In the Name of God

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The Relationship among EFL Learners' Autonomy, Tolerance of Ambiguity, Reading Strategies, and Reading Comprehension

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to explore the relationship among EFL learners' autonomy, tolerance of ambiguity, reading strategies, and reading comprehension. To fulfill this objective, 130 sophomore and junior students majoring in English Translation who had passed at least 45 credits at Tehran and Qazvin Payam-e-Noor Universities were asked to take part in a piloted PET reading comprehension test and three questionnaires on learner autonomy, tolerance of ambiguity (SLTAS), and reading strategies (SORS). After discarding incomplete answer sheets, 106 acceptable cases were used in statistical analysis. Correlation analysis indicated a statistically significant relationship between autonomy and tolerance of ambiguity; autonomy and reading strategies; reading strategies and reading comprehension. However, a statistically significant relationship was not found between autonomy and reading comprehension; tolerance of ambiguity and reading comprehension; and tolerance of ambiguity and reading strategies.

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C H A P T E R I

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

1.1 Introduction

Reading is one of the most necessary skills for daily life. People usually read to be informed about a topic, to be educated, or just to be entertained. The importance of reading is far more serious for EFL learners. Stressing the fact, Farhadi, Jafarpoor, and Birjandi (1994) say, "reading is the most important of all skills for most language learners in general, and for EFL learners in particular" (P. 247).

In spite of the importance and complexity of reading, it is sometimes erroneously viewed just as a passive process of reconstructing the author's intended meaning that is transmitted through language (Nunan, 1999). Rejecting such a perspective toward reading as a single skill that relies on a unitary cognitive process, current views of reading development hold it as a progressive attached sequence of variables that moves from the visual symbol recognition to the text comprehension (Kendeou, Lynch, Broek, Espin, White, & Kremer, 2005).

Reading comprehension as the "essence of reading" (Durkin, 1993, P. 4) occurs when a mental concept of meaning is created from the written text. To do this, "The reader extracts and integrates various information from the text and combines it with what is already known" (Koda, 2005, P. 4).

Due to the significance of reading skill in learning and assessing a foreign language, many attempts have been done in order to determine and identify

factors influencing in or correlating with the complex process of comprehension. In particular, many researchers have been interested in understanding what good readers typically do or posses while they read (e.g., Block, 1992; Brantmeier, 2002; Burns, Roe, & Ross, 1999; Erten & Topkaya, 2009; Heidari, 2010; Kondo-Brown, 2006; Lehr, Osborn, & Hiebert, 2005).

It is generally accepted that among the influential factors in reading comprehension, strategies are one of the most beneficial ones that any reader can use for ensuring success in reading. They are of interest for what they reveal about the way readers manage their interactions with written text, and how these strategies are related to reading comprehension (Carrell, Pharis, & Liberto, 1989). Emphasizing on the key role of reading strategies, Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris (2008) characterize them as "deliberate, goal directed attempts to control and modify the reader's efforts to decode text, understand word, and construct meanings out of text" (P. 15). They range from simple fix-up strategies such as simply rereading difficult segments and guessing the meaning of an unknown word from context, to more comprehensive strategies such as summarizing and relating what is being read to the reader's background knowledge (Janzen, 1996).

Another influential factor in reading comprehension is learner autonomy. Autonomy is generally defined as the capacity to take charge of, or responsibility for one's own learning (Holec, 1981, P. 3). It is both a social and an individual construct, which involves the personal development of each

student and, at the same time, interaction with others (La Ganza, 2001). Research findings have provided evidence that autonomy is of general concern in second or foreign language learning (Dafei, 2007; Wenden, 1998; Zhang & Li, 2004). As a result, the trends in language teaching has recently moved toward making learners more autonomous and shifting the responsibility toward the learner (Wenden, 1998).

Since reading in a foreign language is a rather ambiguous issue that involves processing unknown linguistic and cultural input, tolerance of ambiguity could be another significant related variable in reading comprehension. Tolerance of ambiguity as the ability to accept uncertainties (Ely, 1989), has different levels. Because high tolerance may cause cognitive passivity and low tolerance may impede language learning, it is generally suggested that a moderate level in tolerance of ambiguity should be the most beneficial level for effective language learning and reading comprehension (Ely, 1995; El-Koumy, 2000). However, Kazamia (1999) states that this midpoint has not been fully defined.

Taking the role of all mentioned factors into consideration, each of these attributes could be just as a piece of the puzzle. The correlation between reading comprehension as a target and any of these variables on the one hand and the relationships between each pair of them on the other hand can provide us a more holistic yet precise approach toward reading.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the importance and lots of research on reading, it would be argued that there is no single comprehensive perspective toward reading and subsequently characteristics of a good reader. According to Aebersold and Field (1997), "The act of reading is neither completely understood nor easily described" (P. 5). Moreover, needless to say that although reading comprehension as an ultimate goal of reading is a mechanism of interaction between writer and reader, it is also related to a variety of variables. According to Sweet and Snow (2002), there are multiple sources of difference in the reading comprehension process and outcomes which is strongly affected by variation in reader capacities.

Among these variables, reading strategies are of great significance. However, Brantmeier (2002), who comprehensively but not exhaustively, reviewed the research on reading strategies, stated, "because of the wide variety of participants, tasks, and reading materials employed in studies that examine L2 reading strategies, it is difficult to compare results across studies" (P. 2). Furthermore, many readers still do not know how to use effective strategies to facilitate their understanding of a text (Lau & Chan, 2003).

Learner autonomy is another influential factor in reading comprehension which its contribution has become a critical argument. According to Benson (2001) a reason for the issue is that, "researchers are increasingly beginning to

understand that there is an intimate relationship between autonomy and effective learning. However, to date, this relationship has largely been explored at the level of theory and lacks substantial empirical support" (P. 189).

In addition to the above mentioned effective variables, tolerance of ambiguity has also been shown to have a positive relationship with reading comprehension (El-Koumy, 2000). Regarding the point that apart from linguistic forms, making sense of different culture norms can also cause ambiguity (Lustig & Koester, 1993) on the one hand, and scarce studies in this field on the other hand, result in a partial notion (Erten & Topkaya, 2009).

Considering the above facts, it seems that inadequate localized attention to a set of effective variables in reading is among the reasons that contribute to the learners' difficulties in reading comprehension. Therefore, to come up with a more in-depth picture, the present study aims to investigate the relationship among EFL learners' autonomy, tolerance of ambiguity, reading strategies, and reading comprehension.

1.3 Statement of the Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated:

Q_1. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' autonomy and tolerance of ambiguity?

Q_2. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' autonomy and reading strategies?

Q_3. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' autonomy and reading comprehension?

Q_4. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' tolerance of ambiguity and reading strategies?

Q_5. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' tolerance of ambiguity and reading comprehension?

Q_6. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' reading strategies and reading comprehension?

1.4 Statement of the Research Hypotheses

Based on the mentioned questions posed by the researcher, the following null hypotheses were stated:

$H0_1$. There is no significant relationship between EFL learners' autonomy and tolerance of ambiguity.

$H0_2$. There is no significant relationship between EFL learners' autonomy and reading strategies.

$H0_3$. There is no significant relationship between EFL learners' autonomy and reading comprehension.

$H0_4$. There is no significant relationship between EFL learners' tolerance of ambiguity and reading strategies.

$H0_5$. There is no significant relationship between EFL learners' tolerance of ambiguity and reading comprehension.

$H0_6$. There is no significant relationship between EFL learners' reading strategies and reading comprehension.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

1.5.1 Learner Autonomy

The basis of learner autonomy, according to Holec (1981), is that learner takes charge of his/her learning. By his definition "autonomous learners assume responsibility for determining the purpose, content, rhythm, and method of their learning, monitoring its progress and evaluating its outcomes" (P. 3). In this study, learner autonomy is operationally defined as the obtained scores of respondents on the Persian version of Spratt, Humphreys, and Chan (2002) questionnaire of learner autonomy including 52 items in a Likert-scale, sequentially assigning values of 1,2,3,4, and 5 to options of "not at all", "a

little", "some", "mainly", and "completely" in section one; counting 1 for "very poor" to 5 for "very good" in section two; setting 5 to 1 beside the first to the last choices in section three; and attributing values of 1,2,3, and 4 to options of "never", "rarely", "sometimes", and "often" in section four.

1.5.2 Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is a "process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language" (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002, P. 11). Reading comprehension is operationally defined in the study as the participants' obtained score of a test excerpted from reading comprehension parts of PET Practice Tests developed by Quintana (2003). The test consists of six reading comprehension passages followed by four or five multiple-choice reading comprehension questions on each, lasting 25 minutes to answer. Regarding 28 questions in total, and one point for each correct answer, the maximum achievement score could be 28.

1.5.3 Reading Strategies

Reading strategies are defined as the behavior that a reader engages in at the time of reading and that is related to some goals. In other words, "They are ways of accessing text meaning which are employed flexibly and selectively in the course of reading" (Carter & Nunan, 2001, P. 225). In the present study, reading strategies are operationally defined as the participants' yielded scores

on the Persian version of 30-item questionnaire of the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS), developed by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002) in a Likert-scale, where the candidates' responses to the questionnaire were scored by counting 1 for "never" to 5 for "always".

1.5.4 Tolerance of Ambiguity

Ely (1989) defines tolerance of ambiguity as the acceptance of uncertainties. In a more detailed way, Ellis (1994) defines this term as "an ability to deal with ambiguous new stimuli without frustration or without appeals to authority. It allows for indeterminate rather than rigid categorization" (P. 518). Tolerance of ambiguity in the present study is operationally defined by measuring the candidates' responses to the Persian version of 12-item questionnaire of Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (SLTAS) developed by Ely (1995), in a Likert-scale, assigning values of 1,2,3, and 4 to choices of "strongly agree", "agree", "disagree", and "strongly disagree".

1.6 Significance of the Study

Since the importance of reading comprehension for EFL learners has generally been proved, the interest of language teachers, educators, and material developers toward the notion is steadily on the increase. Success in such a

complex process requires investigation regarding so many factors that might contribute to or correlate with the reading comprehension.

Feeling the same need and interest, this study was carried out due to the perceived gap in providing an exhaustive perspective toward reading comprehension. Although reaching to the point is difficult, if not impossible, the merit of this research is because of simultaneously taking a small number of mentioned variables into account.

In line with plenty of studies, the researcher's main focus was on three of these variables, namely reading strategies, autonomy, and tolerance of ambiguity. Determining the impact of context in the relationship of reading comprehension with reading strategies (Brantmeier, 2002), autonomy (McClure, 2001), and tolerance of ambiguity (Lustig & Koester, 1993) is a good reason why it is crucial to replicate research on these elements within different cultures and learning environment. Plus the fact that any reciprocal correlation between reading comprehension and any of these factors is of great significance, the degree of relationships between each pair of them which was another purpose of this study, is expected to have many implications for EFL learners and teachers.

The researcher hopes that the findings of this study might be beneficial to understand the processes involved in reading. It can also propose guidelines for EFL teachers who are looking for the best ways to equip their teaching procedure, techniques, and resources in order to help their students develop habits of effective reading not only in the class but also out of there.