

IN THE NAME OF GOD



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COLLEGE OF THE PERSIAN LITERATURE AND
FOREIGN LANGUAGES**

**An Investigation of Strategies Employed by Iranian
Young Learners and Adult Learners While Reading
Persian and English Texts through Using 'Think Aloud
Protocol'**

Thesis

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Degree of Master of Arts in TEFL*

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Abstract

A substantial amount of research has been devoted to understanding the processes that contribute to reading comprehension. As part of that research, this study was conducted to explore Iranian adult and young learners' use of reading strategies while reading in the first (L1) and the foreign language (FL). In doing so, 30 Iran Language Institute (ILI) young learners of English as a foreign language and 30 university sophomores studying English at Shahid Beheshti University were given one English text and one Persian text. The participants, i.e. both young and adult learners, were asked to verbalize their thought processes while reading the texts. The results obtained revealed that different reading strategies were employed by adult and young learners while reading English and Persian texts. Both groups used strategies more frequently while reading the English texts; although they almost deployed the same types of strategies while reading the English and Persian texts. Furthermore, this study endeavored to investigate the effect of age variable on L1 and L2/FL reading strategy use. The study showed that strategies that had been used by adult learners were frequently different compared to those employed by young learners while reading in English; whereas, both adult and young learners employed frequently similar strategies in reading the Persian text. This implied that linguistic properties of a language can affect the strategies used by the readers of a language (Koda, 2007). Young learners were at the early stage of learning English, for only about 2 years; there is a difference in adult and young level of proficiency. Thus young learners employ more strategies in order to comprehend the English text; since the text is more challenging for them.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

In today's world it has long become a necessity to learn and communicate in another language other than one's mother tongue (L1). When the world is walking on the path of globalization people try to learn a second/foreign language (L2). In other words, nowadays, in this globalized world, it is important for every individual to learn and to communicate in different languages to succeed within any society. That is why people from every country including Iran are interested in learning a second or foreign language. Being a bilingual speaker can represent having many opportunities in life that those who are not bilingual can miss because of the fact of not knowing a second/foreign language. That is due to the rapid growth and push on the importance of technology. In other words, computer technology involves the individuals in the process of second or foreign language learning. However, learning how to read in a second or foreign language is a priority among other skills in a second/foreign language setting, particularly similar to the one in Iran. The reason being that in a country like Iran in which English is a foreign language, the learners are more exposed to the language in its written form than in its spoken form (Vaezi, 2001). The fact that the majority of learning materials that are used in the teaching-learning process are language-based resources, gives priority to reading

comprehension. Reading serves as an important tool in every field. In many situations reading is considered to be the essential channel of communication in a globalized world (Khand, 2004).

Due to the importance of this skill, reading is the focus of the current study. Since the 1980s, the reading skill has received great attention in terms of both research and its application to the second language classroom (Alsamadani, 2009; Belet & Gursoy, 2008; Gascoigne, 2005; Carrel, Pharis & Liberto, 1989; Kong, 2006). Reading is a receptive language process in which the reader receives a message from a writer. In fact the reader activates the prior knowledge to recreate the writer's intended message (Abdali, 2008). Compared to the traditional view of reading under which a reader simply draws information from the material, the current view describes reading as a psycholinguistic guessing game, allowing readers to rely more on their existing syntactic and semantic knowledge structures than on the knowledge of graphic and sounds (Goodman, 1967, cited in Paran, 1996). He argued that reading is a kind of selective process. Anderson (1991) defines reading process as a private, individual process wherein a learner interacts with the written text to produce meaning. Alpetkin (2006) also points out that reading, whether in first or second/foreign language contexts, involves the reader, the text, and the interaction between the reader

and text. According to Cain, Oakhill, & Bryant (2004), reading comprehension is a complex task that depends on many various strategic cognitive processes; it is more than just decoding words on a page. It is the active process through which the reader constructs meaning based on his or her cultural and experiential background (Abdali, 2008). In order to extract meaning from a text learners also need to develop reading strategies. Abbott (2006) found it difficult to have a succinct definition of reading strategies. Thus, researchers have referred to reading strategies in different ways and have mostly described what the strategies are. However, it is necessary to have a general understanding, at least, of what reading comprehension strategies are in relation to the current study. According to Barnett (1988), reading strategies refer to the mental operations involved when readers purposefully approach a text to make sense of what they read. In a way, reading strategies reveal the readers' resources for comprehension and indicate how readers conceive a task, what textual cues they attend to, how they make sense of what they read, and what they do when they do not understand (Block 1986). Paris, Wasik, and Turner (1996) describe reading strategies as techniques that readers use to engage and comprehend text. To put it simply, reading strategies are plans for solving problems encountered in constructing meaning. In other words, reading strategies reveal about the

way readers manage their interaction with written text and how these strategies are related to text comprehension.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Reading comprehension is of great importance both in L1 and L2 acquisition and learning. The focus of past and present research is whether reading in one's first or native language (L1) is similar or different. Are similar strategies used in reading in L1 and L2? Researchers also attempt to examine any relationship between L1 and L2 reading processes. Are the strategies used by proficient L1 readers transferable to reading in an L2? Researchers have proposed a number of hypotheses about the processes and relationship of reading in L1 and L2. Block (1986) earlier argues in her study that the both ESL readers and native speakers appeared to employ similar strategies. Upton (1997) also claims that L2 learners use their L1 as a resource to understand an L2 reading text. In contrast, Singhal (1998) pointed out that although L1 and L2 reading has some common basic elements, the processes differ. Sometimes learners who read in two languages will find themselves using different strategies to read the two texts and this means transferring L1 strategies to read an L2 text is not significant (Nambiar, 2009). Alderson and Urquhart (1984) proposed that reading skills and abilities should transfer from the L1 to the L2 then why do L1 proficient

learners find it difficult to read in the L2? They made an assumption that the reader's L2 proficiency should be beyond the linguistic threshold before good learner strategies are transferred into L2 reading. Clarke (1980) earlier argues that when readers lack proficiency in the second or foreign language, this limitation "short-circuits" good learner strategy use of the L1 when reading in L2. Thus these researchers argue that reading ability in a second language is mostly a function of proficiency in that language. The current study tries to find whether L1 and L2 reading strategies differ or not.

1.3 Significance of the study

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, much reading research (Alsamadani, 2009; Belet & Gursoy, 2008; Dhanapala, 2010; Kolic-Vehovec & Bajanski, 2006; Maarof & Yaacob, 2011; Talebi, 2007; Yamashita, 2007) has focused on determining lists of strategies administered by readers usually via survey instruments (i.e. questionnaires). Valuable though these are, they do not present an exact picture of the actual processes the reader employs when making sense of a text. Less common, nevertheless, have been empirical investigations into reading strategies through think aloud protocol (Nambier, 2009).

Think-aloud was originally developed by Newell and Simon (1972, cited by Block, 1986) to study problem-solving strategies. It is one of the

methods researchers use to get a clearer picture of what learners generally do while reading a text. Think-aloud means that readers report their thoughts while reading (Cohen, 1987). Through think-aloud, researchers hope to get a more direct view of the mental processes readers are engaged in while reading by means of asking them to talk out loud whatever goes on in their minds.

While many of the previous studies have administered questionnaires to obtain information about learners' reading strategies and the reading process, few of them have employed think aloud methods. This study has employed think aloud protocol to obtain the information about reading strategies.

Moreover, this study is pioneering in looking at L1 and L2 reading comprehension strategies in relation to two various ages. The age variable has not been much looked at in L1 and L2 reading strategies studies (Belet & Gursoy, 2008; Davis & Bistodeau, 1993; Kolic-Vehovec & Bajanski, 2006; Kong, 2006; Maarof & Yaacob, 2011; Nambiar, 2009; Seng & Hashim, 2006; Upton, 1997).

1.4 Purpose of the study

The current study, therefore, investigated L1 and L2 reading strategies of both young learners at fifth and sixth grades and undergraduate

sophomores majoring in English. Differences of strategy use were identified to understand how young learners and adults view reading in L1 and L2. Thus, the reading strategies employed by them to read 2 reading passages – one written in Persian or their L1 and one written in English, their foreign language, were observed through the think aloud method. Specifically, the study set out to describe the similarities and differences in strategies used by these learners to construct meaning from these texts to identify the main ideas in the text. The following research questions guided the study:

1.4 Research Questions

1. What are the reading strategies employed by Iranian young learners while reading Persian and English texts?
2. What are the reading strategies employed by Iranian adults while reading the Persian and English texts?
3. Is there a significant difference between the reading strategies employed by Iranian adults when reading the English text in comparison with the strategies they employ when reading the Persian text?
4. Is there a significant difference between the reading strategies employed by Iranian young learners when reading the English text in comparison with the strategies they employ when reading the Persian text?

5. Is there a significant difference between the reading strategies employed by young learners and reading strategies employed by adults while reading the English texts?

6. Is there any significant difference between the reading strategies employed by young learners and reading strategies employed by adults while reading the Persian texts?

1.6 Research Hypotheses

In order to answer the aforementioned questions, the following four null hypotheses were made:

1. There is no significant difference between the reading strategies employed by Iranian adults when reading in English in comparison with the strategies they employ when reading in Persian.

2. There is no significant difference between the reading strategies employed by Iranian young learners when reading in English in comparison with the strategies they employ when reading in Persian.

3. There is no significant difference between the reading strategies employed by young learners and reading strategies employed by adults while reading the English texts.

4. There is no significant difference between the reading strategies employed by young learners and reading strategies employed by adults while reading the Persian texts.

1.7 Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

In spite of great effort taken to secure credibility for the data and the findings, this study, like any other study, might also encountered some limitations.

First of all, due to the nature of data collection (i.e. think aloud protocols) a limited number of participants took part in the study. In fact each participant was interviewed individually for about 20 to 40 minutes.

Secondly, the texts used to elicit the data may have a structured effect on the data elicited, i.e., the texts might have elicited more use of certain strategies over certain other strategies.

The third limitation to be chalked up is that the study was carried out with an unequal number of genders i.e. male and female, due to the restricted number of participants.

Finally, due to the fact that the think aloud process is very time consuming and mentally challenging, the texts chosen were not very long

(up to 160 words) in order to ensure feasibility in carrying out the think aloud protocols.

1.8 Definition of the Key terms

In this section, a succinct definition of the most fundamental terms occurring in this study will be given.

Chang (2006) defined **reading** as an active process wherein learners construct meaning from the written text.

According to Cohen (1996), **reading strategies** are the mental processes that readers consciously utilize in order to solve reading problems and to comprehend the texts read. Also Singhal (2001) pointed out that “reading strategies are of interest for what they reveal about the way readers manage their interaction with written text and how these strategies are related to text comprehension”.

The think-aloud protocol has been defined by Ericsson and Simon (1987) as the techniques of eliciting data by asking readers to verbalize their thoughts at the time of reading.

First language refers to the person’s mother tongue and the language the person feels most comfortable using (Richards& Schmidt, 2002).

However, Richards& Schmidt (2002) stated that, “...**foreign languages** are

typically taught as school subjects for the purpose of communicating with foreigners or for reading printed materials in the language”(p.206).

CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE