

## Common Strategies Among EFL Students Reading Literature

Shirin Shafiei Ebrahimi & Zaidah Zainal  
Language Academy  
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia  
Johor Bahru, Malaysia

### ABSTRACT

This study is to introduce the most common strategies that EFL students use while they read a piece of literature in English. To identify these strategies a questionnaire is employed as the instrument of data collection. The interesting result shows a significant tendency of EFL students to creativity and construction of new ideas in meaning making of the literary text just the same way as any other type of texts; however, the detected strategies help the readers to realize that strategies only help in the functionality of each text in a different way. This conclusion can assist the students to have a deeper understanding of literary texts and the teachers to facilitate the process of reading for the students.

*Keywords:* Reading strategy, literature, EFL

#### Nomenclature

EFL: English as a Foreign Language.  
SORS: Survey Of Reading Strategy

### INTRODUCTION

Reading literature is difficult for the students for a number of reasons: Literature provides the reader with a sense of aesthetic pleasure, it brightens senses, connects us with ourselves and other people, and makes us think synthetically because of the concise language that is used in making it, such a language makes literature convey a lot. That is why understanding literary pieces is not as easy as understanding other genres as the words in literary texts have both denotative and connotative meanings. These words are informative as well as expressive to convey the author's tone and attitude.

English literature is an interesting subject of study at school time at all levels of education in EFL countries. This is a good reason for the researcher to wish to understand the factors leading to more literature understanding of EFL students. During her teaching experiences, she observed her students' learning processes and outcomes. She assumed that several factors would lead to success or failure in their academic work.

---

\*Correspondence to: Zaidah Zainal (email: m-zaidah@utm.my)

The imposing breadth of the subject of this research is due to the researcher's huge interest in teaching English literature; however, the study itself is not purely on literature but it is on the strategies that the literature readers employ while reading literary texts. The reflections in this study start from literary texts from various aspects, while at the same time they come to the nature of reading with the aim of testing literary texts. Although the main interest in this study is on literature, reading of literary texts is discussed at some points of the work. Therefore, literary criticism might not always be the central point of the present study, but the main concern is the reading strategies of such pieces of aesthetic art.

A wide range of research suggests that students' success in school cannot be explained by cognitive factors alone (Zimmerman, 1990). Rather, the strategies that the learners use in reading the materials play a central role in their learning experiences and are a firm determinant of academic success. Concurrently, studies have shown a correlation between learners' beliefs about language learning and their choice of strategies (Yang, 1999). Understanding learner beliefs about language learning is significant to understand strategies and plan appropriate instruction (Horwitz, 1999).

Although there have been studies on reading strategies in EFL context, only a few referred to the issue of reading strategies of literature in a foreign language. The other issue is that as Feng and Mokhtari (1998) explain, the number of reading strategies that are used in L2 reading is more than that in L1, therefore this gap in the literature identified the research on EFL students' literary reading and their reading strategies.

This research investigates the strategies employed by EFL students while reading English literature. This research is one of the limited studies that aims to identify the reading strategies of literary texts. Using her experience as an English lecturer, the researcher knew that it is hard for EFL speakers to read English literature. Therefore, this research will offer solutions for foreign language teaching, literature teachers, and students.

As stated earlier, this study is expected not only to identify what strategies EFL postgraduate university students use when they read literary texts in English, but also to provide insights on their actual use of those strategies to foster literary reading comprehension. The findings help literature and language teachers to know how they can teach students a repertoire of reading strategies that would facilitate students' adjustment to the different types of literary texts that they read. In addition, teachers will understand different types of difficulties their students encounter during the literary reading process so that they can address them accordingly.

The focus on reading strategies for EFL readers in this study is intended to inform those investigating about these students to improve reading comprehension of English literature. It is not easy to understand how students achieve academic goals without a high level of reading proficiency (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2008, p. 1). This study may be helpful to determine effective reading strategies for these students. It provides literature teachers and faculty at institutions of higher education with guidance for better English literature reading instruction for EFL students. Exploring reading strategies and a relationship between the first and foreign languages in reading strategies may aid these educators in improving their teaching approaches and pedagogies. This may enhance the EFL students' reading comprehension.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The accounts given in this review of literature deals with strategies of reading in literary texts in L2 context. A review of literature shows many studies on the use of reading strategies for non-native English students. Researchers wish to understand reading strategy use of non-native English speaking readers (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2004; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2008). Research also show that non-native English readers use a variety of reading strategies (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2004; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2008). They also show that L1, L2, or FL readers use different reading strategies. Moreover, these studies indicate a number of differences between these groups in specific reading strategies.

Garcia, Jimenez, and Pearson (1998) reviewed two of their own studies of 1995, and 1996. There, they compare proficient bilingual Spanish and English students to successful monolingual English students. The students are asked to read a fiction and two non-fiction English texts and bilingual students are asked to read two fiction and two non-fiction texts in Spanish as well. The methods that are used in this study are think aloud, interview, background knowledge assessment, and passage retelling to

understand the students' reading experiences while reading. The finding shows that readers use Global and Support reading strategies while Spanish-English speakers tend to reading comprehension strategies more than the native English speakers.

According to Garcia, Jimenez, and Pearson (1998) Problem Solving Strategies are the actions and procedures that readers use while working with the text. These are localized and focused techniques used when problems develop in understanding textual information. They also define Support strategies as basic support mechanisms intended to aid the reader in comprehending the text. Global strategies are the overall macro-strategies that deal with the understanding, criticizing, and analysing the text.

Sheorey and Mokhtari (2008) and Jimenez, Garcia, *et al.* (1998) conclude that readers with high level of proficiency among native and non-native English readers are aware of the strategies and they try to develop their reading strategies. On the other hand, readers with low level of proficiency do not use different reading strategies as much as proficient readers and do not know how to use them appropriately.

Block (1992) has the same conclusion that the struggling students can identify problems, but they are not able to solve the problems because of the unfamiliarity of what to do with problems. Mohamed, Chew, & Kabilan (2006) come to a similar conclusion that successful readers are able to identify useful strategies, but less-successful readers struggle in using effective strategies (Jimenez, 2000; Riches & Genesee, 2006; Hudson, 2007).

There are many other studies such as Zhang (2001) with this conclusion that good readers use more reading strategies than poor readers. This is similar to Jimenez, Garcia, *et al.* (1998) and Sheorey and Mokhtari (2008). Upton (1997) also reveals that less advanced EFL Japanese readers use fewer strategies than the advanced readers. Zhang's (2001) study on EFL Chinese college students shows that advanced readers use different reading strategies more often than the less advanced readers.

Studies show more frequent use of reading strategies among successful readers than less successful ones. They also show different characteristics of reading strategies among the two groups (Upton, 1997 and Zhang, 2001). As mentioned earlier, readers with higher level of proficiency tend to global or top-down strategies; on the other hand, readers with low level of proficiency use the local or bottom-up strategies.

In total, several points can be inferred. First, proficient L2 readers mostly extract meaning from texts and use more top-down strategy than less-proficient readers. Second, less proficient readers focus on decoding or bottom-up processes when reading a text. Third, reading strategies are neither inherently good nor bad. Fourth, language background is important in the reading strategy use. Fifth, think-aloud is a promising method to extract the strategies in reading a text.

## METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study which is a fraction of a larger project is to identify the use of the reading strategies by EFL readers and investigate their similarities and differences of the use of reading strategies in reading literary texts. Therefore, the main question this study aims to answer is what strategies EFL students employ when they read English literature. Accordingly for this purpose, the students' use of reading strategies are identified by a questionnaire. This study applies statistical analyses, a quantitative research method, to examine the data collected by this instrument. To show how this study was conducted, the descriptions of participants, instruments, data collection, and data analysis procedures follow.

As explained earlier, this study tries to find an answer for its question with a quantitative method in which the adjusted version of SORS (Survey Of Reading Strategy) for literary texts is used. The study was conducted with 25 EFL students to get the best result. They are chosen randomly among TESL students who have a higher level of proficiency in comparison to their other peers in general. In summary research design and the instruments are illustrated below:

**Research designs:** Quantitative ⇔ Questionnaire ⇔ 25 students

**Research Instruments:** a questionnaire adopted from SORS and adapted for literary texts

The instrument of this study which is a questionnaire mainly focuses on the strategies that the students employ while reading literary texts. This questionnaire is a modified version of Survey Of Reading Strategy (SORS) by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002) which was selected meticulously by comparing several other surveys. Below are the reliability of SORS and its adaptation which shows that the reliability of both questionnaires are high and there is no significant difference with each other.

**Table 1** Reliability of reading strategy instrument

Cronbach's Alpha (SORS)	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.850	.879	30

The strategies in this survey are categorized to 3 groups of Global, Problem-solving, and Support strategies. Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002, p. 4) identified the three categories as such:

*Global* strategies are the intentional, carefully planned techniques that the learners use to monitor or manage their reading, for example having a purpose in mind, previewing the text according to the length or organization, or using typographical aids, tables or figures.

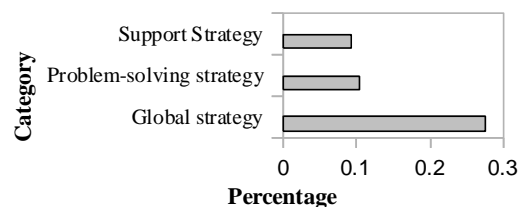
*Problem Solving* strategies are the actions and procedures that readers use in working with the text. They are localized, focused techniques that are used when problems arise in understanding the text; for example adjusting the reading speed if the text gets simple or difficult, guessing the meaning, and rereading.

*Support* strategies are basic support mechanisms that help the reader to understand the text, for example using a dictionary, note taking, underlining, or highlighting.

## RESULTS

The table below shows the findings of this research or the factor loading variables or the factor matrix for the three variables or strategy categories:

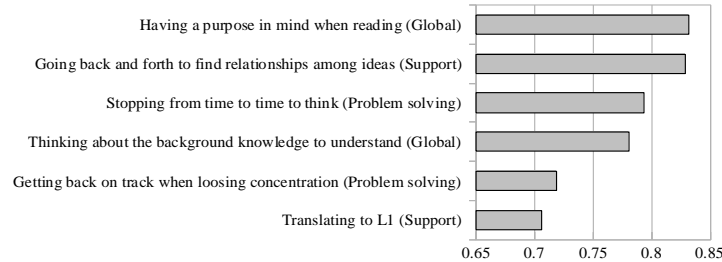
**Table 2** Factor loading variables



As this table shows, principle component analysis with varimax rotation is applied on the items resulted in three loaded factors which consist of Global, Problem-Solving and Support variables. After rotation, the first factor, global strategies, accounted for 27.584 % of the variance, the second factor, Problem-Solving strategies, accounted for 10.314 % of the variance, and the third factor, Support strategies, accounted for 9.231 % of the variance.

In other words, global strategies are the mostly used strategies among EFL students when they read English literature. In the second rank are the problem solving strategies. With not much significant distance, the support strategies are in the third ranking. Some examples of the most used of such strategies are shown in the table below:

**Table 3** Highest factor loading of the strategies



The result of the study shows that more than any other strategy, EFL literature readers tend to have a purpose in their mind when they read literature. It means that most readers are focused about what they are about to read and what they read or at least they claim so which in its own place indicates that reading purposefully is important for EFL literature readers. This strategy is considered as a global strategy in the category of the survey.

With a very slight lower range, as the table above illustrates clearly, going back and forth to find relationships among ideas as a support strategy stands in the second rank. Using this strategy as one of the first top strategies among EFL literature readers conveys that it is important for the readers to understand the literary texts as much as possible and they are interested to get more from a literary piece and if they feel that they are getting out of track or the stream of the meaning, they would like to be on the right path again. As a result, they tend to check if there is any relationship among the ideas in the text.

EFL readers stop from time to time to think about the ideas in the text to find these relationships among ideas or understand the meanings better. They need time to think about what is going on in the text and what is going to happen next. This problem solving strategy aims to help the readers to solve the problems relevant to the meaning making of the text.

As a result, the EFL readers are referring to their background knowledge to find the relationships to help them understand the text better. This is a global strategy as it deals with understanding of the text on the basis of the already existing knowledge in the mind of the readers.

In the course of reading literary texts, the EFL readers might lose their concentration of what is happening in the text. When the questionnaire was administered, the participants claimed with a very high degree that they try to get back on track whenever they feel they are losing their focus on the text. This problem solving strategy shows that interestingly, the readers are enthusiastic about literary text that they feel the need to diverge their attention back to the text as soon as possible not to lose any point out of the text.

One of the main strategies that EFL literature readers most repeatedly use is translating the literary work to their mother tongue for better construction of meaning. This support strategy is a good tool for better absorbing and digesting the material by help of a more familiar language which is their first language.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study tried to identify the most common strategies that EFL readers use while they read literary texts. Exploring these strategies by help of the adapted SORS helps in concluding that sequently the most used category of strategies in reading literary texts of EFL students are Global strategies, Problem-Solving strategies, and Support strategies.

Getting to know these strategies more in depth is useful for the readers to achieve a higher level of understanding of literary texts. It is also advised that language and literature teachers introduce and practice these strategies with the language learners to assist them in an easier and quicker way of construction of meaning and then in understanding the literary texts.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors are grateful to the Ministry of Higher Learning and Ministry of Education Malaysia for the grant FRGS/2/2013/SS109/UTM/02/16 'Developing an Integrated Resources Model of Reading Comprehension Process of Tertiary Level Students'.

#### REFERENCES

- Block, E. L. 1992. See How They Read: Comprehension Monitoring of L1 and L2 Readers. *TESOL Quarterly*. 26(2): 319–343.
- Feng, X., Mokhtari, K. 1998. Strategy Use by Native Speakers of Chinese Reading Easy and Difficult Texts in English and Chinese. *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching*. 8: 19–40.
- Garcia, G. E., Jimenez, R. T., & Pearson, P. D. 1998. Metacognition, Childhood Bilingualism, and Reading. D. J. Hacker, J. Dunlosky, & A. C. Graesser (Eds.). *Metacognition in Educational Theory and Practice* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. 193–220.
- Horwitz, E. K. 1999. Cultural and Situational Influences on Foreign Language Learners' Beliefs About Language Learning: A Review of BAALLI Studies. *System*. 27: 557–576.
- Hudson, T. 2007. *Teaching Second Language Reading*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jiménez, R. T. 2000. Literacy and the Identity Development of Latina/o Students. *American Educational Research Journal*. 37: 971–1000.
- Mohamed, A. R., Chew, J., and M. K. Kabilan. 2006. Metacognitive Reading Strategies of Good Malaysian Chinese Learners. *Malaysian Journal of ELT Research*. 2: 21–41. Retrieved on March 1, 2013 from <http://www.melta.org.my/modules/tinycontent/Dos/MuhammadKamarulKabilan.pdf>.
- Mokhtari, K., & Reichard, C. 2004. Investigating the Strategic Reading Processes of First and Second Language Readers in Two Different Cultural Contexts. *System*. 32: 279–294.
- Mokhtari, K., & Sheorey, R. 2002. Measuring ESL Students' Awareness of Reading Strategies. *Journal of Developmental Education*. 25(3): 2–10.
- Riches, C., & Genesee, F. 2006. Literacy: Crosslinguistic and Crossmodal Issues. F. Genesee, K. Lindholm-Leary, W. M. Saunders, & D. Christian (Eds.). *Educating English Language Learners: A Synthesis of Research Evidence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 64–108.
- Sheorey, R., & Mokhtari, K. 2008. Differing Perceptions of Reading Strategy Use Between Native and Non-native College Students. K. Mokhtari & R. Sheorey (Eds.). *Reading Strategies of First- and Second-Language Learners: See How They Read* Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers. 131–141.
- Upton, T. A. 1997. First and Second Language Use in Reading Comprehension Strategies of Japanese ESL Students. *Teaching English as a Second Language Electronic Journal*. 5(1). Retrieved February 15, 2008, from <http://tesl-ej.org/ej09/a3.html>.
- Yang, N. D. 1999. The Relationship Between EFL Learners' Beliefs and Learning Strategy. *System*. 27: 515–535.
- Zhang, L. J. 2001. Awareness in Reading: EFL Students' Metacognitive Knowledge of Reading Strategies in an Acquisition-Poor Environment. *Language Awareness*. 10(4): 268–288.
- Zimmerman, B. J. 1990. Self-regulated Learning and Academic Achievement: An Overview. *Educational Psychologist*. 25: 3–17.