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The reading strategy use profile of EFL learners

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore foreign language reading strategy use profile of the prep-school students at a Turkish university with reference to the proficiency levels, genders, and the majors of the participants. The participants were 186 Turkish students enrolled in various levels of intensive English courses at a prep-school in a Turkish university. The present study adopted a cross sectional quantitative research design and its data was gathered by means of a foreign language reading strategy questionnaire. The analysis of the findings indicated that focal participants of this study generally use global reading strategies (\overline{x} 4.52), problem-solving strategies (\overline{x} 3.67), and support strategies (\overline{x} 3.16) respectively. In terms of gender, and the majors of the participants, it was found that the difference is not significant in both variables. As for the proficiency levels of the participants, it was found that low proficient students use more reading strategies than the high proficient students do in general.

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As a consensus, it is believed that learning foreign languages necessitates learners to be competent both in receptive and productive skills. More importantly, becoming a

competent speaker or writer in the target language is accepted as the sign of success. Nevertheless, the literature evidenced that being able to read and grasp the gist of the text in the foreign language is the primary goal of most foreign language courses. Thus, focusing on reading skills and the ways to improve it naturally attract the interests of the researchers. The reading skill, either in the first or in the target language, is a complex process, which requires more than one mental process at a time. For instance, the reader should decode the letters on the page, know the sounds that they represent, and gather the meanings of the words from the letters, as well as the sentence structures that are composed of words. In other words, reading process requires several additional skills such as orthography, vocabulary, and grammar knowledge.

The reading skill basically involves two mental processes, i.e. decoding or identifying the words on a written text and comprehending the message conveyed by those words (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough 1990). In a similar vein, the reading comprehension necessitates some "lower-level processes such as word recognition, and higher-level processes such as integrating the textual information on the sentence level" (Shiotsu, 2009). Additionally, as Grabe and Stoller (2014) claimed, "basic grammar knowledge, ability to identify main ideas, recognition of discourse structure, and strategic processing" are necessary mental processes involved in reading comprehension.

To achieve maximum comprehension in reading, readers employ various and essential reading strategies. According to Anderson (2009, p.132) "the reading strategies are conscious actions employed by learners to improve their language learning". As Sheorey and Mokhtari (2008) claimed, the reading strategies were important when used appropriately for both L1 and L2 readings since they actively engage learners in reading and improve the comprehension of the texts. It should be born in mind that the reading strategies are not inherently present in the process of reading. They are actually conscious of techniques and processes employed by readers to decode and comprehend a text.

Regarding the reading strategies, there are various overlapping definitions in the related literature. For instance, while Pritchard (1990) defined the reading strategies as intentional activities employed by readers to understand what they read, Oxford (1990) defined them as particular actions of learners that make learning easier and effective. Afflerbach, Pearson and Paris (2008) defined reading strategies as intended actions adopted by readers to decode written message, understand the meaning conveyed by words, and construct meaning out of the text.

By the same token, the types of reading strategies were also labelled with different names in the related literature. When they are scrutinized though, one can easily see that the categories sometimes overlap, and they vary only in terminology. For instance, Carrell (1989) categorized the reading strategies that focus on decoding dimension such as soundletter and sentence-syntax relationship, grammatical structures, word-meaning, or text details as local (or bottom-up) reading strategies, whereas the strategies that concentrate on text-gist, contextual knowledge, and text organization categorized as global (or top-down)

reading strategies. According to Song (1998) reading strategies are assembled under two main categories. Accordingly, the two categories are simply defined as; 'simple fix-up strategies' involving learners' rereading of problematic parts and predicting unknown words; and 'comprehensive strategies' that help learners summarize the content and relating it their background knowledge.

Several lists of reading strategies have been identified from previous research in the literature regarding reading strategies. However, the reading strategies are generally identified as cognitive and metacognitive processes that help readers decode and get the gist of the reading text and to solve comprehension problems. Regarding this recognition, Cohen (1998) grouped the reading strategies as "cognitive, metacognitive, social, and affective strategies". Similarly, Hsiao and Oxford (2002) classified reading strategies as "cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies". Salatacı and Akyel (2002) suggested that "skimming a text for key information involves using cognitive strategies whereas assessing the effectiveness of skimming for gathering textual information would be a metacognitive strategy". Likewise, Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001, p.431) categorized the reading strategies into three units as "cognitive, metacognitive and support strategies". In another study, Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002) also classified the reading strategies as "global reading strategies, problem solving strategies and support strategies" which were also used by Mokhtari and Reichard (2002) from other researchers such as Pressley and Afflerbach (1995), and Oxford (1990). In another classification of reading strategies, Oxford (2011) brought the affective and sociocultural mental processes into consideration and classified the reading strategies as "cognitive, affective, and sociocultural-interactive strategies" which she called as "metastrategies" in general. In a relatively recent classification, Purpura (2014) classified the reading strategies into four units such as "cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective strategies".

In a broader aspect, every kind of consciously employed technique to comprehend a text such as rereading, paying closer attention, or predicting the meaning of unfamiliar words is referred to as *cognitive reading strategies*. In some reading activities, readers employ some more conscious and pre-planned mental processes to assist them in comprehending the reading material such as using prior knowledge, deciding what to read in detail or skim, as well as techniques to examine and appraise the information in a reading text which are referred as metacognitive reading strategies. Additionally, some readers might use different strategies to promote comprehension such as highlighting or underlining the text, taking side notes, or using dictionaries while reading. Such strategies employed by the readers are also known as support reading strategies.

In Mokhtari and Sheorey's (2002) second grouping, the cognitive strategies are labelled as global reading strategies that enable learners to use some additional techniques to monitor their reading concerning the length and organization of the text or using typographic supports and figures to comprehend better what they read. The problem-solving strategies in their classification require more comprehensive range of techniques that include adapting the reading speed, predicting the meaning of unfamiliar words, and rereading the text to grasp the gist of the text. Other techniques employed by readers to get better text comprehension are "using a dictionary, taking notes, or underlining the text are grouped as support strategies" (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002; 4).

The theoretical importance of this study is based on the need for a broader understanding of reading strategies helping learners' to better comprehend what they read. The fact that learners need to get the most benefit of reading activities attests to significance of researching reading strategies and detecting possible links between language proficiency and strategy use. As Purpura (2014) indicates, the basic ground for examining reading strategies is spotting the reading profile of language learners and addressing better learning and teaching opportunities for them. If teachers are aware of the reading strategy use profile of learners, they might well assist their students in comprehending the deep meaning of a text they read. Similarly, if curriculum developers are aware of the reading strategies employed by learners, they might carefully design the curricula and the reading activities included in it. Likewise, students themselves also make use of the information gained from research findings about their reading strategies and exert some effort to make up for their lacking strategies, which would ultimately help them increase their reading comprehension gains in the target language. Hence, as learners hone their reading comprehension skills, they might meet the EFL proficiency benchmarks required for enrollment at universities or in their professional life. Additionally, if the instructors, or the administrators, have a clue about the reading strategies

The research on the reading strategies generally focused on the first language reading strategies and the review of available literature revealed that there is scant research conducted to investigate reading strategies employed by the EFL learners. The dearth of studies with the EFL learners call for further research. Therefore, the present study attempted to figure out the reading strategy use profile of EFL learners, who have varied backgrounds in the reading strategies in their mother tongue.

that are used by learners, both parties might gain very useful advantages in terms of bettering reading comprehension skills of the learners. Gaining insights about current reading strategies of learners enables instructors to reorganize their methods of teaching academic reading

courses and help their learners become good readers.

The initial objective of the present study is to explore reading strategy use profile of the EFL students at a university in Turkey. Thus, it intends to raise the awareness of teachers, students, and other stakeholders on the reading strategies of EFL learners enrolled in prep schools of universities. In line with its main aim, the present study explored the variations in the type and number of reading strategies and their relationship between some other variables such as language proficiency, gender, and majors of the participants. Concerning its objective, the present study sought answers to the following research questions.

- 1. What is the reading strategy use profile of the EFL learners in general?
- 2. Is there any correlation between the proficiency levels and the reading strategy use?
- 3. Is there any correlation between the genders and the reading strategy use?
- 4. Is there any correlation between the majors and the reading strategy use?

Literature Review

When the available literature on the reading strategies is reviewed it is observed that the studies evidenced usefulness of reading strategy use in advancing learners' reading comprehension in their first language (Baker & Brown, 1984; Brown, 1981; Palinscar & Brown,

1984, Singhal, 2001). Similarly, several studies also figured out that there are variations in the reading strategy use of successful and unsuccessful learners as well as the proficiency levels of learners and their reading strategy use in the first language. For instance, Singhal (2001) found that "successful readers or high proficient readers appear to be using a wider range of strategies" (Singhal, 2001).

As for the variation in reading strategies use of male and female readers, studies conducted by Poole (2005) and Sheorey and Mokhtari (2008) uncovered that the reading strategy use of learners show significant differences in terms of the gender of the learners. For instance, Poole (2005) studied the reading strategy use of 248 college-level ESL students and found that the overall number of strategy use showed differences concerning the genders of the participants. Although there were not significant differences in terms of the global, supportive, and problem-solving strategies, Poole's (2005) findings revealed that the female and male students differed on two individual strategies, which were "noting text characteristics" for the first group and "paying close attention to reading" for the latter.

In their study Sheorey and Mokhtari (2008) examined gender differences in the use of reading strategies of 302 ESL and U.S. students. They found that while there are differences in the U.S. group students concerning the gender, the ESL group students did not show any difference in terms of their genders. That is, the female readers in the US group employed reading strategies more than male readers.

As a possible variable in L2 learners' use of reading strategies, disciplinary fields (majors) were examined in related studies. For example, in a study by Daguay-James and Buluşan (2020) learners' use of metacognitive strategies from various majors were measured using MARSI (Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory). They found that students employed a variety of metacognitive strategies and that there is a discrepancy between the use of metacognitive strategies among subjects from various majors, which means that learners' field of study influences the extent to which reading strategies are used by the readers.

The possible link between academically successful individuals and their use of reading strategies was examined in the related research literature. In their study Chutichaiwirath and Sitthitikul (2017) quantitatively (using MARSI) and qualitatively (using think-aloud protocols) measured Thai EFL learners' use of reading strategies. They have found that subjects' academic success correlates with the use of reading strategies with academically high performing learners indicating higher frequency of reading strategies than low performing learners.

Use of reading strategies was examined in terms of possible correlations with learning styles of learners. Gürses and Bouvet (2016) conducted a study with Turkish/Australian learners of French as L2 that investigated the relationship between reading comprehension/learning styles and learners' perceived use of reading strategies. They found that learners from both sample groups (i.e Turkish and Australian L1 backgrounds) who report similar types of learning styles are found to use reading strategies abundantly. They did not find any correlation between perceived reading strategy use and reading comprehension levels between two sample groups. This finding was interpreted as demonstrating that learners' sheer self-perceived knowledge of reading strategies does not necessarily translate into their actual use when they engage in reading.

Language proficiency and reading strategy use was examined as two possible correlates. In one such study, Sarıçoban and Behjoo (2017) investigated types of reading strategies used by

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Turkish EFL learners and any possible correlation between their perceived use of reading strategies and reading proficiency as measured by their scores from reading courses. They found that 'Global Strategies' and 'Problem Solving Strategies' are two most frequently used reading strategies. Their study corroborated results of similar studies by establishing a relationship between reading strategy use and L2 learners' academic grades from the reading course. This finding indicates that successful readers benefit from reading strategies when they engage in complex reading tasks.

L2 learners exhibit variations in terms of their needs for adopting various types of reading strategies. In order to examine closely how learners vary in their use of reading strategies, a study by Aydın and Yıldırım (2017) investigated the extent to which Turkish intermediate learners used reading strategies using a reading strategy survey. They found that reading strategies are used 'moderately' by subjects indicating that instructional intervention may be necessary to enhance learners' consciousness of reading strategies.

The studies outlined above give us intuitions about the role of reading strategies as a significant variable shaping the extent to which learners successfully master and hone their reading comprehension skills in the target language. Multiplicity of variables may be involved in learners' use of reading strategies. Among a wide array of variables and correlates involved in L2 learners' use of reading strategies, as well as the results of the studies above hint at disciplinary orientation (their majors), gender and academic success as possible considerations. The present study is a further attempt to research these three variables in shaping L2 learners' use of reading strategies.

Method

The present study, which is descriptive in nature, adopted a cross sectional qualitative research methodology to figure out the reading strategy use profile of EFL students. Through implementing such a research design, the researchers intended to observe what is present with the focal participants. The rationale of designing a cross sectional qualitative research is to be capable of gathering data from a larger number of subjects at only one session and illustrate the characteristics of reading strategy use, that exist among the participants without focusing on the cause-and-effect relationships between other variables. The cross-sectional qualitative design is specifically useful in illustrating an overall picture as it is seen at the time of the study. The quantitative data of the research is used to investigate the overall reading strategy use of the participants and figure out whether there are variations in the reading strategy use of the participants regarding their genders, proficiency levels and majors.

Participants

The subjects of the present study are 186 prep-school students who enrolled in Beginner, Elementary, Intermediate, and Upper intermediate level EFL classes at intensive English courses at the school of foreign languages. A total of 220 students were requested to participate and fill in a questionnaire on the reading strategies in foreign language; however, 186 (79 females, 107 males) of them agreed to participate and respond to the items on the questionnaire. As for their majors, while 71 of them were the students of social science and liberal arts programs, 115 of them were students in the field of science or life sciences. The

proficiency levels of the participants were accepted as assessed according to the administrative distribution of the placement examinations which were held at the beginning of the semester by the School of Foreign Languages.

All subjects were enrolled in the prep class reading course, which is an intensive reading course that serves to review and develop English grammar elements studied in other courses. The course is delivered in English, and the readings consist of passages, short stories, as well as practical reading tests. One objective of the course is to help learners achieve the reading proficiency essential to be successful in the English language proficiency exam, and other English related courses in the rest of their educational life. To guarantee that learners shared identical features, for instance the nature of reading instruction and language skills, the same proficiency level students in different classes were grouped together.

Data collection instrument

The present study used a reading strategy survey which was originally based on Oxford (1990) and used and adapted by various researchers in the field of reading strategies such as Dreyer and Nell, (2003); Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002); Mokhtari and Reichard (2002); Pressley and Afflerbach (1995); Taraban, Rynearson and Kerr (2004) and Wyatt, Pressley, El-Dinary, Stein, Evans and Brown (1993). The researchers preferred to use the "survey of reading strategies (SORS)" which was developed by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002) to examine the self-reported reading strategies employed by EFL learners.

The survey was piloted by the researchers of the present study and proved as a reliable and valid instrument for gathering reading strategy use data of EFL learners. The design of the survey is a 5-point Likert type scale, and it consists of 30 items which estimates the reading strategy use in three broad categories, namely, global reading strategies (13 items), problem solving strategies (8 items) and support strategies (9 items). Additionally, the demographic data about the subjects is gathered within the same survey simply by adding three demographic items which inquire the proficiency level, department/major and gender of the participants.

Data collection procedure

The subjects were notified about the purpose of the research and reminded that their responses should only relate to the strategies they employed when reading academic material. The participants were also informed about the Likert type survey. The survey was delivered directly to the participants in one consecutive administration. Participants filled the survey in groups of 18 to 28 during a single meeting that lasted approximately 45 minutes under testing conditions. The language of the survey was English. Yet, the items in the survey were verbally clarified as well when it was necessary due to the students' levels of proficiency in English.

Data analysis

The gathered data were examined using the scoring suggestions and interpretation key developed by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002). Additionally, for the statistical analysis of the records, a statistical software program for social sciences was used. Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002) suggested that the scores obtained should be interpreted using the "High (mean of 3.5 or higher), Moderate (mean of 2.5 to 3.4) and Low (mean of 2.4 or lover)" usage descriptions. As a rule, the total score average "indicates how often students believe they use the strategies" in the

survey when reading course related materials. The means for each subscale in the questionnaire show the frequency with which readers use a given type of strategy when reading academic material (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002).

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the coded answers of the participants depicted in general that, the global reading strategies (\bar{x} 3.67) and problem-solving strategies (\bar{x} 4.52) achieved higher scores whereas support strategies (\bar{x} 3.16) achieved a moderate score. Although the difference between the strategies was not significant, the overall scores depicted that the EFL learners at an intensive English program use the higher and moderate level strategies in their academic readings. Regarding the first research question, we can claim that the students who enrolled in prep classes at the school of foreign languages use global reading strategies more than the other strategies while reading academic materials. Problem solving strategies have also achieved high score. However, these strategies were used less than global reading strategies but higher than support strategies. The results also depicted that the participants use the support strategies moderately. More precisely, the average of the students generally do not prefer using dictionaries or taking notes while reading an academic text. This finding shows similarity with the results of Salatacı and Akyel (2002), who found that the students used the dictionary less to find the meanings of unknown words when they read in English.

The second research question inquired the relation between the proficiency levels and the reading strategy use of the participants. The analysis revealed that regardless of the proficiency levels, all the students use the reading strategies in moderate levels in overall (\bar{x} 3.45), but there are slight differences among them. The findings concerning the proficiency levels and types of the reading strategies are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Reading strategy use and proficiency levels

Types of reading strategy	Upper intermediate	Low intermediate	Intermediate	Beginner
Global Reading Strategies	3.33	3.17	3.55	3.63
Problem Solving Strategies	3.72	3.52	3.65	3.90
Support Strategies	2.74	3.75	3.14	3.39

As seen in Table 1, while reading academic materials, EFL learners used problem solving strategies in high level with slight differences between proficiency levels in general. Concerning the proficiency levels, the problem-solving strategy use profile of the EFL learners are lined up as beginner (\bar{x} 3.90); upper intermediate (\bar{x} 3.72); intermediate (\bar{x} 3.65) and low intermediate (\bar{x} 3.52) respectively. The analysis of the findings concerning the proficiency levels of the participants also revealed that the global reading strategies are ranked in the second order in general. When the scores are examined in detail, it is found that while beginners (\bar{x} 3.63) and intermediate (\bar{x} 3.55) level students used global reading strategies in higher ratios, upper intermediate (\bar{x} 3.33) and low intermediate (\bar{x} 3.17) students used moderate level global reading strategies. The analysis additionally revealed that the support strategies (\bar{x} 3.25) were ranked in low level among all proficiency levels. The further analysis of students'

support strategy use revealed that while upper intermediate $(\bar{x}\ 3.75)$ level students use them in high levels, beginner $(\bar{x}\ 3.39)$, intermediate $(\bar{x}\ 3.14)$ and upper intermediate $(\bar{x}\ 2.74)$ level students use them in moderate levels, respectively. The results indicated that the students in the upper intermediate, intermediate and beginner levels generally prefer using problem-solving strategies. It is also observed that the students in low intermediate classes prefer using support strategies most. Although the previous studies in literature depicted that proficient students use more reading strategies than the other students, the findings of the present study did not reveal a significant difference in terms of reading strategy use.

The third research question was questioning the role of the gender in the use of reading strategies of the participants. The findings of this research question are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Reading strategy use and gender

8 87 8		
Types of reading strategy	Female	Male
Global Reading Strategies	3.46	3.41
Problem Solving Strategies	3.70	3.65
Support Strategies	3.12	3.20

As seen in Table 2, both female $(\bar{x}\ 3.70)$ and male $(\bar{x}\ 3.65)$ EFL learners use the problem-solving strategies in high levels. As for the use of global reading strategies and support strategies, it is found that regardless of the gender, EFL learners moderately use those strategies. The further analysis of this finding showed that there is not a significant difference between the two genders in terms of using the reading strategies. Nevertheless, the findings may provide us an overall picture about the reading strategy use profile of the female and male EFL learners. The finding that there is no significant difference in the use of reading strategies in terms of gender shows similarities with Brantmeier's (2002) study which also depicted that there was no difference in performance by two genders in reading strategy use.

The last research question of the present study examined the role of the students' majors in the use of foreign language reading strategies. The findings concerning the majors of the participants and their reading strategy use is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Reading strategy use and majors

	,	
Types of reading strategy	Social sciences and Liberal arts	Science and Life sciences
Global Reading Strategies	3.49	3.38
Problem Solving Strategies	3.79	3.61
Support Strategies	3.28	3.11

As seen in Table 3, the findings did not show a significant difference concerning the majors and reading strategy use profile of the participants. However, the further analysis uncovered that while EFL students in both broader classifications of majors use problem solving strategies in high level, they use global reading strategies and support strategies in moderate levels.

Conclusion and Implications

The intent of the present study was to illustrate the reading strategy use profile of EFL learners and examine if there is any correlation between the reading strategy use and some variables such as proficiency levels, gender, and majors of the participants.

The findings of present study were promising as they implied that the students in an intensive English course were mostly aware of the reading strategies and employed them in their reading activities in high or moderate levels. Additionally, it is found that while problem solving strategies in reading were mostly used, the global reading strategies and support strategies were not employed as much as the prior one. Moreover, it can be claimed that the participants of this study generally either ignore or do not use the support strategies.

The findings of this study offer a picture of reading strategy use profile of the participants. Thus, the results might be helpful for curriculum developers as well as EFL teachers while planning the reading lessons in EFL contexts. For instance, reading teachers might organize their teaching curriculum according to the preference of the students' reading strategies and highlight the role of neglected reading strategies. Moreover, if the institutions or the reading teachers will arrange reading strategy instruction for their students, they might organize the frame of the instruction regarding these results.

The pedagogical implications of this study should be considered in the light of its limitations. First, although the SORS is a widely used instrument to investigate the reading strategies of the learners, sometimes such a survey might fail to reflect all reading strategies the learners employ. It should be also noted that the findings of the present study are based on the self-reported reflections of reading strategy use of the participants, thus, it is difficult to draw strong generalizations due to their self-reflection as well as the limited number of participants.

For future research, the reading strategy use of the EFL learners could be examined under experimental condition which examines the reading accomplishment and strategy use of learners who get strategy training and those who do not. Such a study can also be enhanced by exploring the variations in reading comprehension in first and foreign language reading activities and monitor the reading strategy employments of learners in different contexts.

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