

# LEARNING STRATEGIES TOWARDS READING SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

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## Abstract

Identified as the core skill in academic setting, the importance of reading skill is undeniable. This study investigated reading strategies employed by 2<sup>nd</sup> graders of SMPN 1 Bandung. It aimed at identifying the most frequent reading strategies and discovering their similarities and differences between higher and lower achievers. Employing descriptive method, two main instruments were employed to collect data; questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Having discussed based on theories proposed by Oxford et al, the study resulted that cognitive strategy was mostly demanded. Both higher and lower achievers were identified using nine high-frequency strategies. The differences were in identifying appropriateness and willingness to use the strategies, and students' interest in reading materials. As conclusion, higher and lower achievers might have different reading strategies due to time allotment, reading frequency, and strategic investment. Therefore, highlighting reading strategies is highly demanded, and having a more comprehensive, integrated classroom-based reading study is strongly required.

Key words: language learning, language learning strategies, reading comprehension, reading strategies.

## Background

In learning a language, learners with learning strategy can enhance their own learning (Oxford, 1990). The strategies used make their learning effective and efficient (Boudah and O'Neill, 1999). The use of the strategies might be various. It depends on a given problem or task (Oxford, 1990) i.e. when learning speaking, student may use social strategy such as using target language with native speaker. The strategy might be different when learning writing.

Reading, as one of the receptive skills is considered important. Reading materials written in second or foreign language are considered difficult (Alderson and Urquhart,

1984). The difficulties might be due to limited vocabularies (Ismini, 2003), getting idea of the text (Gunawan, 2000), and failure in comprehending the text (Alderson and Urquhart, 1984).

Lenz and Hughes (2007) claim that the use of word identification strategy indicates that the number of oral reading errors decrease while reading comprehension scores increase for all students on ability level and grade materials.

A study conducted by Baker and Boonkit (2004) on strategies of reading and writing of undergraduate students at a Thai university shows students make most frequent use of metacognitive, cognitive and compensation strategies. A study about language learning in general including four language skills was conducted by Chen (2005) to Taiwanese University students in language learning found that compensation strategies are most frequently used and affective ones are the least frequent.

In Indonesian junior high schools, the goal of language learning, reading skill particularly, is at functional level (Pusat Kurikulum, 2006). The graduates are expected to use English for survival purposes, such as carrying out transactional exchanges, reading for fun, reading popular science, encyclopedia, and other reading pieces.

Studies on reading and its strategies have been investigated in Indonesian context as well, especially in junior high school. Sukarlan (2003) found that in an attempt to comprehend texts, the students used some strategies such as making prediction of the words that they did not know, using dictionary is to find the unknown word. Syafrizal (2000) found that the appropriate language learning strategies related to reading make a contribution to students' reading achievement.

The present study aimed at finding most frequently reading strategies used by second grade students of junior high school and discovering similar and different reading strategies between higher and lower achievers.

## **Conceptual Framework**

In order to be successful in foreign language learning and to be good language learners, learners should have strategies which can help them in learning a language.

Oxford (1990) defines learning strategies as steps taken by learners to enhance their own learning. In line with Oxford, O'Malley & Chamot (1990) define learning strategies as specific ways of processing information that enhance comprehension, learning, or retention of the information.

In the process of learning, learning strategies take an important role. The appropriate use of learning strategies can result in increased foreign/second language proficiency. Applying certain strategies in language learning including reading skill is prominent because they are tools for active and self-directed involvement. Appropriate learning strategies result in improving proficiency and self-confidence which become prerequisites for communicative competence as the main goal of language learning.

O'Malley (1987) classify learning strategies into three types as follow.

- Metacognitive strategies, which involve executive process in planning for learning, monitoring one's comprehension and production, and evaluating how well one has achieved a learning objective;
- Cognitive strategies, in which the learner interacts with the material to be learned by manipulating it mentally (as in making images, or elaborating on previously acquired concepts or skills) or physically (as grouping items to be learned in meaningful categories, or taking notes on important information to be remembered);
- Social/affective strategies, in which learner either interacts with another person in order to assist learning, as in cooperation or asking question for clarification, or uses some kind of affective control to assist a learning task.

According to Baker and Boonkit (2004), reading strategies are defined as follows.

Reading strategies are techniques and methods that readers use to make their reading successful. Some of reading strategies include skimming, scanning, summarizing, guessing, predicting, making inference, underlying words or phrases, and taking note.

The strategies are regarded as an important aspect of language learning since they can help students to overcome reading problems. A study conducted by Syafrizal (2000) found that the appropriate language learning strategies which are related to reading make a contribution to students' reading achievement. It marks how important reading strategies are to help students in their reading course. Sukarlan (2003) found that in an

attempt to comprehend texts, the students used some strategies such as making prediction of the words that they did not know and using dictionary to find the unknown word.

Brown (2001) provides some strategies for reading comprehension, among others are:

- identifying the purpose of reading
- using graphemic rules and patterns to aid in bottom-up decoding (especially for beginning level learners)
- using efficient silent reading techniques for relatively rapid comprehension (for intermediate to advanced levels)
- skimming the text for main ideas
- scanning the text for specific information
- using semantic mapping or clustering
- guessing when you are not certain
- analyzing vocabulary
- distinguishing between literal and implied meanings
- capitalizing on discourse markers to process relationship.

According to Carrell (1998), reading strategies are traditionally recognized reading behaviors as skimming a text to get the general idea, scanning a text for a specific piece of information, making contextual guesses about the meanings of unknown words, skipping unknown words, tolerating ambiguity, making predictions, confirming or disconfirming inferences, identifying the main idea, rereading, and using cognates to comprehend, to more recently recognized strategies such as activating prior background knowledge and recognizing text structure.

Good readers proceed generally from front to back of documents when reading. They are selectively attentive. They sometimes make notes. They predict, paraphrase, and back up when confused. They try to make inferences to fill in the gaps in text and in their understanding of what they have read. Good readers intentionally attempt to integrate across the text. They do not settle for literal meanings but rather interpret what they have read, sometimes constructing images, other times identifying categories of information in text, and on still other occasions engaging in arguments with themselves about what a reading might mean. After making their way through text, they have a variety of ways of

firming up their understanding and memory of the messages in the text, from explicitly attempting to summarize to self-questioning about the text to rereading and reflecting.

Good readers usually aware of what strategies they use. For example, when reading a newspaper, they have no difficulty scanning the pages quickly, than slowing down to focus on one interesting article. On the other hand, those who are lazy and inattentive about reading, feel insecure and easily intimidated by complex materials. They never read anything as difficult as their textbooks. Such students have not learned to use a variety of reading strategies. The best way to expand your knowledge of words is to read often and in varied content area (Wiener & Bazerman, 1988: 3).

Here are some reading strategies employed by language learners proposed by some experts.

- **Skimming** is the process of fast reading in order to take the gist of a passage. It gives readers the advantage of being able to predict the purpose of the passage, the main topic, or message, and possibly some of the developing or supporting ideas (Brown, 2001: 308). A kind of rapid reading is appropriate when trying to decide if careful reading would be desirable or when there is not time to read something carefully.
- **Scanning** is the process of quickly searching for particular piece or pieces of information in a text. The purpose of scanning is to extract specific information without reading through the whole text (Brown, 2001: 308).  
Scanning and skimming help learners home in on exactly what they need or want to understand, and allow them to disregard the rest or use it as background information (Oxford, 1990).
- **Guessing and making inference** involve using a wide variety of clues (including linguistic and nonlinguistic) to guess the meaning when the learner does not know all the words. Guessing helps readers to overcome knowledge limitation in reading. The readers do not have to recognize and understand every single word before they can comprehend the overall meaning. The readers can actually comprehend a lot of reading passage through systematic guessing without necessarily comprehending all details (Oxford, 1990: 90).
- **Summarizing** is making a condensed, shorter version of the original passage.

- **Using Imagery** means relating new information to concepts in memory by means of meaningful visual imagery, either in the mind or in an actual drawing. The image can be a picture of an object, a set of locations for remembering a sequence of words or expressions, or a mental representation of the letters of a word. This strategy can be used to remember abstract words by associating such words with a visual symbol or a picture of a concrete object (Oxford, 1990).
- **Taking note** usually relates to writing important point(s) from the passage.
- **Translating** allows learners to use their own language as the basis for understanding what they read, although word-per-word translation can sometimes make wrong interpretation. By translating, the readers can improve their vocabulary. And vocabulary is very important in order to read confidently (Weiner and Bazerman, 1988).
- **Associating/elaborating** means relating new language information to concepts already in memory. It is relating one piece of information to another in order to create association in memory.
- **Knowing the purpose of reading** enables learners to channel their energy in the right direction (Oxford, 1990: 158).
- **Placing new words into a context**; the learners are placing a word or phrase in a meaningful sentence, conversation, or story in order to remember it.
- **Asking questions** helps learners get closer to the intended meaning and thus aids their understanding.
- **Rereading** allows the learners to read more than once in order to get the actual meaning of the text. A profitable technique is to read a passage several times, each time for different purposes; for example to get the general drift or the main ideas, to predict, to read for detail, to write down questions, and so on (Oxford, 1990: 70).
- **Looking at the picture or diagram** helps the reader figure out beforehand what the text will deal with (Wiener and Bazerman, 1988).

Carrell (1998) claims that one problem that might hinder the language learners in reading is that the failure to use reading strategies effectively in first language appears when:

- the readers fail to monitor their comprehension,
- they believe that the strategies will not make a difference in their reading,
- they lack of knowledge about text failure,
- they are not interested in text and unwilling to use strategies, and
- they prefer familiar yet primitive strategies over less-familiar but more effective tactics.

Another study about reading strategies was conducted by Baker and Boonkit (2004). It investigated the strategies of reading and writing of undergraduate students at a Thai university. They found that students made most frequent use of metacognitive, cognitive and compensation strategies. Metacognitive strategies in reading include looking at the pictures provided in the text, reading the questions before read the whole passages and other strategies which provide a way for students to coordinate their own learning process. Cognitive strategies include skimming, scanning, summarizing, making inference, etc. Compensation strategies include skipping unknown words, guessing the meaning from the context, predicting what the text is about, and strategies which aid students in overcoming knowledge gaps.

### **Methodology**

This study involved second grade students of SMP Negeri 1 Bandung. The sample was randomly chosen. It consisted of 38 students. Then, they were grouped into lower and higher scores based on a reading test.

The present study employed descriptive method. Two main instruments were used in this study. They were questionnaires, and interviews. A reading test consisting of four different texts with 14 multiple choice questions was used to group the respondents into higher and lower groups. The questionnaires were administered to identify their strategies in reading English text. It was adapted from SILL 7.0 (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) developed by Oxford (1990). They consisted of 26 statements in scale of 5—always, frequently, occasionally, rarely, and never—related to strategies employed in reading. To make it ease, the statements of questionnaires were rendered into Bahasa Indonesia, the respondents' L1. The items of the questionnaire were classified into memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive and social strategies. To

reveal more information about reading strategies used by higher and lower achievers, a semi-structured interview was then conducted.

### Findings and Discussion

In general, the second grade students of junior high school participated in this study used cognitive strategies more often than other categories of reading strategies. Figure below shows the frequency of each classification of reading strategies.

**Findings: Frequency of Reading Strategies Use**

No.	Strategies	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1.	Memory	18.40%	27.17%	31.03%	15.77%	8.77%
2.	<b>Cognitive</b>	<b>18.80%</b>	<b>30.81%</b>	30.07%	16.16%	4.14%
3.	Compensation	11.60%	26.84%	30%	20.54%	11.04%
4.	Metacognitive	15.14%	25.38%	39.48%	16.46%	3.61%
5.	<b>Social</b>	<b>1.77%</b>	<b>14.03%</b>	26.3%	31.53%	25.47%

The table shows cognitive strategies were classified as the strategies mostly used (18.80% and 30.81%). On the other hand, social strategies were the strategies rarely used (1.77% and 14.03%). It is in line with Baker and Boonkit (2004). They found that cognitive and metacognitive were mostly used in their study.

The findings also showed that the reading strategies which were almost always and usually used by the respondents are:

- Rereading
- Looking at the picture or graphic
- Associating with prior knowledge
- Using dictionary
- Scanning to answer questions
- Guessing unknown words from the context
- Self-monitoring
- Previewing by reading the title
- Knowing the purpose of reading.

Concerning cognitive strategies, rereading took place as a familiar strategy used in reading. Similar finding was also found in Syafrizal's study (2000). The respondents tended to convince themselves by rereading the parts that they had not understood yet.

So, they can fully understand of what they read. According to Oxford (1990: 70), the technique of rereading or repeating is to read a passage several times, each time for different purposes, such as to get the general drift or the main ideas, to predict, to read for detail, and to write down questions. It can be regarded as a useful strategy since most students are successful in their reading test by using this strategy.

Looking at the pictures or graphics provided in the text was also usually used by the respondents. It gave them opportunity to predict what the text is about. By looking at the illustrations provided in the text before reading the whole text, it will help the reader figure out beforehand what the text will deal with (Wiener and Bazerman, 1988).

There were nine high-frequency strategies used by both higher and lower achievers, such as guessing the meaning of unknown words from the context, looking at the pictures or graphics, and rereading. Lessard-Clouston (1997) states that there is always a possibility that good language learning strategies are also used by bad language learners, but other reasons cause them to be unsuccessful.

It was found that both successful and unsuccessful language learners can be active users of similar strategies, but it was also discovered that the unsuccessful learners apparently lacked metacognitive strategies which would enable them to assess the task and bring to bear the necessary strategies for its completion (Lessard-Clouston, 1997). In this present study, metacognitive strategies were used by both higher and lower achievers. But, the lower achievers did not use those strategies effectively. From the interview, it was found that the higher achievers spent more time to read, did an extra effort (i.e. try to find the meaning of unknown words by looking at dictionary), and paid more attention (i.e. grammar and sentence structure) to the language they learn. Brown (2001) notes that successful mastery of the second language learning (foreign language, in this case) will be due to a large extent to a learner's own personal "investment" of time, effort, and attention to the second language in the form of an individualized battery of strategies for comprehending and producing the language.

Another strategy used by respondents in reading a foreign language is recouring to a dictionary. Therefore, the use of dictionary still takes an important aspect in reading strategy. Both higher and lower achievers recoured to a dictionary to help them find the meaning of unknown words. It will result in the improvement of students' vocabularies.

Vocabulary is very important in order to read confidently (Weiner and Bazerman, 1988). Sukarlan (2000) found that in order to comprehend a text which consists of unknown words, the students used dictionary. It helps them to find the meaning of the unknown words. Therefore, dictionary is regarded as an important thing by the students. In line with it, Weiner and Bazerman (1988) explain that a dictionary is an important tool to help build someone's reading skills. Besides meaning, in a dictionary, it can be found how to use the word in a certain context, how to spell it, and what its synonym and antonym.

Either higher or lower achiever groups agreed that graphic or picture can help them understand what the text is about. By looking at the illustrations provided in the text before reading the whole text, it will help the reader figure out beforehand what the text will deal with (Wiener and Bazerman, 1988). Text and diagrams or pictures in this case, can also be used to convey the same information in different formats. This is useful in situations in which different aspects of the information are more easily encoded from the text and diagrams (Barr et al., 1991).

Moreover, higher achievers tended to use more strategies in their reading rather than lower achievers. It accords O'Malley and Chamot (1990). They claim that good language learners have wide kinds of language strategies and use a series of strategies rather than single one when engage in a learning task (p: 169).

What makes reading strategies of higher and lower achievers different is the intensity or the frequency of the use. A very significant finding of the difference between higher and lower achievers was the use of rereading. The findings assumed that higher achievers are more careful in reading since they used the strategy to find the meaning of the text more than once. It is to help them fully understand the text that they read. As stated by Oxford (1990), the strategy of repeating is to understand the text more completely. By using this strategy, it can eliminate misperception which might appear between the readers and the text they read. It is also helpful to answer the questions that usually accompany the text.

Higher achievers respondents used scanning more often than skimming. They are actually the strategies used in reading to help learners home in on exactly what they need or want to understand, and allow them to disregard the rest or use it as background information (Oxford, 1990).

In general, the respondents tended to use guessing meaning from the context rather than just guessing the unknown words. It is in line with Baker and Boonkit (2004) who found the use of similar strategy. Higher achievers guessed the meaning of some words from the context clues. Oxford (1990) named this strategy as guessing intelligently. It is regarded essential in reading, since it helps readers to overcome knowledge limitation in reading. The readers do not have to recognize and understand every single word before they can comprehend the overall meaning. The readers can actually comprehend a lot of reading passage through systematic guessing without necessarily comprehending all details (Oxford, 1990: 90).

Higher achievers respondents predicted what the text is about after they read the title. It is a kind of previewing. It helps the readers to predict what the text will be about. This kind of strategy was not used in a same portion by lower achievers. Many students do not understand the value of previewing text, titles, and picture (Barr et al., 1991). Even if the strategies are known, they are sometimes avoided as a time consuming or unnecessary. It, then, results in the failure of reading.

The interviews conducted once to the higher and lower achievers groups found that:

- Most students started learning English in their elementary school at about the third or fourth grade. In other words, they have been learning English for about 4 to 5 years.
- One of 10 students in higher achievers group does not take an English course. Meanwhile, there are only 4 students who take English course in lower achievers group.
- The students who take an English course tend to read more than those who do not.
- Limited vocabularies, grammar, sentence structure, and the length of the text cause problems in reading.
- The students used certain reading strategies to overcome reading problems such as asking other people, skimming, rereading (repeating), guessing unknown words intelligently, and using dictionary. They used the strategies mentioned in order to help them comprehend the text.

- The lower achievers group used skipping strategy more often than the higher achievers.

Based on the interview conducted to the lower achievers, it was also found that they tended to read quickly and ignore all the words that they did not understand. They used skipping technique to the unknown words. They did not find out the meaning of those words. This condition indicates that their strategy is not employed in a correct manner. Skipping unnecessary words is allowed since it is a kind of reading strategy that will help the students overcome their limitation of vocabularies. But, the more often they skip the words, the failure in understanding the text they will get. It indicates unsuccessful readers (Syafrizal, 2000).

Higher achievers respondents tended to read more often than those in lower group. They read many kinds of sources, such as English textbook that they used in school and in their English course and songs' lyrics as well. As they read more, it helped them improve their vocabularies. It is because reading and vocabularies are deeply connected. In order to read confidently, people need to know many words. They have to know how to figure out the meanings for new words that they discover as they read. Yet, the best way to expand someone's knowledge of words is to read often and in various content areas (Wiener & Bazerman, 1988: 3).

Another strategies identified in this study was the use of imagery strategy of higher achievers. In order to remember a new word, this strategy was employed. According to Oxford (1990), a good way to remember what has been heard or read in the new language is to create mental image of it.

In addition, reading strategy used by the higher achievers was "knowing the purpose of reading the text". The strategy is an important one, because knowing the purpose for doing something enables learners to channel their energy in the right direction (Oxford, 1990: 158). When students have a purpose for reading a selection, they will find that purpose not only directs their reading towards a goal, but helps to focus their attention. If they know the purpose of reading something, then they can set their goals and objectives. Therefore, they can focus on what they expect of reading something. Reading activities are also enhanced by having a clear purpose. It will result

in efficient reading. By doing so, the learners know what they are looking for and can weed out potential distracting information (Brown, 2001: 306).

In regard with unsuccessful readers, they seldom skipped words as unimportant and had a negative self-concept as a reader. In this present study, it was found from that lower achievers did not try to find the meaning of unknown words. They just skipped the words. They also had negative concept to a text they read. They tended to believe that when they read and they didn't understand, they would never understand although they read the text more than once.

It was found that the respondents left out the text that they were not interested in. They would have passion to read when the text is a kind of their interest. As stated in Carrell (1998), it will result in the failure of reading strategies use since they are not interested in the text they read and unwilling to use the strategies.

## **Conclusion**

When reading texts in a foreign language, English particularly, students are using strategies to help them comprehend what texts are about. Each student employs different reading strategies. There is a possibility that higher and lower achievers use similar strategies. Regarding similarities in employing reading strategies, higher and lower achievers would have, to some extent, differences in time allotment, reading frequency, and strategy investment. The failure of employing the reading strategies might be caused by appropriateness in employing the strategies, willingness to use the strategies, and interest in reading materials. Learning tasks might affect students reading strategies as well in order to meet students' expectations. Knowing the strategies would be meaningless when interest does not raise.

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