

Effective English Reading Strategies: English Language Learners' Perceptions

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Abstract

Research has shown that second language reading is the bridge that leads to developing other language skills such as speaking, writing, and vocabulary acquisition. Hence, the present study aimed to explore adult language learners' perspectives regarding the most effective and beneficial reading strategies that can be used to develop their reading competency. Using a qualitative research method, the study examined what specific reading strategies language learners believe is effective in developing their reading skills. Analysis of the focus groups revealed five different reading strategies mentioned by the participants. These strategies were: Reading Aloud, Silent Reading, Shared Reading, Scanning or Skimming, and Timed Reading. Findings suggest that understanding the use of different reading strategies is important, so language teachers need to devote more learning time to introduce reading strategies during ESL classes.

Key Words: *ESL Reading; ELLs; reading strategies; reading aloud; silent reading*

Introduction

Reading in English within a second language (ESL) context has received much attention as researchers and second language educators have sought the most effective and beneficial ways to develop language learners' reading skills. For many educators (Horwitz, 2008; Krashen, 2007; Nation, 2008; Singhal, 2001), reading is the bridge that allows English language learners to acquire and develop other language skills including speaking, writing, and vocabulary acquisition. In other words, developing language learners' oral and written competency is associated with developing their reading skills (Horwitz, 2008). Krashen, (2007) pointed out that a good reader usually becomes fluent in other language skills such as writing and speaking. Also,

many scholars (Chomphuchart, 2006; HoFang, 2008; Nordin, Rashid, Zubir, and Sadjirin, 2013) have examined the reading strategies that have been used to develop language learners' reading competency. Barrot (2016) mentioned that research surrounding teaching English reading focuses on the type of text or materials used in English classes and the strategies that ESL teacher utilize to facilitate teaching and learning of English reading. These strategies are influenced by many factors including but not limited to age, gender, English proficiency level, and the learning styles. In other words, research around English reading strategies is essential in identifying the most effective and beneficial methods and techniques that can be used with language learners.

Even though much research has been done regarding second language reading, there is a dearth of studies that examining the perceptions of adult language learners who utilize various reading strategies on a daily basis. As such, the current study sought to shed light upon what reading strategies language learners prefer during ESL reading classes and why. It is important to understand these perceptions in the hope of enhancing the teaching methods that are used in reading classes. Therefore, the present study explores adult language learners' perspectives regarding the most effective and beneficial reading strategies that can be used to develop the reading competency of adult English language learners. Using qualitative research methods, the study examined what specific reading strategies language learners believe are effective in developing their reading skills. Accordingly, the following research questions guided the research study:

1. What are adult English language learners' perceptions and attitudes towards the use of reading strategies in reading classes?
2. What reading strategies do adult language learners prefer to be used in ESL classes?

Understanding these perceptions is important for second language teachers to design lesson plans and classroom activities that help in developing the reading skills of language learners. Moreover, such knowledge will extend our understanding of language learners' preferences in terms of how and which strategies are utilized in language classes. In other words, the study attempts to give voice to language learners and to allow them to be part of shaping and designing their learning process. With students' opinions and feelings, teachers can conduct more effective and appealing ESL classes. Language learners' opinions, preferences, and ideas

should be valued regarding the materials, methods, and sources that are incorporated in ESL classes.

Review of Literature

Over the past decade, research on English language teaching and learning has emphasized the importance of developing the reading skills of language learners. Many researchers (Haupt, 2015; Horwitz, 2008; Krashen, 2007; Nation, 2008; Singhal, 2001) believe that assisting language learners in the development of their reading skills is a crucial step in leading them to refine and master other language skills. Horwitz (2008) explained the importance of reading in second language acquisition by stating:

Reading is fundamental to the development of full second language competence. Many people across the world develop some listening and speaking abilities in a second language through contacts with target language speakers or television or movies, but reading is necessary to use a language for academic purposes or professional purposes. Reading can provide a wide range of language input unavailable to learners in other ways. Through reading, learners have a window on the day-to-day-lives of L1 speakers and their cultures and can experience a much wider variety of conversational situations than they would through their own interaction with target language speakers. (p.135)

Similarly, Haupt (2015) noted that reading is an essential skill for language learners to develop simultaneously with other language skills such as writing, speaking, and listening. Haupt added that language learners are encouraged to develop their reading skills because it will facilitate the growth of other skills.

In terms of reading strategies, several studies (Chomphuchart, 2006; HoFang, 2008; Nordin, Rashid, Zubir, and Sadjirin, 2013) have examined different reading strategies that can be used effectively with language learners. Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris (2008) defined reading strategies as “deliberate, goal-directed attempts to control and modify the reader’s efforts to decode text, understand words, and construct meanings of text” (p. 368). Moreover, researchers have investigated keyfactors in relation to the use of these strategies. Some of these factors include gender (Denton, Wolters, York, Swanson, Kulesz & Francis, 2015), readers’ proficiency level (Denton et al. 2015; Nordin et al. 2013), text type (HoFang, 2008), text genres (Chomphuchart, 2006), and reading purposes (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002).

Mokhtari and Reichard (2002) classified reading strategies into three categories: global strategies, problem-solving strategies, and support strategies. According to Mokhtari and

Reichard, global strategies refer to the reading methods that are used intentionally and unintentionally by readers to monitor reading. Such methods include, for instance, previewing, predicting, skimming, and scanning the text. Problem-solving strategies refer to the methods and actions used by readers to facilitate and better process reading the difficult text. Examples of such strategies include guessing the meaning of words, visualizing the reading materials, adjusting reading pace, and reading slowly. Finally, support reading strategies are used to help reader increase their comprehension of the text. For example, taking notes while reading, paraphrasing the text, using related materials, asking questions, and summarizing the text are typical support strategies used to increase comprehension.

In addition, HoFang (2008) pointed out that one of the primary factors with a direct influence on the reading process of language learners is the “type of text,” which refers to the discourse mode that tends to serve the linguistic and communicative purposes. For the language learner, type of text might prevent them from choosing the appropriate learning strategy that helps them read more fluently (Fang, 2008). For instance, on one hand, some texts require language learners to carefully read through to understand the main themes of the texts. On the other hand, other texts can be easily understood using fast reading strategies such as skimming and scanning.

Nordin et al., (2013) investigated the reading strategies used by ESL learners at higher education levels. The study aimed to find out what type of reading strategies were frequently used by low and high achieving ESL learners. Forty undergraduate language learners, (both low and high achieving ESL learners) participated in a questionnaire that focused on how frequently they use pre-and post-reading strategies. Nordin et al. (2013) found that both groups of learners rely on different reading strategies that help them grasp the meaning of the texts. However, the researchers found that high achieving ESL learners relied more on post-reading strategies, while their low achieving peers tended to use using while-reading and pre-reading strategies more often. These results indicated that low achieving language learners prefer to be exposed to the texts before reading them. The findings also provide language teachers with insight into what types of learning strategies were frequently used by low and high achieving ESL learners.

Furthermore, Chomphuchart (2006) examined the reading strategies used by Thai English language learners when they were exposed to various English texts. The study aimed to answer the questions: what reading strategies are used by those learners and what is the effect of text

genres (e.g. academic text or literature in English text) on selecting these strategies. The study included 253 Thai graduate students who were studying in different universities in the U.S. The results showed that the participating language learners used reading strategies moderately. In other words, the researcher reported that there was a significant difference when using reading strategies across different types of reading materials. In other words, different reading genres affected the participants' choices of reading strategies. The study also revealed that language learners with high reading proficiency tended to rely more on reading strategies with both types of materials. That, according to the researcher, indicated that highly proficient language learners were aware of the importance of using reading strategies to develop reading skills. Chomphuchart (2006) concluded by stating that different variables such as major, gender, familiarity with U.S. English, and educational backgrounds had little to no effect on the use of different reading strategies with either academic or literature texts.

Methodology

A qualitative research method was used to collect data for the current research study. Qualitative research inquiry allows the researcher to understand the participants' beliefs and opinions toward the most effective and beneficial reading strategies. This research method also helped the researcher go beyond understanding the participants' opinions to include the underlying reasons behind these preferences. Moreover, focus group discussions were used as primary sources of data collection. Particularly, three focus group sessions were conducted with about 20 adult language learners. These three focus group sessions were guided by semi structured questions. According to Krueger and Casey (2014), the focus group is a data collection method that enables researchers to gather participants who have similar characteristics to share their opinions and thoughts and to build upon each other's ideas about the study topic. The focus group sessions were transcribed and coded using Dedoose, an online-based program used to organize and code qualitative data.

In addition, the participants were 20 adult language learners who were enrolling in two different English language institutions in the United States. The institutions were intensive English programs, which serve the needs of language learners who learn English to attend a U.S

university. It is worth mentioning that the participants' proficiency levels were either high intermediate or advanced. The participants also were from different ethnic backgrounds: 8 Asian, 7 Arabic, and 5 Hispanic students. They also varied in their educational levels: some were pursuing a bachelor's degree while others were seeking their graduate degrees. The study included a mixed gender group with ten males and fifteen females. Accordingly, Table 1 provides more information about the participants and the focus group sessions:

*Table 1:
The focus groups*

Focus Group	Participants	Proficiency Level	Demographic Category
1st	7	High-Intermediate (3) Advanced (4)	Asian (3) Arabic (3) Hispanic (1)
2nd	6	High-Intermediate (1) Advanced (5)	Asian (3) Arabic (1) Hispanic (2)
3rd	7	High-Intermediate (4) Advanced (3)	Asian (2) Arabic (3) Hispanic (2)

Findings

The analysis of the data generated through the focus group discussions revealed five reading strategies that were mentioned consistently by the participants. In the following sections, each reading strategy is identified and discussed in detail:

Reading Aloud

Previous research (Hiebert, Samuels, & Rasinski, 2012; Price, Meisinger, Louwse & D'Mello, 2016) has indicated that Reading Aloud is one of the essential reading strategies used to develop reading literacy, enhance text comprehension, and facilitate understanding of themes and ideas that appear in the text. Hiebert, et al., (2012) mentioned that reading aloud is a reading technique where students take a turn to read a given text loudly. Similarly, reading aloud was a common reading strategy shared by most of the language learners in the three focus groups from the current study. This reading approach was identified by many of the participating language

learners as the most effective and beneficial reading technique. According to the participants, reading aloud allows for a more in-depth understanding of the general ideas and specific details of the text. The participants believed that reading aloud during ESL classes helped them develop not only their reading skills but also other language skills such as speaking and pronunciation, and that was one of the reasons why language learners prefer this strategy over other strategies. The participants also mentioned that when they read aloud, they usually receive instant feedback from their language teachers, especially when they mispronounce a word. Moreover, making the reading process more enjoyable and interesting was another reason why this reading strategy was reported by the language learners. The participants believed that reading aloud allows for emotions and feelings to be present, and that in turn motivates them to read more and be engaged with the text.

Silent Reading

Another reading strategy mentioned during the focus group sessions was Silent Reading. The participating language learners believed that silent reading is a beneficial reading strategy that allows for faster but less comprehensive reading. According to the participants, silent reading helps them improve their concentration while reading. In other words, when reading silently, language learners can concentrate on the ideas, themes, and topics that appear throughout the texts. According to the participants, another benefit of silent reading was that it allowed for the improvement of reading rhythm, reading with consistent pace without paying attention to other aspects of the language, such as pronouncing the word correctly. Surprisingly, the participants expressed frustration that even though silent reading provide faster reading abilities, it decreases the comprehension of the text. These particular opinions do not resonate with the research (Hiebert et al., 2012; Taguchi, Melhem & Kawaguchi 2016) that indicates that silent reading helps readers concentrate on understanding the text without paying attention to pronounce every single word; this, according to Taguchi, et al., (2016), increases reading fluency and comprehension.

Shared Reading

One of the reading strategies reported by the participating language learners was Shared Reading. The idea of shared reading is that learners read and interact with certain text cooperatively. The participating language learners listed several benefits of this reading strategy. First, they believed that shared reading allows for all students to succeed and develop their

reading skills simultaneously. Second, the participants pointed out that when using shared reading during reading classes, linguistic support is provided for all students. That is, teachers can provide instant feedback to all students individually and in groups. Third, it was reported that shared reading allows for a more enjoyable and interesting way of reading. These learners believed that cooperative reading makes the class more enjoyable and appealing. The participants also added that cooperative reading promotes a better classroom environment and helps them develop their reading abilities, as they learn in more comfortable, welcoming, and productive ways.

Scanning or Skimming Sections of Text

The other reading strategies brought forth by the participants was Scanning or Skimming sections of text. Scanning the text refers to reading quickly to understand the main ideas to find specific information throughout the text. Skimming, on the other hand, refers to rapidly reading the materials to get a general idea or overview of the text. The participants believed that these two strategies were helpful in reading lengthy passages or materials. They added further that these techniques tend to be used much more in the pre-reading phase. In other words, before line by-line reading, they usually rely on these two reading approaches to get an overview of the text and to prepare themselves for reading. Another benefit of scanning and skimming brought up by the participants was that these techniques allow them to find specific information quickly. This, according to the participants, is particularly helpful when answering questions in a reading test, during which they can scan or skim the text to find the required information instead of reading the whole passage.

Timed Reading

Discussions during the three focus group sessions revealed that the least preferred reading strategy was Timed Reading. Participating language learners did mention, however, that Timed reading does improve their reading speed. They added that using timed reading frequently helps in developing their reading comprehension. This finding resonates with Chang's (2010) research that indicates that timed reading is an effective learning strategy that leads to development and improvement in reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. However, in all focus groups, the interviewees pointed out that they do not prefer this reading strategy because it usually used to assess their reading skills. They believed that the time aspect usually puts them under pressure, and that added pressure decreases their abilities to concentrate and do better on the test.

Another disadvantage of timed reading reported by the participants was that it limited their abilities to explore the text. They note that reading as quickly as possible curbs the attention that they are able to give to other aspects of the reading process, such as understanding the main ideas or identifying the themes and ideas of the passage.

Conclusion

The present research examined language learners' perceptions regarding the reading strategies they prefer to use to develop various reading skills. Qualitative research methods and three focus groups were utilized to explore these perceptions. The analysis of the focus group sessions revealed some reading strategies that the participating language learners believe can be effectively used to develop their reading skills. The study found that the participants prefer to use several reading techniques such as Reading Aloud, Silent Reading, Shared Reading, Scanning or Skimming, and finally Timed Reading. Each one of these strategies has advantages and limitations.

Accordingly, it is important for second language teachers to be aware of these preferences to help language learners find the best way to develop their language skills. The findings of the current study reveal that most of the participants had positive perceptions toward using different reading strategies to develop their reading competency. The use of these strategies depends on the purpose of the reading. To illustrate, some reading methods, such as Silent Reading and Scanning and Skimming were used to increase the reading speed, while others, like Reading Aloud and Shared Reading, were used to enhance comprehension. Surprisingly, the participants seemed to be knowledgeable regarding different reading strategies and the purpose of using them. This knowledge was almost certainly a result of the time and effort given to learning the language, since all participants were either high-intermediate or advanced language learners.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Significantly, based on the findings, the study has some implications related to the teaching and learning of second language reading. One of the study's implications suggests that perhaps teachers need to devote more learning time to introduce reading strategies during ESL classes. Language learners need to learn the benefits and drawbacks of each reading strategy, so they can decide which approach fits their reading needs. Derakhshan and Nazari (2015) pointed out that ESL teachers need to increase students' awareness of different reading strategies to be

able to use them where it is relevant and suitable. This according to the researchers allows language learners to have “more responsibilities for using the proper strategies independently.” (p. 435). Hence, more class time should be given to clarify what, when, and for what purpose reading strategies should be used. The second implication of this study suggests that language learners should learn more about other reading strategies. Even though the participants identified five different reading methods, there are still more reading techniques to know about. For instance, Birch (2014) identified other reading strategies that can be used to develop the reading proficiency of language learners. These strategies include summarizing, sequencing, inferencing, comparing and contrasting, and relating background knowledge. Teaching reading strategies is essential for language learners to raise their awareness about different reading strategies that can be used. Mehrpour, Bagheri, and Sadighi (2012) examined the effectiveness of teaching reading comprehension strategies explicitly for Iranian EFL pre-university students and found that it appeared to raise students’ awareness and encourage them to use different strategies when necessary. That, according to the researchers, develops students’ reading skills.

Ultimately, the present study is important because it gives language learners the opportunity to voice themselves in regard to what reading strategies they prefer to use. This information can be used to determine the specific purposes these strategies are used for and more importantly why the strategies are useful overall. Furthermore, the present study provides guidelines for both ESL instructors and language learners to be aware of what reading strategies should be emphasized during ESL classes. It also provides a framework for language learners to pay more attention to the reading approaches that match their language needs. The present study, however, explores only language learners’ perceptions about the reading strategies used in ESL reading classes. Hence, additional research is needed to explore ESL teachers’ opinions and thoughts of regarding the effectiveness of different types of reading methods. Teachers’ voices will be important to identify what language learners need to know about developing their reading skills.

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