

**IN THE NAME OF GOD**



**University of Isfahan**

**Faculty of Foreign Languages**

**Department of English Language**

**PhD Thesis**

**The strategic needs of Iranian students in reading literary and non-literary texts: A dialogic approach**

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## پایان نامه دکتری رشته آموزش زبان انگلیسی خانم کتایون افضلی تحت عنوان

### نیازهای راهبردی دانشجویان ایرانی در خواندن متون ادبی و غیر ادبی از طریق روش تولید سؤال

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*To Karin*

## **Abstract**

The current study sets out 1) to investigate the strategic needs of Iranian EFL learners in reading literary and non-literary texts; 2) to shed some light on the differences between reading literary and non-literary texts; and 3) to specify the differences in the interaction of participants with texts while reading two literary subgenres ( i.e., short story and literary essays). To this aim, 30 undergraduate students (24 females and 6 males) who were all Persian native speakers and were selected from the population of senior students majoring in English literature at Sheikhabaee University participated in the study.

To specify the strategic needs of students in reading literary and non-literary texts and to compare the processes of reading literary and non-literary texts, five texts (i.e. one short story and two literary essays plus two expository texts) were assigned to the participants. They were asked to read the texts and write down the questions that occurred to them while reading them.

To classify the questions produced by the students for each text type, the model proposed by Dubravac and Dalle (2002) was employed. Based on their model, the questions were categorised in five groups (Scripturally implicit, textually implicit, textually explicit, linguistic and miscomprehension). The findings suggest that the dominant problem of participants lies in textually implicit aspects of the text. Finally, a Kruskal-Wallis test was applied to compare the frequency of question types across literary and non-literary texts. The difference of all question types proved to be statistically significant across both literary and non-literary texts.

As for the differences across reading short stories and literary essays, a Mann-Whitney test revealed significant differences between the interaction of students while reading fiction and that while reading literary essays.

**Keywords:** Reading strategies, discourse analysis, dialogic approach, reading literature, genre analysis.

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# Chapter One

## 1.1. Preliminaries

Reading comprehension appears to be one of the difficult skills for L2 learners (Bensoussan, 1990). This problem stems from the fact that text comprehension involves a number of skills simultaneously: morphological knowledge, syntactic knowledge, knowledge of topic, knowledge of text structure and cohesion. In addition, the reader's social and cultural background will also influence comprehension, and consequently a text may be interpreted differently by different people (Sharp, 2002).

Considering the EFL learners' problems with reading, a number of scholars such as Bensoussan (1990), Dubravac and Dalle (2002) and Ling Lau (2006) have conducted experiments to understand what specific problems EFL learners are faced with during their reading process. Generally speaking, throughout the annals of foreign language reading, the skill has been viewed either as a process in which the reader may sequentially deal with letters, words and sentences (the bottom-up, or text-driven

approach) or as a process in which the reader may deal with larger units of text (the top-down, or reader-oriented approach) (Sharp, 2002).

However, on the psycholinguistic view of reading, the term 'interactive' by Carrell, Devine and Eskey (1988) has been used to describe the second language reading process. This term has been interpreted in two ways. First, it has been treated as a dynamic relationship between the text and the reader. In other words, when dealing with a text, he/she struggles to make sense of it. In trying to do so, the reader is definitely involved in an active process, one which Goodman (1967) describes a "psycholinguistic guessing game". Playing this game involves combining information from the text with the knowledge brought to it by the reader. From this perspective, as Widdowson (1979) asserts, reading can be seen as a kind of dialogue between the reader and the text, or rather between the reader and the author (Hedge, 2008). As for the second interpretation of the term 'interaction', it pertains to the interplay among various kinds of knowledge (i.e., syntactic, morphological, general, sociocultural and topical) that a reader employs in moving through a text.

Having considered the above-mentioned facts, we must now turn to an issue which is crucial to the present study: comparing the processes involved in reading literary and non-literary texts. It has been argued that reading literary texts seems to be more extensively susceptible to misunderstanding and misinterpretation than non-literary ones. For this reason, the majority of students face frustration and disappointment on encountering them. Such feelings may be ascribed to the significant local level of phonemics and grammar on the one hand, and the global level of organization and structure deviations of literary texts from non-literary ones, on the other (Miall & Kuiken, 1998; Romero, Paris & Brem, 2005).

Current research on reading comprehension, artificial intelligence and discourse analysis is consistent with contemporary literary theory in that the former points to the interactional processes at work in reading and understanding literary texts (Kramsch, 1985). In recent years, the notion that written discourse may also be regarded as an interactive process has gained strength through the theories of the Russian linguist and literary theorist Bakhtin (Cook, 1995).

Seeing that reading literary texts has proved to be different from reading non-literary ones, cognitive theorists have played a dominant role since the 1970s (Dixon & Bortolussi, 1996). In this connection, it must be recognized that psychological models of text comprehension have usually distinguished between two types of texts: narrative and expository. Narrative texts include poems, short stories, novels or those texts whose main purpose is to entertain (Dubravac & Dalle, 2002). Expository texts, on the other hand, encompass texts (e.g. newspapers, text books, instruction booklets and brochures) whose main purpose is to inform (Dubravac & Dalle, 2002). There are, however, important differences between narrative and expository texts in the sense that each text type poses problems specific to L2 readers (Bensoussan, 1990).

In clarifying the difference between reading literary and non-literary texts, Vipond and Hunt (1984) differentiate among three types of reading: point-driven reading, story-driven reading and information-driven reading. The term 'point' refers to the meaning of the text, and Vipond and Hunt (1984) contend that point-driven reading is the only type of reading which is likely to occur while reading literary texts; however, it is not the only way to read such texts.

To Vipond and Hunt (1984), information-driven reading is especially appropriate in learning-from-text situations. For example, if one is reading a bus

schedule, it is not necessary to construct a model of an intentional author. The term 'story-driven' is based on Chatman's (1978) distinction between story and discourse in narrative. Accordingly, story-driven reading tends to emphasize plot, character, and events of the story and to neglect the discourse by which the events and characters are presented. Someone reading in a story-driven way will be looking for interesting events, but will not predict that the narrative will construct a valid point. By contrast, a person reading in a story-driven way would not find it necessary to construct a model of the author: the story seems to exist, and can be enjoyed, quite independently of an implied author.

In the same vein, Rosenblatt (1978) distinguishes efferent from aesthetic reading. To her, when one reads for information (for example, when one reads the directions for heating a can of soup) one is engaging in efferent reading. During this process, one is interested in newly gained information, not in the actual words themselves. On the other hand, when one engages in aesthetic reading, one notes its words, its sounds, its patterns, and so on. Reading literary texts falls within the domain of aesthetic reading (Bressler, 2007).

There are also other classifications for reading styles. Pugh (1978), and Lunzer and Gardner (1979) classified reading into five groups: 1) Receptive reading is undertaken, for example, when a reader wants to enjoy a short story, or understand the main stages in a text book description of a manufacturing process; 2) Reflective reading involves reading the text and then pausing to reflect and backtrack. For example, when a reader wants to check whether a new line of argument in a political text is consistent with opinions expressed earlier in the same article; 3) Skim reading is used to get a global impression of the content of a text. An example would be previewing a long



magazine article by reading rapidly, skipping large chunks of information, and focusing on headings and first lines; 4) Scanning involves searching rapidly through a text to find a specific point of information. For example, the relevant times on a time table; and 5) Intensive reading involves looking carefully at a text, as a student of literature would look at a poem to appreciate the choice of words.

The rationale behind making these distinctions is that different purposes for reading determine different strategies in approaching texts, as well as different rates of reading. In this regard, different reading styles imply different uses of top-down (schematic) and bottom-up (linguistic) processes. Skimming, for example, uses largely top-down processes to get at the general dimensions of a text (Hedge, 2008). Therefore, in ELT methodology, the real purpose for reading should be taken into consideration. In this connection, Rivers and Temperly (1978) contend that reading activities from the beginning should have some purpose. They enumerate the following purposes of reading activity: to get information; to respond to curiosity about a topic; to follow instructions; to perform a task; to take pleasure; to amuse oneself; to keep in touch with friends and colleagues; to know what is happening in the world; and to find out when and where things are.

From the above observations, it can be inferred that the aim of reading literary texts does not coincide with that of non-literary ones; accordingly, the findings from reading non-literary texts cannot readily be applied to the reading of literary texts since the former tend to lack the multi-leveled complexity of the latter (Miall & Kuiken, 1998). The aim of reading literature in language classrooms is to nurture in students the ability to interpret a literary text. To this end, specific training within a formal

educational setting is required to create this ability in students (Dixon & Bortolussi, 1996; Hanauer, 1999).

Traditionally, the aim of literary education has been to produce students who have a wide knowledge of historical and biographical information about authors, historical periods and genres. Therefore, the underlying assumption of a literary education is that the interpretation of a literary text involves a body of knowledge that is supplementary to the linguistic and pragmatic knowledge used for comprehending other text types (Zyniger, 1994; Hanauer, 1999). By contrast, recent research in psychology asserts that comprehension is 'explanation-driven' and that the reader's goal is to construct a more or less representation which requires explanations for the relations between the story's events (Smith, 1982).

Considering the distinction between literary and non-literary texts, it is noteworthy that what is called a literary text is a controversial issue. Some scholars, like Brumfit and Carter (1991), hold that there is no such thing as literary language which can be recognized and classified in the same way as, for example, the language of newspaper headlines or legal language. They contend that literature is not a language variety. In this connection, they justify their claim by pointing out that a literary text is almost the only context where different varieties of language can be mixed and still admitted. For example, any deviation from norms of lexis and syntax in legal documents would be inadmissible; however, they are considered normal in literary texts.

Brumfit and Carter (1991) also suggest that it is preferable to talk about language and literariness rather than literary language. This leads to the corollary that what is considered literary is a matter of relative degree. In some texts, some textual

features of language signal a greater literariness than others. Thus, literariness is best identified along a continuum rather than seen as a yes/no distinction.

Ultimately, Brumfit and Carter (1991) conclude that a literary text is an authentic one, i.e. real language in context, to which one can respond directly. This means that in literary texts what is said is related to how it is said. For literary texts provide examples of language resources being used to the full, and the reader is placed in an active interactional role in making sense of this language.

Brumfit and Carter's (1991) conclusion is actually consistent with Widdowson's (1975) distinction between literary and non-literary texts. Since Widdowson is a pioneer figure in investigating the distinction between literary and non-literary texts, the current research adopts his distinction. Widdowson (1975, p.70) asserts that in literary texts it is impossible to separate the content of the text, the "what" of the text, from the way that it has been written, the "how" of the text. It is for this reason that literary works cannot be satisfactorily explained. To be explained, they should be converted to "the definite shape of conventional statement". To Widdowson (1975, p.70), the major problem in the teaching of literature is to develop in the learner an awareness of the what/how of literary communication, i.e., the content of the text and the way that it has been written.

To address the problems of L2 readers in reading literary and non-literary texts, teachers have, as a rule, tended to generate post-reading questions, but this method has not appealed to students (Eliason, 2009). These teacher-questioning techniques have been used as a way for reducing the difficulty of literary interpretation. These questions are usually devised in such a way that they guide students through higher levels of thinking progressively. Conversely, the ways in which teachers have traditionally used questioning have ironically created some more interpretive difficulties. Moreover, it has

been shown that such questioning techniques prevent students from wrestling with complexities of literary texts (Hynds, 1990).

It has been maintained by Hynds (1990) that teacher questions often ignore the literariness of literary texts. For these questions, he goes on to argue, usually narrow, rather than broaden, response, and encourage searching for an answer rather than being involved in the aesthetic aspect of the reading act. Therefore, the texts in question should be viewed as an intentionally made product of an author, attempting to create a particular effect on a reader (Hynds, 1990).

Considering the drawbacks of the teacher-questioning approach, Eliason (2009) invites researchers to shift from teacher-generated to student-generated questions to address the reading problems of L2 readers in getting to grips with literary and non-literary texts. Furthermore, it has been revealed that student-generated questions can increase comprehension and retention of texts and, thereby, more accurately indicate the level of comprehension. Consequently, students should be trained how to ask appropriate questions (Brown, 1981; Cohen, 1983; Dwyer, 2000; Olson, 1985).

Another justification for using student-generated questions can be the cognitive development theory proposed by Bialystok (1990). Bialystok (1990) describes learning in terms of two cognitive processing components: the process of analysis and the process of control. The process of analysis involves a change in the way knowledge is represented in the mind of the learner. Through this process, language knowledge changes from implicit knowledge organized at the level of meanings, to explicit knowledge organized at the level of formal or symbolic knowledge. By contrast, the process of control involves a development in the learners' ability to selectively focus on