

READING STRATEGIES: WHAT ARE THEY?

Hossein Karami

University of Tehran

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Reading is an integral part of academic affairs and it is equally important outside academic contexts. Apart from the essential linguistic requirements of the reading process (e.g. vocabulary and grammar), there are some so-called reading strategies that are attested to improve reading. Many articles and, indeed, whole books have been devoted to investigating reading. However, little research has been done to explore the nature of the reading strategies. This text attempts to provide a brief synthesis of the literature on the reading strategies.

In his introduction to Alderson (2000) on assessing reading, Lyle Bachman notes: "Reading through which we can access worlds of ideas and feelings, as well as the knowledge of ages and visions of the future, is at once the most extensively researched and the most enigmatic of the so-called language skills." The enigmatic nature of this "psycholinguistic guessing game" (Goodman, 1979) is even more evident when we are faced with reading in a foreign or second language. But, what is involved in reading that makes it so complicated and indeed difficult?

King (see references) believes that four factors are involved in reading comprehension: the reader, the text, the strategies, and the goal. He, then, goes on to emphasize that what actually makes the difference is the reading strategies. For King, the single most important factor in reading is the strategies learners utilize. But, what are reading strategies? We will have a brief look at the literature to answer this question.

Wenden (1987 cited in Alderson 2000) notes that the strategies have been labeled differently in the literature and goes on to list the following: techniques, tactics, potentially conscious plans, consciously employed operations, learning skills, basic skills, functional skills, cognitive abilities, language processing strategies and problem-solving procedures.

A general distinction has often been made between strategies and skills. However, for some, they denote essentially the same processes.

Brown (2007 P.119) defines strategies as the "specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation for achieving a particular end, planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information." He differentiates

between strategies and styles. Styles are “consistent and rather enduring tendencies and preferences within an individual”. Styles are what distinguish you from others they are rather consistent and defy changes. Strategies on the other hand, vary within individuals from moment to moment as the specific problems and contexts change.

Chamot (2005 cited in Brown 2007) emphasizes the distinguishing feature of the strategies is consciousness. We utilize them rather consciously. Alderson (2000) takes the same position.

These definitions are provided in the context of general learning. Pani defines reading strategies as “the mental operations involved when readers approach a text effectively to make sense of what they read... Good readers apply more strategies more frequently ...and more effectively than poor readers.” (Pani 2004)

According to Brown (2007), the literature on second language acquisition has differentiated between two broad categories of strategies: learning strategies and communication strategies. Simply put, the former relates to input whereas the latter pertains to output and how we produce language either in speech or writing. As reading is considered to be a receptive skill, we are concerned with learning strategies here.

Among the learning strategies cited in the literature, the metacognitive and cognitive strategies are most relevant to reading. Metacognition is concerned with monitoring, or watching, and evaluating the success of the learning process. Cognitive strategies, on the other hand, relate to the specific contexts and learning tasks.

Note that these strategies are part of our overall capacity in dealing with problems and tricky situations. This capacity is called strategic competence (see Bachman 1990, Bachman and Palmer 1996, Canale and Swain 1980).

The impact of these strategies on reading is conceived to be of utmost importance in any act of reading. Remember that King (see above) emphasized that what differentiate between poor and good readers are reading strategies. Of course, he is not alone in this regard. Brown (2001), for example, points out that "reading

comprehension is a matter of developing appropriate, efficient comprehension strategies" (ibid P. 306). He goes on to enumerate ten such strategies:

1. Identify the purpose in reading.
2. Use graphemic rules and patterns to aid in bottom-up reading.
3. Use different silent reading techniques for relatively rapid reading.
4. Skim the text for main ideas.
5. Scan the text for specific information.
6. Use semantic mapping or clustering.
7. Guess when you aren't certain.
8. Analyze vocabulary.
9. Distinguish between literal and implied meanings.
10. Capitalize on discourse markers to process relationships.

Interestingly enough, there have been some studies which have enumerated poor readers' characteristics. Lau (2006), for example, cites the following in the literature:

1. They do not know how to construct the main ideas and macrostructure of the texts,
2. They are not familiar with the text structure and do not make use of the text structure to organize the main ideas,
3. They have little prior knowledge and do not know how to activate their knowledge to facilitate text comprehension,
4. They have difficulties in drawing inferences to achieve in-depth understanding of the texts,
5. They lack metacognitive ability, and are not aware of the problems that emerge during reading and do not know how to monitor their reading process.

Empirical investigations have been done into the usefulness of strategy instruction on reading. Wright and Brown (2006) investigated the impact of explicit strategy instruction on reading comprehension of students of Spanish and/or French as a foreign language. The authors concluded that although the results indicated that the participants' awareness of some strategies and their ability to reflect upon their reading did increase," other strategies seemed harder to acquire. They also pointed out that some learners faced difficulties in acquiring some complex strategies.

The use of strategies after they have been learned has also been related to a variety of factors. For example, it is claimed that there is a close relationship between strategy use and motivation or the goal of reading. Generally, it is conveyed that the higher the motivation and the more important the goal, the more learners utilize strategies. He (2008) investigated the effect of the goal of reading and motivation on the learners' utilization of strategies. The results indicated that the participants with stronger goals generally performed better than those with the same proficiency levels but weaker goals.

Based on this general review, we may be in a position to provide a synthesis definition of reading strategies. Reading strategies may be defined as the conscious, internally variable psychological techniques aimed at improving the effectiveness of or compensating for the breakdowns in reading comprehension, on specific reading tasks and in specific contexts.

The definition provided here highlights some aspects of reading strategies:

1. They are conscious
2. They change from moment to moment
3. They are regarded as tactics (for attacking a problem)
4. Their use depends on the specific reading tasks
5. Context is a determinant factor
6. They are aimed at improving performance
7. They make up for the breakdowns in comprehension

The final point is that although the literature generally indicates usefulness of these strategies for efficient reading, other factors may also be involved in their application. As we saw above, goal of reading is one such factor.

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