 2002; Salataci & Akyel, 2002);
- Good readers are better at monitoring comprehension than poor readers (Block, 1986; Hosenfeld, 1977; Kong, 2006; Sarig, 1987; Block, 1992; Nambiar, 2009);
- There are similarities and differences in L1 and L2 reading in terms of strategy use (Kong, 2006; Nambiar, 2009; Singhal, 1998).

Learner strategies are the cognitive steps learners use to process second language input and first language input. Such cognitive procedures include retrieving and storing new input. According to Brown (1994), strategies are the specific "attacks" that learners employ when faced with a problem. More specifically, reading strategies are the comprehension processes that readers use to make sense of what they read. This process involves skimming, scanning, guessing, recognizing cognates and word families, reading for meaning, predicting, activating general knowledge, making inferences, following references, and separating main ideas from supporting ideas (Barnett, 1988).

## 3. Methodology

The participants are ten Iranians who were busy doing their English postgraduate studies in a country whose language of instruction is English. Five of them were at advanced level of English proficiency, and the rest were intermediate.

The main instrument for the study is: a 22-item, 4-point Likert scale questionnaire (on a scale from Never True to Always True, adapted from questionnaires of studies on reading strategies (Kong, 2006; Brantmeier, 2002, Saricoban, 2002, and Singhal, 2001). An additional instrument is Kong's (2006) Interview Guide.

To compare readers' strategies used in reading two languages, an English text was chosen and the same text was translated to Persian. Care was taken to ensure that the reading materials in two languages are compatible in style, content, and length. In addition, the Flesch-Kincaid readability formula was used to test the reading ease of the prepared texts. The text was gauged at a slightly difficult level. Three university instructors were consulted to obtain their expert opinions on the readability and suitability of the texts. The interview was conducted on a one to one basis immediately after the student read the text. Both the researcher, who conducted the interview, and the participants had a copy of the text during the interview. A profile of the students was also developed. Data from the nine respondents on the questionnaire was analyzed using frequencies and percentages.

#### **4. Conclusion and Implications**

Based on the findings, it can be suggested that there are some similar and different common reading strategies used by the EFL readers in L1 and L2. Strategies commonly used in reading the L1 and L2 texts comprise such strategies as skimming for general ideas, slowing down the speed of reading of difficult parts of the text, perseverance in continuing to read difficult parts of the text, self-encouragement to continue reading through difficult parts of the text, paying close attention to the text read, cooperating with peers to understand the text, and requesting clarification, correction, and feedback from the teacher. However, strategies such taking notes on the content of the text, creating mental images when reading, using reference materials to help understand the text, and summarizing the text after reading were not employed in reading the L2 text. This latter limitation can possibly be due to students' L2 proficiency. For instance, all the preceding strategies the students used in reading the L1 text such as making notes and summarizing require understanding the L2 and the ability to manipulate the language. These strategies are easier used in reading the L1 text because the students are familiar and proficient in the language. However, the findings of this study are limited only to the students of above intermediate level of proficiency in English. Perhaps, a study involving more participants can yield results that can be generalized to EFL readers in L1 and L2.

The implications include exploring the explicit teaching and training of strategies students use in reading L1 texts to help them enhance their understanding of L2 texts. Research shows that it is possible for learners to transfer some of the good L1 strategies in reading in L2 (Kern, Koda, 1988; Salataci & Akyel, 2002; Song, 1998; Karbalaeei & Rajyashree, 2010). In the context of EFL reading, it can be suggested that teaching reading strategies explicitly could help students use these strategies when reading L2. These strategies could include raising awareness among students of different types of common reading strategies in L1 and L2 and encouraging students to do narrow and wide reading to be aware of strategies that work or do not work for them in reading. Teachers should also be aware of the strategies used by the students. This can be done through observation of students in the reading classroom while students are engaged in reading. In addition, cooperative learning groups can be used whereby advanced level students could help other students during reading.

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