

A Survey of Secondary School Students' Reading Strategy Use, Teachers' Perceptions and Practices: the Case of Grade Nine

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Abstract

This study tried to explore the reading strategy use of Grade 9 Students of four senior high schools in Jimma Zone as well as their English teachers' perceived use of reading strategies and awareness. A total of 152 students and 29 Grade 9 English teachers responded to a survey questionnaire with a five point Likert scale. The students' questionnaire had 28 items of reading strategies which were adopted from Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002) Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) to measure non-native English speakers' metacognitive awareness and perceived use of reading strategies. The teachers' questionnaire had 16 items that deal with the reading strategies they use when they teach reading lessons and other 18 items that assess their awareness of reading strategies. The collected data were computed and analyzed using descriptive statistics and revealed that students' reading strategy use as well as teachers' reading strategies instruction is of 'moderate' level to a large extent. On the other hand, teachers' awareness of reading strategies is of 'high' level.

Key words: Reading strategy, Cognitive strategies, Metacognition

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a complex process that largely demands the use of various strategies which are vital in increasing comprehension. There seems to be general agreement that a reading strategy is a conscious procedure that facilitates comprehension and knowledge acquisition (Brantmeier, 2002; Chamot & O'Malley, 1987; Paris et al., 1994). Thus, it is fundamental in all academic disciplines and failure to employ appropriate reading strategies greatly hampers comprehension,

and this in turn could adversely affect academic performance at large. Recent research on the reading strategies used by successful and less successful readers indicated that most of the comprehension activities of efficient readers take place at the metacognitive level (Hudson, 2007). Metacognitive awareness, or metacognition, refers to one's ability to understand, control, and manipulate his/her own cognitive process to maximize learning.

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In other words it entails readers' knowledge of strategies for processing texts, the ability to monitor comprehension, and the ability to adjust strategies as needed (Pressley, 2002). This concept has offered great insights as to how learners manage their cognitive activities to achieve comprehension before, during, and after reading. Cognitive strategies, on the other hand, are one type of learning strategies that learners use in order to learn more successfully such as making prediction, summarizing, translating, and guessing meaning from context, repetition and using imagery for memorisation (Oxford, 1990). All of these strategies involve deliberate manipulation of language to improve learning.

Studies revealed that reading strategies can be taught and that once students' metacognitive knowledge about reading strategies and strategy use is developed, they will become better readers (Farrell, 2001; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001). Some of the active reading strategies that need to be cultivated in our students through instruction and regular practice are: generating questions about ideas in text while reading; constructing mental images representing ideas in text; summarizing and paraphrasing; analyzing the text into components of setting, language structure, main idea, cohesive devices and transitions (Anderson & Pearson, 2004). The application of such reading strategies results in improved memory and comprehension of text for students. Hence, language educators insist on teaching students to use reading comprehension strategies in a self-regulated fashion with extensive teacher explanation and modelling of strategies, followed by teacher-scaffolded use of the strategies, and culminating in student self-regulated use of the strategies during regular reading

(Hogan & Pressley, 1997; Snow *et al.*, 1998; Taylor *et al.*, 1995).

When reading to learn, students need to follow four basic steps: 1) figure out the purpose for reading; activate background knowledge of the topic in order to predict or anticipate content and identify appropriate reading strategies; 2) attend to the parts of the text that are relevant to the identified purpose and ignore the rest. This selectivity enables students to focus on specific items in the input and reduces the amount of information they have to hold in short-term memory; 3) select strategies that are appropriate to the reading task and use them flexibly and interactively; 4) check comprehension while reading and when the reading task is completed (Drucker 2003; Grabe, 2004; Yigiter *et al.*, 2005). Monitoring comprehension helps students detect inconsistencies and comprehension failures, helping them learn to use alternate strategies. With this understanding, the benefits of reading strategy instruction on conscious procedures need to be considered and wisely applied so as to facilitate comprehension. To realize this goal, therefore, EFL learners should know how to read and make use of appropriate reading strategies as this skill can be cultivated through intentional instruction.

Statement of the Problem

Reading strategies instruction needs to be given due emphasis in reading classes as it helps students become purposeful and active readers who are in control of their own reading. Many English teachers, however, complain that most of their students are slow readers and some of them hardly comprehend reading passages. The question is, therefore, how successfully do English teachers implement reading comprehension strategies in their reading classes? What do the current practices look

like at our high schools? Do teachers give due emphasis to reading strategies instruction? Therefore, the study tried to answer the following research questions:

- How effectively do Grade 9 students make use of reading strategies when they read academic texts?
- To what extent do the Grade 9 English teachers teach reading strategies to their students in reading activities?
- To what extent are the Grade Nine English teachers well aware of reading strategies that students need to learn and employ while reading?

Objective of the study

This study tried to explore the effectiveness of reading strategies instruction in Grade Nine English classes. It explored how much students make use of such strategies when they read academic texts. It also examined to what extent high school English teachers purposely teach reading strategies in their reading classes.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

The study design is a survey research design which is a very valuable tool for assessing opinions and trends. Survey studies aim at describing the characteristics of a population by examining a sample of that group (Dornyei, 2007). Even on a small scale, such as local government or small businesses, judging opinion with carefully designed surveys can dramatically improve strategies (Dornyei, 2007).

Participants of the Study and Sampling Technique

The study involved four high schools, (Setto, Jiren, Seqa & Serbo High Schools);

all the English teachers (availability sampling) as well as 20% of the students (systematic random sampling) from one shift (which is nearly 50% of the grade 9 sections) were used to draw the samples. Thus, to identify the sample students, first the morning and afternoon shifts were identified by drawing lots and every section in the morning shift was taken as sample. After this, by means of systematic random sampling technique, 20% of the morning shift students were picked up by locating every 5th student from the classroom name list. Thus, an attempt is made to randomize the selection in order to ensure that all students are fairly represented. A total of 152 students and 29 Grade 9 English teachers responded to a survey questionnaire with a five point Likert scale

Data collection Instruments

The main data collection method in surveys is the use of questionnaires as they help address questions which are used to find out what the respondents are doing or have done in the past, focusing on actions, lifestyles, habits, and personal history. Likewise questionnaires also deal with attitudinal questions which are used to find out what people think, covering attitudes, opinions, beliefs, interests, and values. (Dornyei, 2007:102). In line with this, students' and teachers' questionnaires are designed to collect data in the study.

Therefore, the data for this study were collected through students' and teachers' questionnaires adapted from the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002) which was developed to measure the metacognitive awareness and perceived use of reading strategies of adolescent and adult learners of English as a second language (ESL) while reading academic texts. SORS is used as a standard instrument because it was field-tested extensively using large and diverse

sample population representing students with equivalent reading abilities ranging from middle school to college by Mokhtari & Reichard, (2002). The internal consistency reliability coefficient for its three subscales (metacognitive, cognitive & support strategies) ranged from 0.89 to 0.93 and was found to have well-established validity and reliability data (Alpha = .93) (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002). In addition, factor analysis of the strategy is confirmed by many studies (Hsiao & Oxford, 2002; Oxford, 1996; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995).

The SORS was adapted for this study as a main instrument because it emphasizes the importance of cognitive strategies and meta-cognitive awareness in L2 reading, which fits the theoretical framework of this study. The researchers translated the students' questionnaire into the students' vernacular (to Afan Oromon and Amharic) so as to avoid comprehension difficulties that participants might encounter when filling in the English version. At last, it was commented by 3 English teachers at JU. Similarly, questionnaire was also developed and administered for all grade 9 English teachers of the target high schools. This was supposed to answer the research questions related to teachers' awareness and implementation of the reading strategies instruction.

Data Collection Procedures & Analysis

The SORS Questionnaire was administered to the participants of the study in a similar way in all the four schools. It was conducted during a regular class period with the help of the classroom instructors who were well acquainted with the general objective of the research. The students were instructed to read each of the 28 statements in the SORS Questionnaire and put a (✓) mark against the alternative which best indicated their perceived use of the

strategies described in the statement using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (I never or almost never use this strategy') to 5 (I always use this strategy'). After the students returned the questionnaire, the teachers' questionnaire were dispatched and filled in. Descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentage were used to analyze the data.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore how much students make use of reading strategies when they read academic texts. It also examined to what extent grade nine English teachers explicitly address comprehension strategies in their reading classes. Data were collected both from grade nine English teachers as well as students of the target schools. The reading strategies questionnaire was scored as follows: once participants completed the 5-point Likert scale, the data were analysed using SPSS version 16. After compiling the data, the scores were categorised and interpreted using the three levels of reading strategy usage developed by Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995). These are: high (mean of 3.5 or higher), moderate (mean between 2.5 and 3.4) and low (mean of 2.4 or lower). The strategy has been used extensively by many researchers and its reliability has been checked in multiple ways, and has been reported as high validity, reliability and utility (Oxford, 1996). Then, the data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The results are presented as follows.

Students' Questionnaire

The students' questionnaire incorporated 28 items of reading strategies of which the first 6 were meta-cognitive reading strategies. Items 7-13 were cognitive strategies and the rest, i.e., 14-28 were items related to the strategies the English teachers instruct in reading classes.

The results are summarized and indicated in the following tables.

Table 1: Students' Meta-Cognitive Reading Strategy Use (N = 152)

No.	Reading Strategies	Value	No.	Percent
1	Meta-cognitive	low Mean of < = 2.5	33	21.7
		moderate Mean of 2.5 - 3.4	95	62.5
		high Mean of ≥ = 3.5	24	15.8

As the results indicate, 95 (62.5%) of the respondents confirmed that they make use of meta-cognitive reading strategies moderately in reading academic texts in English. The analysis also revealed that the meta-cognitive reading strategy use of 33

(21.7%) of the students in the target schools is 'low'. On the other hand, the other groups of the respondents, 24 (15.8%) of them indicated that their application of meta-cognitive reading strategy is 'high'.

Table 2: Students' Cognitive Reading Strategy Use (N = 152)

No.	Reading Strategies	Value	No.	percent
2	Cognitive	low Mean of < = 2.5	12	7.9
		moderate Mean of 2.5 - 3.4	78	51.3
		high Mean of ≥ = 3.5	62	40.8
Total			152	100%

When we see the cognitive reading strategy application, 12 (7.9%) of the respondents showed that their cognitive reading strategy use is 'low'. The other group of students (78, 51.3%) revealed that their cognitive

reading strategy is of 'moderate' level. The rest of the students, (62, 40.8%) make use of cognitive reading strategies effectively in their English reading sessions; their strategy use is rated 'high'.

Table 3: Teachers' Practices in Employing Reading Strategies

No.	Responses	Value	No.	percent
1	Students' Responses	low Mean of < = 2.5	18	11.8
		moderate Mean of 2.5 - 3.4	123	80.9
		high Mean of ≥ = 3.5	11	7.2
	Total		152	100%
2	Teachers' Responses	low Mean of < = 2.5	-	-
		moderate Mean of 2.5 - 3.4	15	51.7
		high Mean of ≥ = 3.5	14	48.3
	Total		29	100%

Both the students and teachers of the target schools were asked the extent to which teachers instil various reading strategies to their students in their reading classes. This was meant to explore the effectiveness of the reading strategies instruction in the target schools. Their responses were tallied and summarized and then categorized into 'low', 'medium' and 'high' taking the mean score of every respondent in their respective groups (teachers' questionnaire and students' questionnaire separately). The table above shows the responses of both groups. Based on their responses, it is inferred that 11 (7.2%) of the students as well as 14 (48.3%) of the teachers rated teachers' reading strategies instruction as 'high'. On the other hand, one can see from Table 3 that, the responses from 18 (11.8%)

of the students indicated that the practice of their teachers in applying or discussing reading strategies is rated as 'low'.

Teachers' Awareness of Reading Strategies

Teachers were asked to indicate how much the following reading strategies are relevant to cultivate the reading competence of their students. They marked their responses on the questionnaire and their reflections were tallied and summarized. These scores were then categorised and interpreted using the three levels of reading strategy usage: 'high' (mean of 3.5 or higher), 'moderate' (mean between 2.5 and 3.4) and 'low' (mean of 2.4 or lower) (Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995). Here follow the results.

Table 4: Teachers' Awareness of Reading Strategies (N = 29)

No.	Reading Strategies	Value	No.	Percent
1	Meta-cognitive	low Mean of < = 2.5	-	-
		moderate Mean of 2.5 - 3.4	11	37.9
		high Mean of ≥ = 3.5	18	62.1
Total			29	100%
2	Cognitive	low Mean of < = 2.5		
		moderate Mean of 2.5 - 3.4	9	31.0
		high Mean of ≥ = 3.5	20	69.0
Total			29	100%

The responses the teachers gave were indicators of the level of awareness they have towards reading strategies. The table shows that, of the 29 English language teachers, the meta-cognitive reading strategy awareness of 11 (37.9%) of the teachers is 'moderate'. In line with this, the majority of the teachers, 18 (62.1%) have a good knowledge of meta-cognitive reading strategies labelled as 'high'. The situation is more or less similar with cognitive reading strategy awareness of the grade nine English teachers too. Nine (31.0%) of the teachers' cognitive reading strategy awareness is 'moderate'. Furthermore, the table shows that twenty (69.0%) of them have 'high' level of awareness of cognitive reading strategies.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study on reading comprehension strategies indicated that the meta-cognitive reading strategies use of the target schools' students is of 'moderate' level. This shows that the great majority of the students need rigorous training on making use of various types of meta-cognitive reading strategies with relevant reading exercises. The study further

revealed in Table 1 that the meta-cognitive reading strategies use of some of the students in the target schools is 'low'. This is a critical problem for the academic success of the students as it hampers their reading competence at large. We see from these results that the great majority of the students require practicing meta-cognitive reading strategies as frequently as possible in their reading classes. Scholars believe that meta-cognitive reading strategy is crucial in helping learners improve their performance, particularly in problem-solving and successful language learning (Alexander *et al.*, 2000)

On the other hand, when we see the cognitive reading strategy application in Table 2, 7.9% of the respondents showed that their cognitive reading strategy use is 'low'. This problem needs to be addressed so as to bring the students into appropriate level of reading competence and help them become successful readers in their academic endeavour. It is only 51.3% of the students who makes use of a 'moderate' level of cognitive reading strategy. This group of students also needs more attention in cultivating their cognitive reading

strategy to a higher level. Thus, reading lessons that focus on strategy awareness and application need to be offered regularly so as to help students master these essential techniques. The study also revealed that less than 40.8% make use of cognitive reading strategies effectively in their English reading sessions which are rated 'high'. However, the number of such students who are successfully making use of cognitive strategy is still less than half. In this regard, quite a lot has to be done on reading strategy instruction so as to enhance the students' reading skill into advanced level.

The second question which the study tried to answer was the extent to which the Grade 9 English teachers teach reading strategies to their students in reading activities. As indicated in Table 3, the majority of the students (80.9%) rated their teachers' reading strategies instruction as 'moderate'. Similarly, the teachers themselves (51.7%) confirmed that they carry out reading strategy instruction at a 'moderate' level. We learn from these results that reading strategies instruction needs quite a lot of attention as it contributes a lot in cultivating the reading competence of the students. The 'low' level of reading strategies instruction is likely to have a lot of adverse effects on the academic performance of the students. Unless students are equipped with appropriate reading strategies, they are unlikely to make use of them, and if they are deficient in strategy use, their reading comprehension ability will be at stake in ensuring word recognition fluency; activating their background knowledge in appropriate ways; cultivating effective language knowledge and general comprehension skills; identifying text structures and discourse organization; building their reading fluency and rate;

enhancing their extensive reading skill; and developing intrinsic motivation for reading (Grabe , 2004).

So as to curb these problems, therefore, it is highly indispensable to devote ample time practicing a wide range of reading strategies to our students. Improving the teachers' competence in the subject matter as well as in methods of teaching with particular reference to reading is also the other perspective that needs critical consideration. Thus, so as to suggest appropriate solutions, it would be imperative to explore some other factors too. What could be the possible causes for such 'moderate' and 'low' practices in areas of reading strategies instruction? One possible reason could be lack of adequate training on the part of the teachers. Another cause of the problem could be attributed to the way the reading lessons are designed (textbook preparation). To address the first reason, therefore, it would be imperative to examine the level of awareness the English teachers have pertaining to reading comprehension strategies.

Therefore, the third issue the study investigated was the grade nine English teachers' awareness of reading strategies that students need to learn and employ while reading. As indicated in Table 4, the majority of the teachers, 18 (62.1%) have a good knowledge of meta-cognitive reading strategies labeled as 'high'. Teachers with such knowledge are likely to help their students acquire the strategies that are vital for their academic success. On the other hand, the meta-cognitive reading strategy awareness of 11 (37.9%) of the teachers is 'moderate'. The situation is more or less similar with cognitive reading strategy awareness of the Grade Nine English teachers too where 31.0% of the teachers' cognitive reading strategy awareness is 'moderate' and 69.0% of them have 'high'

level of awareness of cognitive reading strategies. In sum, knowledge of reading strategies would help teachers a lot in executing their role as successfully as possible and transform their students into competent readers. In line with this, Grabe, (2009) emphasizes instruction of reading strategies by stating as follows: "Because meaning does not exist in text, but rather must be actively constructed, instruction in how to employ strategies is necessary to improve comprehension" Grabe, 2009:32). That is, the increase of interests in reading strategy is attributed to a belief that using reading strategies helps the development of reading comprehension. The main goal of reading is to facilitate the utmost comprehension by providing various tasks that necessitate applying a range of reading strategies. In order to interact with, comprehend, and gain knowledge from texts, students should be able to identify and use strategies that aid comprehension, evaluation, memory, and integration.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

The study assessed whether or not high school English teachers explicitly address reading strategies in their reading classes. It also examined how much students make use of such strategies when they read passages. The following conclusions are made from the study.

- Cognitive and meta-cognitive reading strategies are practised in English classes at a 'moderate' level; however, the number of students who are successfully making use of cognitive as well as meta-cognitive strategies ('high' level) is less than expected. Thus, the great majority of the students require practicing cognitive and meta-cognitive reading strategies as

frequently as possible in their reading classes.

- Both the grade nine teachers and students rated teachers' reading strategies instruction as 'moderate'. This shows that the great majority of the teachers execute reading comprehension instruction up to a satisfactory level, and yet it does not fall into the 'high' category.
- The majority of the teachers' meta-cognitive as well as cognitive reading strategies awareness is very good, i.e., it is of 'high' category. However, when it comes to implementation, what they practice is to a 'moderate' level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Teachers have an indispensable role in the teaching/learning process. Therefore, they need to be equipped with pertinent instructional strategies so as to build their capacity on solid foundations. If this is not the case, it is likely to have a lot of adverse effects on the reading competence of the students. Thus, short and long term training programmes need to be organized for English language teachers to update not only their awareness but also to practically cultivate their method of teaching.
- Furthermore, the appropriateness of the reading lessons of the Grade Nine English textbook in cultivating the reading strategies of our students needs to be assessed.

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