

# A Comparison of Different Reading Strategies in Reading Poems by EFL Readers

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**Abstract.** The aim of this paper is to have an overview on the strategies the EFL readers use while reading poetry. The researcher wishes to find these strategies mainly by help of think aloud protocol, and interview as the complementary instrument. The results of the study can be illuminating guidelines for literature teachers to facilitate the process of understanding poetry by the students.

**Keywords:** reading strategy, poetry, think aloud

## 1. Introduction

In light of the theories of language education, theories of reading, and literary theories, the researcher became interested in knowing EFL postgraduate English-major students' beliefs about understanding English poetry. Specifically, she is interested in the strategies they use while reading English poetries, since only a few studies referred the issue of reading poetry in a foreign/second language and strategies the students commonly use.

The study aims at examining the thinking processes using “think-aloud” protocols complemented by interview. The study is one of the first studies on using “think-aloud” for identifying the reading strategies of poetic texts. The significance of this study stems from the fact that research literature on this topic is scarce. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the understanding of L2 reading and provide teachers and students with knowledge and insights in EFL students’ thinking processes in order to control their reading and promote their understanding.

Research indicates that advanced native English-speaking readers are more likely to apply a variety of reading strategies while reading than do less advanced readers (Baker, 2008; Blackowicz & Ogle, 2008; Block & Israel, 2004; Mokhtari, Reichard, & Sheorey, 2008). However, there is little research in strategy use among EFL students. As a result, there is the need to examine strategy use in this population and develop effective methods for EFL learners in reading (Pintozzi & Valeri-Gold, 2000).

Researchers, educators, and teachers need to consider investigating reading strategies that would effectively fit learners (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2008). The students may not know how to employ reading strategies; therefore, exploring characteristics and elements of reading among the learners who are non-native speakers of English will contribute to research in foreign language reading.

Next, the focus on reading strategies for non-native English speakers in this study is intended to inform those seeking to help these students improve reading comprehension of English poetic texts. This study may be helpful to determine effective reading strategies for these groups. It is anticipated that the findings of this study may provide classroom teachers and faculty at institutions of higher education with guidance for better English literature reading instruction for non-native English speaking students. This may aid educators in improving their teaching approaches and pedagogies, and may enhance the EFL students' poetry reading comprehension.

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The relationship between language learners' reading comprehension and reading strategy use has been of interest for scholars in the field such as second/foreign language acquisition. Not surprisingly, substantial research on this research topic has been performed in a second/foreign language context including an ESL/EFL context (Lee, 2007; Phakiti, 2003; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001; Wu, 2005). In particular, many scholars have been interested in understanding what skilled readers typically do while they read and identifying the types of strategies they use, how they use those strategy, and under what conditions they use them (Brantmeier, 2000, 2002; Lee, 2007; Wu, 2005; Zhang, 2001). In this regard, research shows that learners' use of reading strategies and their reading comprehension are related. Therefore, the question which arises is:

What strategies do EFL postgraduate students employ while processing poetry in English?

As stated earlier, this study is expected not only to identify what strategies EFL university students implement when they read English poetry, but also to provide insights on their actual use of those strategies to foster poetry reading comprehension.

The findings obtained from this study could be used as a guideline for teachers to figure out what effective strategies are and how they can teach students a repertoire of reading strategies that would facilitate students' adjustment to the different types of poetries they read. Furthermore, teachers will better understand several types of difficulties their students encounter during their poetry reading process so that they can address them accordingly.

Apart from the aforementioned pedagogical implications, students themselves can also benefit from the findings of this study by reflecting on their own reading experience and realizing some of the hindering factors which impede their poetry reading performance. They can learn more about the effectiveness of strategies proficient readers use and apply them to relieve comprehension difficulties. Moreover, the researcher believes that the findings will prompt researchers to extend the scope of the current study and continue to offer significant advantages for the sake of teaching and learning practices.

## **2. Review of Literature**

### **2.1. Reading in a Foreign Language**

Research on reading in a foreign/second language started to grow since the mid- 1960s, but emphasis on reading instruction in EFL/ESL did not begin until the early 1970s. Starting from the 1980s, comprehension strategies were given much emphasis and attention. People in the second language field began to accept the claim that Goodman's "psycholinguistic view of reading" was more suitable to the second language context than the first language context (Coady, 1979). Also accepted is the concept that both the reader's first language reading ability and the second language linguistic knowledge are important in second language reading achievement (Bernhardt & Kamil, 1995). The notion that fluent reading is rapid, purposeful, interactive, comprehending, flexible, and developing gradually holds well for reading of foreign or second language students (Grabe, 1991).

Some reading educators perceive reading in the first and second languages as being going through the same process, while others observed prominent differences and expressed their view that non-native readers of English differ from native language readers in many ways. Goodman (1996, p. 9) states that he is "convinced that there is a single reading process—just one way of making sense of print—regardless of differences in language and orthography". According to him, the second language learners develop their reading ability via the same process as the first language, using their first language literacy to make sense of the new language, and "puzzling through a written text until it makes sense". Wallace (1992, p. 22) has a similar view and writes, "We draw on similar processing strategies in the reading of all languages, even where the writing systems are very different". And Alderson and Urquhart (1984, p. xv) state, "We do not, indeed find it difficult to, draw a clear distinction between first and foreign language reading".

On the other hand, Grabe (1991) argues that factors that are considered in reading in a second language are different from those in the first language. According to him, a major difference between reading in first and second languages is the size of vocabulary. It is estimated that fluent readers in first language has recognition vocabularies of about 10,000 words to 100,000 words (Anderson & Freebody, 1981), whereas in

second language reading, the figure runs much lower, ranging from 2,000 - 7,000 words (Nation, 1990). Second, transfer effects from the first language processing differences can cause difficulties for L2 readers. Hosenfeld et al. (1981) supports this stance as they claim that the commonly held notion that proficient, native language readers transfer their reading skills to the second language has been challenged by the findings of several studies. Third, L2 readers' first language linguistic differences also cause difficulties. Other differences such as the social contexts of literacy use in L2 readers' first language, the extent the L2 readers use, interpret, or value reading material in their first language may also attribute to reading difficulties (Grabe, 1991). However, Grabe (1991) sees the advantages that the FL readers have in terms of their conceptual sense of the world, especially those who are older and are academically goal orientated. Other researchers consider the background knowledge that the reader brings to the interpretation of the English texts to be a difference. According to them, this kind of knowledge, including their cultural traditions and beliefs, can be quite different from what is expressed in the text (Steffensen, Joag-Dev, & Andersen; 1979), and the mismatch can result in the readers' misinterpretations of the author's intended meaning in the text (Hosenfeld, 1995).

In summary, much research has been conducted on reading in the first and foreign/second languages regarding, the process of reading, factors involved in reading comprehension such as the reader's language competence, strategies required, knowledge the reader brings to the reading process, etc. Two major views are examined over the similarities and differences between learning and reading in a first language and a foreign/second language. Therefore, the implication which can be drawn is that second or foreign language learners need to develop their second language proficiency and make use of many other knowledge sources and strategies in order to become effective and proficient readers.

## **2.2. Definition and Classification of Reading Strategies**

Many scholars consider reading a constructive process. Wade (1990) views reading as the active construction of meaning, and McGeown and Getilucci (2007, p. 136) describe reading as a covert process actively controlled by readers to create meaning from text. On the other hand, according to Anderson (1991), strategies are deliberate, cognitive steps that learners take in acquiring, storing, and retrieving new information. In this sense, strategies are a reader's resource for understanding (Block, 1986). There are a number of definitions of reading strategies in the L2 literature. According to Cohen (1986, p. 7), reading strategies refer to those mental processes that readers consciously choose to use in accomplishing reading tasks. Brantmeier (2002) defines reading strategies as the comprehension processes that readers use in order to make sense of what they read. Mokhtari and Reichard (2002) say that reading strategies are generally deliberate activities undertaken by active learners, many times to remedy perceived cognitive failure. In this sense, a reading strategy is an action (or a series of actions) that is employed in order to construct meaning (Kletzien, 1991). Similarly, Carrell, Gajdusek, and Wise (1998, p. 97) define reading strategies as actions that readers select and control to achieve goals or objectives.

Researchers in reading strategy studies have utilized different strategy types when categorizing reading strategies. Many identify two types of strategies: those used to construct meaning of text as a framework for understanding, and those used to monitor understanding and take action when necessary. For example, Block (1986) and Carrell (1989) categorize strategies they found into general or global strategies and local strategies. Whereas local strategies constitute a category of decoding strategies, global strategies are related to top-down types of reading, including getting the gist of a reading, utilizing background knowledge, and being aware of text organization.

Other scholars classified reading strategies using different terms. Anderson (1991) groups the strategies to five categories: 1) supervising strategies, 2) support strategies, 3) paraphrasing strategies, 4) strategies for establishing coherence in the text, and 5) test-taking strategies. On the other hand, Jimenez, Garcia, and Pearson (1996) classify reading strategies to text-initiated, interactive, and reader-initiated strategies.

The classification scheme that will be used in the present study is based on Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001). Using a cognitive framework, they group what they find into metacognitive, cognitive, and/or support strategies. Many other researchers follow this categorization. According to them, metacognitive strategies are defined as those intentional, carefully planned techniques by which learners monitor or manage their reading

(p. 436). Such strategies include having a purpose in mind, previewing the text as to its length and organization, or using typographical aids and tables and figures.

McGeown and Getilucci (2007, p. 136) say metacognition is the practice of readers thinking about their thinking while engaged in the reading process. Many studies on reading strategies recognize the role of metacognitive awareness in L1 and L2 reading comprehension (Block, 1992; Carrell, 1989; Singhal, 2001). According to Auerbach and Paxton (1997, pp. 240-241), metacognition entails knowledge of strategies for processing texts, the ability to monitor comprehension, and the ability to adjust strategies as needed. Schramm (2008) also said that metacognition of reading involves strategy awareness and perceived strategy use, as well as the actual regulation and control of the reading process. Global strategies cited by Block (1986) are similar to metacognitive strategies, and such strategies as having a purpose in mind, previewing the text as to its length and organization, or using typographical aids, tables, chart comparing, and figures belong to metacognitive strategies.

Cognitive strategies are concerned with readers' use of prior knowledge and various strategies in their efforts to construct meaning in the comprehension process (Pang, 2008). In a similar vein, Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001, p. 436) consider cognitive strategies as the actions and procedures readers use while working directly with the text. According to them, these are localized, focused techniques used when problems develop in understanding textual information, including adjusting one's speed of reading when the material becomes difficult or easy, guessing the meaning of unknown words, and re-reading the text for improved comprehension.

Finally, following Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001, p. 436), support strategies are basically supportive actions learners take that are intended to aid the reader in comprehending the text. Examples are using a dictionary, taking notes, or underlining or highlighting the text to better comprehend it.

Generally, in a L2 context, it is believed that readers often have to use more cognitive strategies to decode the meaning of a text, due to limited linguistic knowledge; and comprehension monitoring is particularly crucial to ensure effective and efficient use of strategies (Pang, 2008).

### **3. Methodology**

This chapter presents research methodology that will be employed to understand how ESL/EFL students feel, think, and interact with the sample of poetry. In this regard, two poems of different eras are selected to work on to see at the first step, what reading strategies the EFL readers use in reading them, and second, if the strategies being used in reading each differs with the other or not. Thus, the study is mainly qualitative and the quantitative findings will be used to support qualitative findings. The first part of the study, the micro-evaluation, will analyze poetry through description based on the researcher's evaluation, and the second part relates to the macro-evaluation or gathering students' and instructors' opinions about poetry by a structured interview. Specifically, this chapter outlines research steps to answer the following question: What strategies do EFL postgraduate students employ while processing poetry in English?

This study will be conducted at the University Technology Malaysia. Thirty EFL postgraduate students who have English literary background knowledge will participate in the study. The participants will diverse in terms of gender, age, grade, and their experiences in learning English. Each of the used instruments of this study will be described one by one, think-aloud reports as the main data gathering instrument and interview as the complementary one.

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