

Strategy Preference of Vietnamese college students when reading English texts

**Hanh Nguyen
Ha Tinh University**

Strategic reading is a critical component of skilled reading. The fact that most college students in Vietnam have received long-term English education, it is not sure that they are strategic readers when reading English texts. In addition, although a substantial body of empirical research has examined reading strategy use by English learners of different L1s, there is little research involving Vietnamese ESL learners. Therefore, this study attempted to investigate the most preferred patterns of reading strategy use by Vietnamese ESL learners at tertiary level. The sample of the study was 32 Vietnamese ESL students at Ha Tinh University. The Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) was used to measure learners' frequency of use of global, problem solving, and support strategies when reading academic materials in English. The frequency analyses showed a fairly regular use of reading strategies by Vietnamese ESL college students. Of the three types of strategies, support strategies were the most frequently employed, followed by global and problem solving strategies. The study results were discussed in view of learner's language proficiency and training experiences and in comparison to other ESL learner groups. These findings carry valuable pedagogical implications in training ESL learners to become more strategic readers.

Key words: reading strategies, strategy preference, Vietnamese ESL college learners

1. Introduction

Given the additional linguistic barrier of a second language and possible differences in cultural and educational backgrounds, reading in a second language is generally more challenging than reading in the first language. Then, the active role of the reader, specifically, the reader's ability to invoke appropriate strategies to tackle reading difficulties, is crucial to successful comprehension (Barnett, 1988; Carrell, 1989). In other words, as summarized by Grabe (1991), strategic reading is one critical component of fluent reading.

Cohen (1990) defines reading strategies as the mental procedures that readers deliberately prefer to employ in accomplishing reading tasks. It is fairly clear that the employment of reading strategies indicates how readers understand a reading task, what they think they can do to achieve their goal, and what they decide to do to tackle comprehension challenges. Based on a metacognitive framework, researchers identify two types of strategies: cognitive strategies (i.e. those used to construct meaning of text) and metacognitive strategies (i.e. those used to monitor understanding and take action when necessary) (Garner, 1987; Oxford, 1990). Sheorey and Mokhtari (2002) further specify reading strategies into three subtypes: global (metacognitive) strategies, problem-solving (cognitive) strategies, and support strategies. Global strategies refer to “intentionally, carefully planned techniques by which learners monitor or manage their reading” (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2002, p. 4), for example, having a reading purpose. Problem-solving strategies are “localized” and used when the text becomes difficult to read, for instance, re-reading. Support strategies are tools to aid comprehension such as the use of outside reference materials and note-taking.

Readers’ active engagement in the reading process reflects in their attempt to use different types of reading strategies to maximize their comprehension of a reading text. The fact that most college students in Vietnam have already received long-term English education, many of them still experience a lot of difficulties in reading English texts. It is not sure that Vietnamese college students are strategic readers when reading in English. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the preference in the use of second language reading strategies by Vietnamese college students.

2. Literature Review

Reading research has documented that good and older readers employ strategic reading to a greater extent than do poor and younger readers (e.g. Baker & Brown, 1984; Garner, 1980). Proficient readers are more aware of their reading purposes and are better at monitoring their reading process through the effective use of reading strategies. They are likely to use more cognitive and metacognitive strategies, whereas younger and less skilled readers tend to focus on strategies which mainly deal with the decoding of the text or the local level of the text (Garner, 1980).

An impressive volume of work has been done to explore the strategies employed by ESL learners of different populations. A positive correlation between strategic reading and second language reading performance has been reported in different studies. Barnett (1988) found that among college-level EFL French learners, those who utilized more strategies scored higher than did their counterparts. Also, those readers who employed strategies such as effectively considering and using contextual clues achieved a higher level of comprehension. Similarly, Zhang's study (2001) showed that the higher English proficiency subjects who set and kept a clear purpose for reading and could employ various strategies achieved a significantly higher level of comprehension. By contrast, the lower English proficiency participants who had little monitoring of their reading process and used less strategies attained a lower reading performance.

Developing the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) to examine second language learners' use of global, problem solving, and support strategies, Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) found a significantly positive correlation between ESL learners' strategy use and self-rated reading ability. In a study of Indian ESL learners, Madhumathi and Ghosh (2012) found that high performing readers employed all three types of reading strategies, especially global strategies, significantly more frequently than their lower level counterparts. Particularly, the results of correlation analyses in Karbalaei Kamran's study (2013) showed that the overall use of reading strategies and the use of global strategies could be predictors of reading performance. Besides, other factors, for example, linguistic proficiency, genders, and backgrounds, may also play a role in the use of reading strategies by second language readers (see Carrell, 1989; Malcolm, 2009; Lee, 2012; Razi & Grenfell, 2012; Sheorey et al., 2008).

By means of the SORS, researchers have identified some prominent tendencies in the use of reading strategies by ESL learners of various L1s and cultural backgrounds. One of these tendencies shows that regardless of differences in their L1s, ESL learners share a common preference for support strategies. This trend is supported by the findings of studies with ESL learners who were studying in the US (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001), Iranian ESP learners (Jafari & Shokrpour, 2012), and Hungarian learners of English (Sheorey & Baboczky, 2008). According to Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001), these tendencies suggest that many ESL readers use supportive tools to compensate for their lack of linguistic competence in comprehending a text.

Another trend, found among a body of other studies, shows a preference for problem-solving strategies. Zhang and Wu (2009) found that Chinese senior high school learners of English preferred problem solving strategies the most, global strategies the second and support strategies the least. The exactly same results were also recognized for Thai adult English learners in Typamas (2012). Other examples include ESL learners from Morocco (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2004), Japan (Sheorey, Kamimura, & Freiermuth, 2008), Bahrain (Malcolm, 2009), and India (Madhumathi & Ghosh, 2012).

In addition, research has also provided valuable observations about ESL learners' preferences regarding the use of individual reading strategies (e.g. Malcolm, 2009; Mokhtari & Reichard, 2004; Sheorey & Baboczky, 2008; Sheorey et al., 2008). Indian ESL learners frequently used strategies involving visualizing information from the text, re-reading, and adjusting their reading speed. On the other hand, they rarely thought in both English and L1 or translated from English to their mother tongue (Madhumathi & Ghosh, 2012). Differently, Iranian ESP students showed a higher preference for some support strategies such as using reference materials, thinking in both English and their native language, and translating. They less favored strategies like adjusting the reading speed, reading aloud, evaluating what is read, using visuals and distinguishing between what should be read closely and what should be ignored (Jafari & Shokrpour, 2012). The diversity of preferences for strategy types and individual strategies suggest that ESL learners' strategic behaviors may differ under the influence of their first languages and educational and cultural backgrounds.

Findings and discussions from numerous studies have urged the author's interest into examining the strategic pattern of Vietnamese ESL learners at tertiary level when reading academic English texts. To the researcher's knowledge, there has not been much evidence about reading strategy use by Vietnamese ESL learners, especially college students. Thus, on a smaller scale, this study aimed to provide a more comprehensive insight into the way Vietnamese college students read academic materials in English. On a larger scale, it is hoped that this research would offer further empirical evidence about reading strategy use by different groups of ESL learners.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

The present study aimed to identify the preferred pattern of reading strategy use by Vietnamese ESL college students. Two research questions were formulated to guide the research process:

1. What are Vietnamese college students' preferences of reading strategy types when reading English texts?
2. What are Vietnamese college students' preferences for individual reading strategies when reading English texts?

3.2 Participants

The sample of the present study consisted of 32 Vietnamese ESL college students at the age of 20 and 21, including 30 females and 2 males. Participants were fourth-year students majoring in English Teaching Pedagogy at Ha Tinh University, Vietnam. At the time of the study, all participants had studied English for about 10 years, including seven years at secondary level and three years at tertiary level. Their English proficiency level was considered as upper-intermediate.

The participants formed a homogeneous group since they were young adults of a similar English proficiency, sharing the same cultural background and same native language, Vietnamese. In terms of orthography, like English, Vietnamese uses the Latin alphabet and a left-to-right writing and reading system.

3.3 Instruments

In order to assess the participants' metacognitive awareness of reading strategy use, the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) developed by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002) was employed. Mokhtari and Sheorey categorize thirty items in the inventory into the three following subscales:

- 13 global reading strategies (GLOB) (e.g. having a purpose in mind, previewing length and organization of the text);
- 8 problem-solving strategies (PROB) (e.g. adjusting the reading speed, guessing the meaning of unknown words, and rereading the text);
- 9 support strategies (SUP) (e.g. using a dictionary, taking notes, underlining, or highlighting textual information).

The frequency level of readers' strategy use is measured on a five-point Likert scale available after each statement, ranging from 1 ("I never or almost never do this") to 5 ("I always or almost always do this") (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002). The frequency level of strategy use is grouped as follow: 3.5 or higher = High; 2.5 – 3.4 = Medium; 2.4 or lower = Low. Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002) claim that SORS was "field-tested on a population of ESL students, its internal reliability was found to be 0.89, indicating a reasonable degree of consistency in measuring awareness and perceived use of reading strategies among non-native students of English" (p. 4).

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection was carried out after obtaining an official permission from the administrator of Ha Tinh University and participants' written consent. The Survey of Reading Strategies - SORS was delivered to every participant. Then, the participants responded to the survey by reading each statement carefully and then, circling the number that applied to them within 20 minutes.

The Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS, version 19.0) was used to analyze the data. Descriptive and frequency statistics provided means, standard

deviations, and frequency distributions for their overall scores of the use of each strategy subscale (global, problem solving, and support) as well as scores of 30 individual items in the SORS.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Vietnamese ESL Learners' Preference for Reading Strategy Types

The purpose of the first research question was to identify Vietnamese ESL college students' preferred pattern for strategy types. Frequency statistics were calculated for the total mean scores of the three strategy subscales. Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics for the three subscales of reading strategies.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Three Types of Reading Strategies

Types of reading strategies	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Global strategies	32	2.85	4.31	3.48	.36
Problem solving strategies	32	2.38	4.13	3.43	.47
Support strategies	32	2.67	4.11	3.59	.36

As shown in Table 1, none of the three types of reading strategies was reported with a low frequency of use, and there was no big difference in the mean scores among the three strategy types. The mean scores of 3.48 and 3.59 for global and support strategies, respectively, reveal that these two strategy subscales as a whole were used more than 50% of the time, approaching the point of “often” use. The results also show that of all three strategy subscales, support strategies were used most frequently. Problem solving strategies received the lowest mean score of 3.43, which, however, was very slightly lower than the mean scores of the other two strategy subscales.

Based on the frequency statistics, it appears that Vietnamese ESL college learners employed reading strategies quite frequently. The fairly high use of reading strategies by Vietnamese ESL readers could be a result of their long-term English education. At the time of the study, all participants had studied English for about ten years and their English proficiency was considered to be upper-intermediate. Therefore, it can be presumed that they had a quite substantial experience in reading in English which could have resulted in explicit and implicit awareness and use of reading strategies.

Additionally, because participants were college-level students, they all had acquired literacy skills in their first language to a high degree. As found in prior studies (e.g. Garcia, Jimenez, & Pearson, 1998; Mokhtari & Reichard, 2004; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001), skilled readers in both L1 and L2 tend to have a relatively unitary pattern of metacognitive knowledge and are more aware that "information and strategies learned or acquired in one language could be used to comprehend text written in another language" (Garcia et al., 1998, p. 204). Thus, it is possible that the participant in this study could have transferred some of their strategies in L1 reading to ESL reading (e.g. Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Sheorey et al., 2008).

The result shows that support strategies were the most preferred by Vietnamese ESL learners, followed by global and problem solving strategies. The same pattern was revealed for Iranian ESP students in Jafari and Shokrpour's study (2012). Hungarian learners of English also shared with Vietnamese ESL learners the strongest preference for support strategies. Similarly, Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) found that ESL learners studying English in the US, regardless of their reading ability, made use of support strategies more often than of the two other strategy types. The consistent preference for

support strategies among several studies with ESL learners of different first languages suggests that support strategies may play an important role for some ESL learners.

On the contrary, other ESL learner groups appear to favor problem-solving or cognitive strategies. Typamas (2012) found that Thai adult English learners reported the highest frequency to problem solving strategies, global strategies the second and support strategies the least. Likewise, Moroccan ESL students (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2004), Indian ESL learners (Madhumathi & Ghosh, 2012), and Arabic-speaking ESL learners (Malcolm, 2009) reported the most frequent use of cognitive strategies. Japanese college students were found to employ support strategies less frequently than problem solving and global strategies (Sheorey et al., 2008).

4.2 Vietnamese ESL Learners' Preferences for Individual Reading Strategies

The present study also examined Vietnamese ESL learners' preferences for individual reading strategies. Table 2 shows the reading strategies with the reported frequency of use in the ascending order. None of the 30 individual reading strategies was reported to be used at a low frequency by Vietnamese ESL learners at tertiary level, and 14 had high usage (above 50% of the time and usually).

Table 2
Reading Strategies Used by Vietnamese ESL College Students in Ascending Order

Type	Strategies	Mean	Rank
SUP	10. I underline or circle information in the text to help me remember it.	4.53	1
PROB	19. I try to picture or visualize information to help me remember what I read.	4.16	2
GLOB	1. I have a purpose in mind when I read.	4.15	3
GLOB	24. I try to guess what the content of the text is about when I read.	4.06	4
PROB	25. When text becomes difficult, I re-read it to increase my understanding.	3.97	5
GLOB	27. I check to see if my guesses about the text are right or wrong.	3.88	6
SUP	2. I take notes while reading to help me understand what I read.	3.84	7
GLOB	23. I check my understanding when I come across new information.	3.75	8
SUP	22. I go back and forth in the text to find the information presented in the text.	3.69	9
GLOB	3. I think about what I know to help me understand what I read.	3.66	10
SUP	29. When reading, I translate from English into my native language.	3.66	11
GLOB	12. When I read, I decide to read closely and what to ignore.	3.63	12
SUP	30. When reading, I think about information in both English and my L1.	3.59	13
PROB	7. I read slowly and carefully to make sure I understand what I am reading.	3.56	14
GLOB	4. I take an overall view of the text to see what it is before reading it.	3.47	15
GLOB	6. I think about whether the content of the text fits my reading purpose.	3.41	16
SUP	18. I paraphrase to better understand what I read.	3.41	17
SUP	26. I ask myself questions I like to have answered in the text.	3.38	18
GLOB	20. I use typographical features like bold face, italics to identify key information.	3.34	19
GLOB	21. I critically analyze and evaluate the information presented in the text.	3.34	20
SUP	13. I use reference materials to help me understand what I read.	3.34	21
PROB	11. I adjust my reading speed according to what I am reading.	3.43	22
PROB	16. I stop from time to time and think about what I am reading.	3.28	23
PROB	9. I try to get back on track when I lose concentration.	3.19	24
PROB	28. When text becomes difficult, I re-read it to increase my understanding.	3.16	25
GLOB	17. I use context clues to help me better understand what I am reading.	3.03	26
GLOB	8. I review the text first by noting its characteristics like length and organization.	3.00	27
SUP	5. When text becomes difficult, I read aloud to help me understand what I read.	2.91	28
PROB	14. When text becomes difficult, I pay closer attention to what I am reading.	2.66	29
GLOB	15. I use tables, figures, and pictures in text to increase my understanding.	2.47	30

Note: **Bold** means indicate high frequency of strategy use.

It is shown in Table 2 that the highest frequency of use was reported in relation to a support strategy, namely, *underlining or circling information in the text to help me*

remember it (M=4.53), followed by a problem solving strategy *picturing/visualizing information* (M=4.16), two global strategies *having a purpose in mind when reading* (M=4.15) and *making guesses about the content of the text* (M=4.06). On the other hand, *reading aloud* (M=2.91), *paying closer attention when text becomes difficult* (M=2.66), and *using tables, figures, and pictures to increase understanding of the text* (M=2.47) were the three least preferred strategies by Vietnamese learners of English.

In comparison with other ESL learner populations, Vietnamese ESL learners both resemble and differentiate in their use of individual reading strategies. For example, Indian ESL students also used 14 strategies with a high frequency and also highly preferred *picturing or visualizing* (Madhumathi & Ghosh, 2012). However, unlike Vietnamese ESL learners, they most regularly used both *re-reading* and *adjusting the reading speed* and avoided *thinking in both English and their native language* and *translating*. Contrary to Vietnamese ESL learners, *using tables, figures and pictures* was one of the most preferred strategies by both Hungarian and Japanese learners of English (Sheorey & Baboczky, 2008; Sheorey et al., 2008).

Similarities and differences in preferences for specific reading strategies are also revealed in Tengku and Nooreiny's study (2012) with Malaysian students. The overall results show that like the Vietnamese participants in this study, Malaysian students also employed reading strategies at a fairly high frequency rate. However, their most preferred strategies included *re-reading*, *paying closer attention when the text becomes difficult*, and *previewing the text*. They also showed high usage of *reference materials such as dictionaries*, whereas Vietnamese ESL learners utilized this strategy at a moderate level. In short, similarities and differences in strategy preferences of ESL learners confirms both the universality and uniqueness of the use of reading strategies by different groups of ESL learners. In some ways, they share similar choices of reading strategies; in other ways, they are likely to have different preferences for certain reading strategy types and particular strategies.

5. Conclusion and Implications

In the present study, Vietnamese ESL learners at tertiary level showed a relatively frequent use of reading strategies. Generally speaking, Vietnamese college students are rather metacognitively strategic when reading academic English texts. They use most reading strategies at a high or average frequency and tend to favor support strategies. The study also observed a preferred pattern of reading strategy use by Vietnamese ESL learners which is both similar to and different from that of other ESL learner populations. It supports the findings of many empirical studies that ESL learners' first language and backgrounds may have some impact on their strategic behaviors.

These different trends in related research about the most frequently employed and the least frequently employed reading strategies need to be further explored and analyzed. For example, it is necessary to conduct meta analysis of existing research in order to identify with more precision common characteristics in the use of certain reading strategies among ESL learners with respect to level of proficiency, reading instruction, typological similarities between L1s, L1 and L2 reading practices and experiences.

Pedagogically, it is not always effective and fair to treat all ESL learners using the same approaches and methods in English classrooms. It is, therefore, proposed that designing ESL reading materials and teaching ESL reading should consider both universality and uniqueness of ESL learners' preferences for strategy use. Besides, the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) can be used as a tool for training metacognitive awareness for ESL learners. At the beginning of each reading class, the teacher can ask

students to assess their own frequency of use of reading strategies using the SORS. Based on the results, the teacher can prepare a proper plan to help empower their learners' strategic awareness.

Finally, the findings of this study must be considered within the contexts of several limitations. In the first place, the study used a small sample without a balance of genders (2 males and 30 females) and all participants were ESL college-level learners whose major was English Teaching. It is possible that as a result of the teacher training courses that the participants had taken, they had acquired a higher level of metacognitive awareness than the average English language learner in the Vietnamese education system. Then, the results of this study might not be applicable to the whole population of Vietnamese ESL learners. Another limitation is that the data was elicited through a survey in which the participants reported their use of reading strategies in an abstract and general manner. In this process, they had to draw on their past experiences and it is possible that the reported frequency of use may not be exact and accurate. Future research may try to triangulate data from different instruments such as interviews, observations and think-alouds for a more accurate account of strategy use.

REFERENCES

- Baker, L., & Brown, A. L. (1984). Metacognitive skills and reading. In P. D. Pearson (Ed.), *Handbook of reading research* (pp. 353-394). New York: Longman.
- Barnett, M. A. (1988). Reading through context: How real and perceived strategy use affects L2 comprehension. *Modern Language Journal*, 72(2), 150-162.
- Carrell, P. L. (1989). Metacognitive awareness and second language reading. *The Modern Language Journal*, 73(2), 121-134.
- Cohen, A. (1990). *Language learning: Insights for learner, teachers, and researchers*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.
- Garcia, G. E., Jimenez, R.T., Pearson, P. D. (1998). Metacognition, childhood bilingualism, and reading. In D. Hacker, J. Dunlosky, A. Graesser (Eds.), *Metacognition in Educational Theory and Practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Garner, R. (1980). Monitoring of understanding: An investigation of good and poor readers' awareness of induced miscomprehension of text. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 12(1), 56-63.
- Garner, R. (1987). *Metacognition and reading comprehension*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Grabe, W. (1991). Current development in second language reading research. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(3), 375-406.
- Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. L. (2002). *Teaching and researching reading*. Harlow, England: Pearson Education.
- Jafari, S., & Shokrpour, N. (2012). The reading strategies used by Iranian ESP students to comprehend authentic expository texts in English. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 1(4), 102-113.
- Karbalaei Kamran, S. (2013). Does reading strategy use predict and correlate with reading achievement of EFL learners? *International Journal of Research Studies in Language Learning*, 2(2), 29-38.
- Lee, M. (2012). A study of the selection of reading strategies among genders by EFL college student. *Procedia-Social and Behavior Sciences*, 64, 310-319.
- Madhumathi, P., & Ghosh, A. (2012). Awareness of reading strategy use of Indian ESL students and the relationship with reading comprehension achievement. *English Language Teaching*, 5(2), 131-140.
- Malcolm, D. (2009). Reading strategy awareness of Arabic-speaking medical students studying in English. *System*, 37, 640-651.
- Mokhtari, K., & Reichard, A. C. (2004). Investigating the strategic reading processes of first and second language readers in two different cultural contexts. *System*, 32, 379-394.
- Mokhtari, K., & Sheorey, R. (2002). Measuring ESL students' awareness of reading strategies. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 25(3), 2-11.
- Oxford, R. L. (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. New York, NY: Newbury House.
- Razi, O., & Grenfell, M. J. (2012). The impact of linguistic knowledge on learner strategy deployment. *Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 47, 818 – 822.

- Sheorey, R., & Baboczky, S. E. (2008). Metacognitive awareness of reading strategies among Hungarian college students. In K. Mokhtari, & R. Sheorey (Ed.), *Reading strategies of first- and second-language learners: See how they read* (pp. 161-173). Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.
- Sheorey, R., & Kamimura, Y. & Freiermuth, M. R. (2008). Reading strategies of the users of English as a library language: The case of Japanese ESP students. In K. Mokhtari, & R. Sheorey (Ed.), *Reading strategies of first- and second- language learners: See how they read* (pp. 161-173). Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.
- Sheorey, R., & Mokhtari, K. (2001). Differences in the metacognitive awareness of reading strategies among native and non-native readers. *System*, 29, 431-449.
- Tengku, M., & Nooreiny, M. (2012). Empowering ESL readers with metacognitive reading strategies. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 69, 1250–1258.
- Typamas, C. (2012). Thai adult EFL learners' metacognitive awareness of reading strategies. *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences*, 6(9), 83-95.
- 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.
- Zhang, L. J., & Wu, A. (2009). Chinese senior high school EFL students' metacognitive awareness and reading-strategy use. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 21(1), 37-59.