

LEARNING STRATEGIES TOWARDS READING SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: Identified as the core skill in academic setting, the importance of reading skill is deniable. This study investigated reading strategies employed by 8th graders of a public school in Bandung. It aimed at identifying the most frequent-used reading strategies and discovering their similarities and differences between higher and lower achievers. This study employed questionnaires and interviews to collect data. The findings of this study suggested that cognitive strategies are the most frequently-used strategies. Both higher and lower achievers were identified using nine high-frequency strategies. The differences were in identifying appropriateness and willingness to use the strategies, and students' interest in reading materials. As a conclusion, higher and lower achievers might have different reading strategies due to time allotment, reading frequency, and strategic investment. Therefore, highlighting reading strategies is vital, and having a more comprehensive, integrated classroom-based reading study is strongly required.

Key words: language learning, language learning strategies, reading comprehension, reading strategies.

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BACKGROUND

The use of strategy in learning has been considered helpful for most learners. It is regarded the main factor towards one's achievement. In studying a language, learners' employing strategy can enhance their own learning (Oxford 1990). The strategies used make their learning effective and efficient (Boudah and O'Neill 1999). The use of the strategies in doing the tasks might be various. It depends on a given problem or task (Oxford 1990) i.e. when learning speaking, a student may use social strategy such as using the target language when communicating with a native speaker. He/she might use a different strategy when learning writing.

Reading skills have been the most important part in academic setting. Without the skills, students might have difficulties in accomplishing certain tasks. Unfortunately, reading materials written in a second or foreign language are considered difficult (Alderson and Urquhart 1984). The difficulties might be due to students' limited vocabularies (Ismi 2003), inability to get the idea of the text (Gunawan 2000), and failure to comprehend the text in detail (Alderson and Urquhart 1984). Using certain strategies might help students encounter reading problems. Experts have suggestions to overcome them. Lenz and Hughes (2007) claim that the use of word identification strategy indicates that the number of oral reading errors decrease while reading comprehension scores increase for all students on ability level and grade materials.

A study conducted by Baker and Boonkit (2004) on strategies of reading and writing of undergraduate students at a Thai university shows that students make use of metacognitive, cognitive and compensation strategies the most. The use of those strategies improves their achievement and increases their awareness of such strategies.

Chen (2005) conducted a study on language learning in general including the four language skills to Taiwanese University students. He found that compensation strategies are the most frequently-used strategies and affective strategies are the least frequently used ones. He found that the first can trigger the students' understanding in most subjects.

In Indonesian junior high schools, the teaching of reading skill focuses on the functional level (Pusat Kurikulum 2006). Students are

expected to be able to use English for survival purposes, such as carrying out transactional exchanges, reading for fun, and reading different types of materials/genres. In addition, they are targeted to have the ability to utilize their reading skills in order to facilitate the productive skills.

Some scholars have investigated the reading strategies of Indonesian learners of English in junior high schools. Sukarlan (2003) found that in an attempt to comprehend texts, the students used some strategies such as making prediction of the words that they did not know, using a dictionary to find unfamiliar words. Syafrizal (2000) found that the appropriate language learning strategies related to reading make a contribution to students' reading achievement. When learning vocabulary, one can employ an appropriate strategy. The strategy might be useful to make it easy to learn the required vocabulary and can help a student learn efficiently.

Regarding the issues mentioned above, the present study is aimed at finding the reading strategies that eight graders of a public school in Bandung used most frequently and examining the similarities and differences of the types of reading strategies used by high and low achievers. The study will identify the strategies used by two levels of students as well as to present the reason why students used certain strategies. This is important since it will complete the findings on the study of reading for the eight graders. This will also be beneficial in practical reading classes so the study can inspire the reading class management.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In order to be successful in foreign language learning and to be good language learners, learners should have strategies which can help them in learning a language. Oxford (1990) defines learning strategies as steps taken by learners to enhance their own learning. In line with Oxford (1990), O'Malley and Chamot (1990) define learning strategies as specific ways of processing information that enhance comprehension, learning, or retention of the information.

Learning strategies is vital in the process of learning a foreign language. The appropriate use of learning strategies can increase foreign/second language proficiency. Applying certain strategies in

learning language skills is necessary because they are tools for active and self-directed involvement. Appropriate learning strategies can improve proficiency and increase self-confidence, which are prerequisites for communicative competence.

O'Malley (1987) classifies learning strategies into three types as follow.

- **Metacognitive strategies**, which involve executive process in planning for learning, monitoring one's comprehension and production, and evaluating how well one has achieved a learning objective;
- **Cognitive strategies**, in which the learner interacts with the material to be learned by manipulating it mentally (as in making images, or elaborating on previously acquired concepts or skills) or physically (as grouping items to be learned in meaningful categories, or taking notes on important information to be remembered);
- **Social/affective strategies**, in which learner either interacts with another person in order to assist learning, as in cooperation or asking question for clarification, or uses some kind of affective control to assist a learning task.

In reading, employing strategies are also encouraged. These are considered helpful for most learners. According to Baker and Boonkit (2004: 8), reading strategies are defined as follows.

Reading strategies are techniques and methods that readers use to make their reading successful. Some of reading strategies include skimming, scanning, summarizing, guessing, predicting, making inference, underlining words or phrases, and taking note.

The reading strategies are important aspects of language learning since they can help students overcome reading problems. yafrizal's (2000) study has demonstrated that the use of appropriate language learning strategies improved students' reading achievement. His study shows how important reading strategies are in improving students's reading proficiency. Sukarlan (2003) found that in an attempt to comprehend texts, the students used some strategies such as making prediction of the words that they did not know and using dictionary to find the unfamiliar words.

Some of the strategies for reading comprehension are:

- identifying the purpose of reading
- using graphemic rules and patterns to aid in bottom-up decoding (especially for beginning level learners)
- using efficient silent reading techniques for relatively rapid comprehension (for intermediate to advanced levels)
- skimming the text for main ideas
- scanning the text for specific information
- using semantic mapping or clustering
- guessing when you are not certain
- analyzing vocabulary
- distinguishing between literal and implied meanings
- capitalizing on discourse markers to process relationship (Brown 2001).

According to Carrell (1998) reading strategies traditionally refer to skimming a text to get the general idea, scanning a text for a specific piece of information, making contextual guesses about 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 recently recognized strategies such as activating prior background knowledge and recognizing text structure.

Carrell also confirms that good readers have the following characters:

- 1) they attentively read a passage in sequence-from the first part to the end,
- 2) they jot down important information, 3) they make guesses, recycle, and reread the passage when confused and 4) they make efforts to solve reading problems.

Carrel adds good readers have strategies to accentuate ideas through different texts, they are never satisfied with what the texts say, and they will synthesize the information gathered during reading and express them as the author's intention. In order to have a solid understanding, they may make inquiries about the texts. In addition, the difference made between good readers from those who are not is that good readers are usually aware of what strategies they use. For example, when

reading a newspaper, they have no difficulty scanning the pages quickly, than slowing down to focus on one interesting article. The not-so-good readers, however, tend to use less various reading strategies. Therefore, the best way to expand one's knowledge of words is to read often and in varied content areas (Wiener and Bazeran 1988: 3).

Some reading strategies that are generally employed by language learners are as follows:

Skimming is a quick browse when immediate general information of a text is needed or when reading time is limited. It can benefit readers to predict the text' purpose, the main topic, and possible text development (Brown 2001: 308).

Scanning is a fast search for information in a text. It can benefit readers to converge the expected information efficiently (Brown 2001: 308). Scanning and skimming help learners home in on exactly what they need or want to understand, and allow them to disregard the rest or use it as background information (Oxford 1990).

Guessing and making inference employ clues to understand new words or unfamiliar ones in a text. It benefits readers to comprehend specific information clearly (Oxford 1990: 90).

Summarizing is a process of simplifying and shortening original text while keeping the message.

Using Imagery is a process of describing concepts into visualization in order to memorize them. Mostly, it helps readers to concrete abstract words (Oxford 1990).

Taking note is a technique of jotting down of important information.

Translating is a technique of rendering a source language into a target language in order to avoid misunderstanding and it can improve readers' vocabulary.

Associating/ elaborating is a technique to connect abstract concepts in mind to their association.

Knowing the purpose of reading is a technique to focus readers' attention and interest to comprehend a text (Oxford 1990: 158).

Placing new words into a context is a technique of putting new or unfamiliar words in their use to memorize them.

Asking questions is a technique of getting more details of a topic discussed.

Rereading is a technique of reading a text or a part of a text in times in order to get more understanding of the text read (Oxford 1990: 70).

Looking at the picture or diagram is a technique of getting into a text before reading the words in order to focus readers' attention to read (Wiener and Bazerman 1988).

Carrell (1998) claims that one problem that might hinder the language learners in reading is that the failure to use reading strategies effectively in first language appears when: monitoring their comprehension, making use of different reading strategies, lacking text background, having less interest in the topic read, having less interest to employ the strategy, and having inability to use effective strategy.

Another study about reading strategies was conducted by Baker and Boonkit (2004). It investigated the strategies of reading and writing of undergraduate students at a Thai university. They found that students made most frequent use of metacognitive, cognitive and compensation strategies. Metacognitive strategies in reading include looking at the pictures provided in the text, reading the questions before read the whole passages and other strategies which provide a way for students to coordinate their own learning process. Cognitive strategies include skimming, scanning, summarizing, making inference, etc. Compensation strategies include skipping unknown words, guessing the meaning from the context, predicting what the text is about, and strategies which aid students in overcoming knowledge gaps.

METHODOLOGY

The respondents of this study were thirty eight of 8th graders of a public junior high school in Bandung. The study used random sampling. It involved 38 students. Then, they were grouped into lower and higher scores based on a reading test.

The present study employed descriptive statistics. Questionnaires and interviews were the two main instruments to collect data for this study.

A reading test consisting of four different texts with 14 multiple choice questions was used to group the respondents into higher and lower groups. The questionnaires adapted from SILL 7.0 (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) developed by Oxford (1990) were administered to identify their strategies in reading English text. They consisted of 26 statements related to the use of reading strategies in a scale of 5 — always, frequently, occasionally, rarely, and never. In order to make it easy for students to respond, the questionnaires were given in Indonesian, the official language in Indonesian schools. The items of the questionnaire were classified into memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive and social strategies. Then the interviews were used to obtain in-depth responses about reading strategies used by higher and lower achievers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In general, the students participating in this study used cognitive strategies more often than other categories of reading strategies. The figure below shows the frequency of each classification of reading strategies.

No	Strategies	Always	Usually	Some-times	Rarely	Never
1.	Memory	18.40%	27.17%	31.03%	15.77%	8.77%
2.	Cognitive	18.80%	30.81%	30.07%	16.16%	4.14%
3.	Compensation	11.60%	26.84%	30%	20.54%	11.04%
4.	Metacognitive	15.14%	25.38%	39.48%	16.46%	3.61%
5.	Social	1.77%	14.03%	26.3%	31.53%	25.47%

Table 1:
Frequency of Reading Strategies Use

The table shows cognitive strategies were the most frequently used strategies (18.80% and 30.81%) whereas social strategies were the strategies the most-rarely used (1.77% and 14.03%). It is in line with the findings from Baker and Boonkit (2004). They found that their respondents mostly used cognitive and metacognitive. The findings also showed that the reading strategies which were almost always and usually used by the respondents are:

- Rereading
- Looking at the picture or graphic
- Associating with prior knowledge
- Using dictionary
- Scanning to answer questions
- Guessing unknown words from the context
- Self-monitoring
- Previewing by reading the title
- Knowing the purpose of reading

The finding indicates that among the cognitive strategies, rereading is the most-often used reading strategy. This supports the findings in Syafrizal's study (2000). Students tend to reread parts that they have not understood yet to make sure that they fully comprehend the text they are reading. According to Oxford (1990: 70) the technique of rereading or repeating is to read a passage several times, each time for different purposes, such as to get the general drift or the main ideas, to predict, to read for detail, and to write down questions. It can be regarded as a useful strategy since most students are successful in their reading test by using this strategy.

Students also make use of the pictures or graphics because they gave readers opportunity to predict what the text is about. By looking at the illustrations provided in the text before reading the whole text, readers can predict beforehand what kind of text they will be reading (Wiener and Bazerman 1988).

There were nine high-frequency strategies used by both higher and lower achievers, such as guessing the meaning of unknown words from the context, looking at the pictures or graphics, and rereading. Lessard-Clouston (1997) states that there is always a possibility that good language learning strategies are also used by unsuccessful language learners, but other reasons cause them to be unsuccessful.

Lessard-Clouston (1997) found that both successful and unsuccessful language learners can be active users of similar strategies, but it was also discovered that the unsuccessful learners apparently lacked

metacognitive strategies which would enable them to assess the task and bring to bear the necessary strategies for its completion. In this present study, both high and low achievers use metacognitive strategies; however, the lower achievers did not use those strategies effectively. From the interview, we found that the higher achievers spent more time to read, did extra efforts (i.e. try to find the meaning of unknown words by looking at dictionary), and paid more attention (i.e. grammar and sentence structure) to the language they learn.

Brown (2001) notes that successful mastery of the second language learning (foreign language) depends on, to a large extent, to a learner's own personal "investment" of time, effort, and attention to the second language in the form of an individualized battery of strategies for comprehending and producing the language.

Another strategy used by respondents in reading a foreign language is recursing to a dictionary. This indicates that the use of a dictionary still takes an important aspect in reading strategy. Both higher and lower achievers resorted to a dictionary to help them find the meaning of unknown words. It may result in the improvement of students' vocabularies. Vocabulary is vital in reading because it helps students read confidently, serves as a tool to build one's reading skill, and helps learners with the spelling, the pronunciation, and the contexts in which words are used (Weiner and Bazerman 1988).

The study also found that both higher or lower achievers agreed that graphics or pictures can help them understand what the text is about. By looking at the illustrations provided in the text before reading the whole text, learners are able to predict the texts (Wiener and Bazerman, 1988). Texts, diagrams, and pictures can also be used to convey the same information This is useful in situations in which different aspects of information are more easily encoded from the text and diagrams (Barr et.al. 1991).

Higher achievers were more likely than lower achievers to use reading strategies This finding corroborates with O'Malley and Chamot's study (1990). They claim that good language learners employ various kinds of language strategies and use a series of strategies rather than a single one when engage in a learning task (O'Malley and Charot 1990: 169).

What makes reading strategies of higher and lower achievers different is the frequency of the use of reading strategies. A very significant finding on the difference between higher and lower achievers was the use of rereading. The finding suggests that higher achievers are more careful when reading. They reread the text more than once in order to better understand it. Oxford (1990) argues that the strategy of repeating is to understand the text better. By using this strategy learners can minimize any misinterpretation. Rereading also helps learners when answering any questions about the text.

Higher achievers are more likely to use scanning than skimming. The strategies are familiar in reading to help learners home in on exactly what they need or want to understand, and allow them to disregard the rest or use it as background information (Oxford 1990).

In general, the respondents were more likely to guess meaning from the context rather than guess the unknown words. This is in line with Baker and Boonkit's finding (2004). The respondents in their study also guessed the meaning of words from their contexts. Higher achievers predicted the meaning of some words from the context clues. Oxford (1990) names this strategy as intelligent guessing. This strategy is essential because it helps readers overcome knowledge limitation in reading. Readers do not have to recognize and understand every single word in a reading passage. They can comprehend a text through systematic guessing (Oxford 1990: 90).

Higher achiever respondents predicted what the text is about after they read the title. This strategy is known as previewing. It helps the readers predict what the text is about. Low achievers did not use this strategy as often as high achievers. Most of them consider that doing this is time consuming. Some experience it as not resulting in an improvement in comprehension. Barr et. al. (1991) suggest that many students do not understand the value of previewing text, titles, and picture. Even if they know the strategies, they avoid them because they think such strategies are time consuming and unnecessary.

The results of the interviews reveal that most students started learning English in their elementary school at about the third or fourth grade. In other words, they have been learning English for about 4 to 5 years. One of 10 students in the higher achievers group does not take an English course.

Meanwhile, there are only 4 students who take English course in lower achievers group. The students who take an English course are more likely to read more books. Limited vocabularies, grammar, sentence structure, and the length of the text cause problems in reading. The students used certain reading strategies to overcome reading problems such as asking other people, skimming, rereading (repeating), guessing unknown words intelligently, and using a dictionary. They used the strategies mentioned in order to help them comprehend the text. The lower achievers group used skipping strategy more often than the higher achievers.

From the interviews with the lower achievers, we found that students read quickly and ignore all the words that they did not understand. They skipped new and unfamiliar words. They did not attempt to find their meaning. This shows that students could not utilize guessing strategy effectively. Skipping words is acceptable because that will help the students overcome their limitation of vocabularies. But, the more often they skip the words, the failure they will have in understanding the text. Having no comprehension of the texts, the strategies they use might be useless. It indicates unsuccessful readers (Syafrizal 2000).

Higher achiever respondents read more than low achievers. They read many kinds of reading texts such as the English textbooks that they used in school and in their English courses and songs' lyrics as well. The more texts they read, the more likely it is for them to improve their vocabularies. In order to read efficiently people need to have a rich vocabulary of many words. The best way to expand someone's knowledge of words is to read often and in various content areas (Wiener and Bazerman 1988: 3).

Another strategy identified in this study was the use of imagery strategy of higher achievers. This strategy is useful when readers want to remember a new word. According to Oxford (1990), a good way to remember what has been heard or read in the new language is to create a mental image of it.

In addition, another reading strategy used by the higher achievers was "knowing the purpose of reading the text". The strategy is important because knowing the purpose for doing something enables learners to

channel their energy in the right direction (Oxford 1990: 158). Brown claims that having a clear purpose may help readers to focus more on their attention and their expectation on the reading, and it may decrease potential misleading information (2001: 306).

In this study, we found that lower achievers did not try to find the meaning of unknown words. They just skipped the words. They also had negative attitude towards a text they read. They said they believe that even though they read the texts more than once, they will never be able to fully comprehend them. Lower achievers often stop reading the texts when they had no interest in them They will continue reading when they read the texts they like. This supports what Carrell (1998) states: learners who are not interested in the texts they are reading and are unwilling to use reading strategies might not be able to improve their reading skills.

CONCLUSION

When reading English texts students use numerous strategies to help them comprehend what texts are about. Each student employs different reading strategies. There is a possibility that higher and lower achievers use similar strategies. High and low achievers have different time allotment in reading, reading frequency, and strategy investment. The failure of employing the reading strategies might be due to the appropriate use of a certain type of reading strategy, the willingness to use the strategies, and the students' interest in reading materials. Our study found that learning tasks might affect students reading strategies in order to meet students' expectations. Also, implementing the strategies would be meaningless when students are not interested in the reading materials.

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