

Awareness of Reading Strategies among EFL Learners at Bangkok University

Nuttanuch Munsakorn

Abstract—This questionnaire-based study, aimed to measure and compare the awareness of English reading strategies among EFL learners at Bangkok University (BU) classified by their gender, field of study, and English learning experience. Proportional stratified random sampling was employed to formulate a sample of 380 BU students. The data were statistically analyzed in terms of the mean and standard deviation. t-Test analysis was used to find differences in awareness of reading strategies between two groups (male and female- /-science and social-science students). In addition, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare reading strategy awareness among BU students with different lengths of English learning experience. The results of this study indicated that the overall awareness of reading strategies of EFL learners at BU was at a high level ($X = 3.60$) and that there was no statistically significant difference between males and females, and among students who have different lengths of English learning experience at the significance level of 0.05. However, significant differences among students coming from different fields of study were found at the same level of significance.

Keywords—EFL learners, higher education, reading comprehension, reading strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

ESL and EFL university students have to read a large volume of academic texts in English, but many of those entering university education are unprepared for the reading demands placed on them [1]. Like other EFL learners, Bangkok University students in Thailand also face the problem of reading comprehension which is reflected in their poor reading scores. It is important for the learners to improve their reading comprehension. In order to do this, strategies are used to assist them in getting the meaning of what they read. The learners also use various strategies to help them in the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of information [2]. They neither naturally acquire the target strategies through implicit learning nor know which strategies to use to reach their reading comprehension goal [2]. As stated earlier, students need to make use of reading strategies. However, teachers assume that students know how to read English texts as well as they read in Thai. Hence, the aspect of choosing the appropriate reading strategies, which is very important for readers, is ignored. In addition, it is not enough for the readers simply know what reading strategies are; they must also know how to use reading strategies successfully and be able to apply them interchangeably. Most Thai students do not understand reading passages thoroughly because they do not apply the appropriate reading strategies [3].

N. Munsakorn is with the Language Institute, Bangkok University, Bangkok, Thailand (e-mail: nuttanuch.m@bu.ac.th).

The issues of which strategies and how many of them the students are using has become a point of discussion among Bangkok University lecturers. Therefore, the researcher would like to investigate the level of reading strategy awareness among students as there might be some strategies that have remained unknown to them. Also, it would be useful to learn more about other factors affecting the use of reading strategies. Knowing this information would help lecturers improve the teaching and learning process in order to develop students' reading abilities, which would lead to better reading comprehension. The information provided in this research would also help to increase the awareness of reading strategies among the learners and to improve their understanding of the reading process, thus helping them to become strategic readers.

II. PURPOSES OF THE STUDY

This study aims to measure the type and frequency of use of reading strategies by first-year students at Bangkok University and to compare the English reading strategy awareness of the student's gender, field of study, and lengths of English learning experience.

III. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The findings of this research will help English lecturers at Bangkok University to know their students' awareness level of reading strategies, and the type and frequency of use of reading strategies among the students. With this knowledge, they can provide instructions on reading strategies that some students may not recognize or have never learned, thus helping them improve their abilities as strategic readers.

IV. THEORY: READING STRATEGIES

[4] stated that the importance of using reading strategies is especially critical for English language learners. Reading strategies can be taught to students, and when taught, strategies help improve student performance on tests of comprehension and recall. Reference [5] identified the advantage of reading strategies in their research by expressing that even in a standardized test like the TOEIC, test-takers have to use a wide range of reading strategies under the conditions in order to obtain a high TOEIC reading score. They further stated that some of the more important strategies include scanning, skimming, speeding reading, and the ability to identify and eliminate irrelevant information. Academic reading, on the other hand, requires students to analyze the texts, make inferences, and think critically.

Adams and Patterson [6] defined reading strategies as the mental process people use to enhance their reading comprehension.

They identified the types of reading strategies as follows:

1. Scanning refers to the skill by which one reads very quickly to find needed specific information.

2. Skimming refers to the skill by which one moves his or her eyes rapidly through the material to get the gist or general idea.

3. Schema refers to the skill by which one connects new information to his or her previous knowledge and then interprets it meaningfully.

4. Identifying main ideas and supporting details refers to the skill by which one uses either key words that lead to topic sentences or the topic sentences of the paragraphs and/ or texts to obtain the main idea; it is also the skill by which one can identify the crucial details (fact, reason, comparison, example or statistics) that develop the main idea.

5. Using grammatical clues refers to the skill by which one uses nine types of grammatical clues to unlock word and sentence meaning: part of speech, sentence pattern, punctuation, modifier, subject- verb agreement, tense, phrase, clause, and type of sentence.

6. Using word parts refers to the skill by which one uses word parts (prefix, suffix, and root) to determine the meaning of words.

7. Using context clues refers to the skill by which one uses features within the sentence or paragraph that can help them define unfamiliar words: pronoun reference, restatement, transitional marker, relative pronoun, synonym, and antonym.

8. Making inferences refers to the skill by which one uses context clues and their background knowledge to gather information and draw the final or proper meaning that is not clearly stated by the writer.

9. SQ3R, which stands for survey, question, read, recite and review refers to the skill by which one picks out only the important points and fixes them in his or her memory, resulting in faster reading.

10. Summary is the skill by which one states briefly in his or her own words the main and supporting ideas in a reading selection. There are, three basic guidelines for a summary: it has to be brief, complete, and objective (that is, it does not include feeling and opinion of the one who summarizes).

There are many reading strategies that can help the readers improve their reading abilities. However, in this study, the researcher would like to investigate students' awareness of only eight reading strategies. These eight strategies include scanning, skimming, schema, identifying main ideas and supporting details, using grammatical clues, using word parts, using context clues, and making inferences.

Providing students with guidance on reading strategies before they start reading is one of the key factors that motivate them to become strategic readers. The existence of various types of reading strategies allows readers to select those that are appropriate to particular text genres, as well as to their own

schemata and metacognitive awareness. If the students know the techniques in reading, it is possible for them to read and comprehend texts better.

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Populations

The population of this study consisted of 3,762 first-year students enrolled in the Fundamental English 1 course (EN111) at BU in the first semester of the academic year 2011. All of them were from science and social science departments.

B. Subjects

The samples in this study each comprised 380 first-year students enrolled in EN111 course at BU in the first semester of the academic year 2011 using a stratified random sampling technique. The estimated sample size was based on Taro Yamane's table. A 95% confidence level was selected, with a precision rate of $\pm 5\%$. Thus, in a population of 3,685, the samples should comprise at least 380 individuals each.

C. Instruments

The instrument used in collecting data was a questionnaire adapted by [6], a lecturer at Bangkok University who has studied the use of English reading strategies by Thai students. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part focused on the respondents' background, particularly gender, field of study, and length of English learning experience. The second part was based on reading strategies proposed by Adams and Patterson [6]. It aimed to examine the respondents' reading strategy awareness focused on the above-mentioned eight reading strategies: scanning, skimming, schema, identifying main ideas and supporting details, using grammatical clues, using word parts, using context clues, and making inferences. This part consisted of 47 items in the form of Likert rating scales with the points "very frequently," "frequently," "sometimes," "rarely," and "never."

To test its proper reliability, the questionnaire was piloted among 40 first-year students at Bangkok University during the summer session in the academic year 2010. The proper reliability value was calculated based on five-point scale items using Cronbach's coefficient alpha. The reliability of the questionnaire was found to be 0.962. The proper reliability of each strategy was 0.600-0.913.

VI. DATA COLLECTION

The data were collected from 380 first-year students enrolled in a required Fundamental English 1 course at Bangkok University in the first semester of the academic year 2011. The researcher obtained samples from all the departments through the student lists on the Bangkok University intranet. The questionnaires were given to all the samples and then collected by the researcher. The data collection process took about three weeks.

VII. DATA ANALYSIS

The data obtained from the questionnaires were statistically analyzed through the following statistical device: percentages were used to illustrate the background information on the first-year students; the means and standard deviations were employed to analyze the level of reading strategy awareness; and the computed weighted means of reading strategy awareness were interpreted in the form of range.

Mean Range	Level of Strategy Awareness
4.21-5.00	very extensive
3.41-4.20	extensive
2.61-3.40	medium
1.80-2.60	little
1.00-1.80	very little

t-Test analysis was used to compare the mean scores on the opinions on reading strategy awareness between two groups classified by gender and two groups classified by fields of study (science and social science). One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed to test the mean scores on the opinions on reading strategy awareness in terms of English learning experience. The LSD method was used to compare each pair of results whenever a statistically significant difference was found.

VIII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Research Hypothesis 1: Males and females have different levels of reading strategy awareness.

This study found striking similarities in reading strategy awareness among males and females. The results on the reading strategy awareness of EFL students at BU classified by gender indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between males and females in terms of overall strategy ($p = 0.05$). Males and females not only used the same number of overall strategies ($M = 3.60$) but also did not differ significantly on any individual reading strategy. As figure 1 indicates, among Bangkok University students, both males and females have a high level of awareness of *scanning* ($\bar{x} = 3.84$, $\bar{x} = 3.89$ respectively). In other words, male and female students use the same strategies to achieve reading proficiency. This is because reading is not a subject that requires linguistic talents and intellectual ability; thus, either gender can apply the same reading strategies whenever they read [6]. In addition, [7] indicated that female students trend to be higher L2 achievers because of their innate gender characteristics. This confirms that reading strategy use is primarily influenced by factors other than gender. The results found here are consistent with [4]'s findings, which showed very few strategic differences by gender, with both males and females using reading strategies with medium or high frequency. Likewise, [8], who focused specifically on gender differences in reading strategies, found that there were no significant differences between males and females in terms of the cognitive strategies they use. This also

corresponds with [9]'s findings, which revealed that male and female college ESL learners show no significant differences overall and only differed on one individual strategy. On the other hand, several studies [10] found a wide range of gender differences in the frequency and flexibility of reading strategy use, including that female students employ a variety of reading strategies in coming to terms with and arriving at a comprehension of the text. [10]

B. Research Hypothesis 2: Students coming from different fields of study have different level of reading strategy awareness.

As the research findings revealed, significant differences between two different fields of study were found in all strategies ($p = .05$). The social science and science students had a high level of awareness of the use of reading strategies ($\bar{x} = 3.64$ and $\bar{x} = 3.40$, respectively). *Scanning* was mainly used at a high level by both science and social science students ($\bar{x} = 3.84$ and $\bar{x} = 3.95$, respectively). There was no difference in awareness between students coming from different fields of study. Students from the social science (Humanities, Communication Arts, Fine and Applied Arts, and Business) and science (Law, Engineering, and Science and Technology) departments use the same strategies during the reading process in English learning. The findings contrast with [11] and [6], who found that Humanities students employed some strategies more often than did students in technical and business majors. Moreover, [6] revealed in his study that third-year Humanities students at Bangkok University are more exposed to English since this department offers majors in English and Hotel and Tourism, in which the students are continuously taught and encouraged to practice reading strategies as part of their major subjects.

In this study, the science and social science students are first-year students enrolled in the Fundamental English 1 course. This course is based on the product-oriented approach and provides the same reading materials for both social science and science majors. The teachers concentrate on reading tasks with a series of passages and questions provided to the students. This is assuming that students instinctively understand how to use the strategies.

C. Research Hypothesis 3: Students with different lengths of English learning experience have different levels of reading strategy awareness.

According to the research findings, students with English learning experience of less than 8 years, 8-12 years, and more than 12 years employed overall reading strategies ($p = 0.05$); that is, the number of years spent studying English affects the reading strategy usage of students. In this view, those students with English learning experience of less than 8 years, 8-12 years, and more than 12 years had a high level of reading strategy awareness ($\bar{x} = 3.72$, $\bar{x} = 3.49$, and $\bar{x} = 3.62$, respectively).

It should be stressed that the relevance of improving the reading comprehension skills of learners is for them to achieve

enhanced performance in their daily academic tasks. If the person studying English has previously studied another foreign language, then it will be easier for him/her to learn the English language. This type of learner has been in a learning environment for a longer period of time than a learner of English who has not studied any other foreign language [12]. In addition, the results of this study are consistent with [13], who claimed that the more time spent on academic texts, the higher the level of strategy usage reported. Surprisingly, students who have English learning experience of less than 8 years had a higher level of strategy awareness than that of students who had been learning English for 8-12 years. The fact that the length of English learning experience did not appear to affect the students' awareness of reading strategies might be due to the failure of the checklist to accurately reflect the students' reading strategy usage or reading abilities. Although Thai students have been learning English as a foreign language for many years, their reading abilities are limited. This is assumed that students instinctively understand how to use strategies.

IX. CONCLUSION

These findings point to a need to instill an awareness of reading strategies among science/social science students regardless of the length of their English learning experience. Realizing the advantages of reading strategies and putting them into actual use would enable students to acknowledge the need for and importance of reading comprehension skills. It should be stressed that the relevance of improving the reading comprehension skills of learners is for them to achieve enhanced performance in their daily academic tasks. This idea is supported by [12], who said that learners need to think about reading so that they can develop their own strategies according to what works for them.

This study has some practical implications for EFL teachers. First, strategy-based instruction should be added in the comprehension test. Since the product-oriented approach does not work in teaching reading [14], the teacher should seek more interesting techniques for teaching reading or construct other instructional media for teaching reading strategies to motivate the students to study reading more attentively and to use reading strategies that they rarely use or have not recognized. Second, teachers should adopt comprehension exercises and strategy evaluations. In this way, students will increase their knowledge or awareness of reading strategies. Gradually, they can then develop a higher degree of autonomy in using these reading strategies in different contexts. This recommendation is supported by [15] - [17]. Third, students need to be trained on how to apply these strategies for successful comprehension of academic materials. Therefore, students should be guided on the use of different reading strategies for them to perform better in examinations and tasks. Finally, as teachers play a vital role in raising students' awareness of reading strategies, in helping them use such strategies, and in teaching them how to determine whether they are successful in their use of the strategies [18], they too should be trained on how to use metacognitive strategies so

that they can effectively help their students, as also recommended by [19].

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Munsakorn N. was born in Thailand, January 14th, 1973. She received M.A. (Communication Arts), 2001 and B.A. (Education), 1995 from Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand. Asst. Prof. Munsakorn is currently a full-time lecturer at Language Institute, Bangkok University. Her area of interest in research is reading strategies.