

SELF-REPORTED READING STRATEGY USE AMONG SPANISH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT. *The research literature on metacognitive awareness of reading strategies indicates the need to increase our understanding of readers' metacognitive knowledge about reading and reading strategies to develop them into active, constructively responsive readers. The study reported here is intended to contribute to the study of the relationship between reported strategy use and self-rated reading ability in the context of Spanish students of English as a foreign language and also to provide more conclusive results of the gender effect (the females report significantly higher frequency of strategy usage) found in some previous studies. Specifically, we ask the following questions: 1. Is there a relationship between Spanish students' reported strategy use and their self-rated reading ability? And 2. Are there any differences between male and female EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in their perceived use of reading strategies while reading academic materials? We conclude that different types of reading strategies influence self-perceived reading competence. Moreover we find differences between male and female EFL students in their self-assessed strategy use.*

KEYWORDS: *Metacognitive awareness, reading strategies, reading ability, gender.*

RESUMEN. *La literatura que se ocupa de la concienciación metacognitiva acerca de las estrategias de lectura muestra la necesidad de mejorar nuestra comprensión del conocimiento metacognitivo acerca de la lectura y las estrategias de lectura de los estudiantes para así convertirlos en lectores activos. El trabajo que se presenta aquí pretende contribuir al estudio de la relación entre el uso auto-percibido de las estrategias y la habilidad lectora auto-percibida en el contexto de estudiantes españoles de inglés como lengua extranjera, así como proporcionar resultados más concluyentes del efecto de género (la mujeres indican que utilizan estrategias más frecuentemente) encontrado en algunos estudios previos. En concreto, se plantean las siguientes preguntas: 1. Hay una relación entre el uso auto-percibido de estrategias de los estudiantes españoles y su habilidad lectora auto-percibida? Y 2. Hay diferencias de género entre los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera en su uso percibido de estrategias de lectura mientras leen materiales académicos? Concluimos que diferentes tipos*

de estrategias de lectura influyen en la competencia lectora auto-percibida. Además, encontramos diferencias entre hombres y mujeres entre estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera en su uso auto-percibido de estrategias.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Conciencia metacognitiva, estrategias de lectura, habilidad lectora, género.

1. PREVIOUS RESEARCH STUDIES AND AIM OF THE PRESENT STUDY

University students of English as a second language and English as a foreign language are required to read a large volume of academic texts in English. However, many students enter university education underprepared for the reading demands placed on them (Dreyer and Nel, 2003). They show inability to read selectively, that is, extracting what is important for the purpose of reading and discarding what is insignificant (Benson, 1991). They often present a low level of reading strategy knowledge (Dreyer, 1998; Van Wyk, 2001). They lack the strategies needed to successfully comprehend expository texts. They often select ineffective and inefficient strategies with little strategic intent (Wood et al. 1998).

Strategic awareness and monitoring of the comprehension process are critically important aspects of skilled reading (Pressley and Afflerbach, 1995; Sheorey and Mokhtari, 2001). Such awareness and monitoring is often referred to in the literature as “metacognition” which “entails knowledge of strategies for processing texts, the ability to monitor comprehension, and the ability to adjust strategies as needed” (Auerbach and Paxton, 1997: 240-41). According to Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001), it is the combination of conscious awareness of the strategic reading processes and the actual use of reading strategies that distinguishes the skilled from the unskilled readers. Studies in L1 and L2 contexts show that successful reading strategy use is dependent on whether a strategy is employed metacognitively (Carrell et al 1989, Jiménez et al. 1996). Studies also show that unsuccessful students lack this strategic awareness and monitoring of the comprehension process (e.g. García et al., 1998). These less successful students, who are often unaware of their own cognitive process, must be helped to acquire and use the reading strategies that have been found to be successful (Mokhtari and Reichard, 2004).

Recent studies recognize the role of metacognitive awareness in reading comprehension. Thus, in their study, Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) examine differences in the reported use of reading strategies of native and non-native English speakers when reading academic materials. Participants were 302 college students (150 native-English-speaking US and 152 ESL students), who completed a survey of reading strategies aimed at discerning the strategies readers report using when coping with academic reading tasks. Results of the study revealed, first, that both US and ESL students display awareness of almost all of the strategies included in the survey. Secondly, both groups attribute the same order of importance to categories of reading strategies in the survey, regardless of their reading ability or gender: *cognitive strategies* (the deliberate actions readers take when comprehension problems develop), followed by *metacognitive strategies* (advanced planning and comprehension monitoring techniques), and *support*

strategies (the tools readers seek out to aid comprehension). Thirdly, both ESL and US high-reading-ability students show comparable degrees of higher reported usage for cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies than lower-reading-ability students in the respective groups, and while the US high-reading-ability students seem to consider support reading strategies to be relatively more valuable than low-reading-ability US students, ESL students attribute high value to support reading strategies, regardless of their reading ability level. This study also shows that, in the US group, the females report significantly higher frequency of strategy usage; this gender effect is not reflected in the ESL sample. These authors conclude that it is important for all readers, native and non-native, to be aware of the significant strategies proficient reading requires. Teachers can play a key role in increasing students' awareness of such strategies and in helping them become active readers.

Mokhtari and Reichard (2004) investigated whether significant differences exist between first and second language readers in their metacognitive awareness and perceived use of specific strategies when reading for academic purposes in English. Three hundred and fifty college students (141 US and 209 Moroccan) completed an instrument designed to measure their metacognitive awareness of reading strategies. The results revealed that despite the fact that the two student groups had been schooled in significantly different socio-cultural environments, they reported remarkably similar patterns of strategy awareness and reported usage when reading academic materials in English. Both US and Moroccan students demonstrated a moderate to high awareness level of reading strategies. An examination of the type of strategies reported as used by the subjects shows that Moroccan students reported using certain types of strategies more often than did their American counterparts. These authors conclude that this study's findings help to explain some of the differences and similarities between second language readers and those reading in their first language, which have only been seen in terms of deficiencies but not in other, presumably more beneficial or even neutral ways.

N. Dhieb-Henia (2003) investigates into the reading processes of English as a foreign language/English for specific purposes (EFL/ESP) students with respect to research articles in their speciality area: Biology. Specifically, the study was aimed at exploring how metacognitive strategy training influenced a group of readers' declarative and procedural knowledge, and their choice and use of strategies while reading research articles. Two groups of undergraduate Biology students (62 in all) from two science institutions took pre- and post-course reading tests, and 12 participated in retrospection. The purpose of this study was to find out if, and to what extent, a metacognitive strategy training course in the study skills and strategies necessary for reading scientific research articles can help ESP students in an EFL context read more efficiently and rapidly in their subject area. The general hypothesis of this study was that the students who received this strategy training would show enhanced declarative and procedural knowledge (as indicated by their higher scores and lower task-achievement timings) at the end of the course. The tests and protocols provided evidence of the effectiveness of

metacognitive strategy training in improving the subjects' familiarity with and proficiency in reading research articles, and also of the effectiveness of retrospection as a method for evaluating the subjects' reading behaviour.

Dreyer and Nel (2003) conducted research on strategic reading instruction. The purpose of the study was to find out if the students in the experimental group who followed strategic reading instruction attain statistically and practically significantly higher mean scores on their end-of-semester English reading comprehension tests and if they differed in terms of their reading strategy use. The strategic reading instruction component consisted of a printed interactive study guide focusing on explaining the main features of strategies and explaining why that strategy should be learned. There were also contact sessions (face-to-face) to give the students additional information on the strategies, model the strategies for the students and to provide practice opportunities both individually and in groups. Finally the instruction included a technology-enhanced feature, a Learning Content Management System.

The participants were 131 first-year English as a Second Language students taking an English for Professional course at the Potchefstroom university for CHE, in South Africa. The instruments used were a reading strategies questionnaire, the TOEFL test to determine the English proficiency of the students and two reading comprehension tests. The results indicated that students who received strategic reading instruction received both statistically and practically significantly higher marks on the reading comprehension measures than did the students in the control group. This was true for successful students, as well as for those considered to be at risk.

As we have seen, Sheorey and Mokhtari's (2001) paper shows that the females report significantly higher frequency of strategy usage. Gender differences have also been found in other studies. In language learning strategy research, efforts have been made to investigate the strategies used by males and females and the sex difference findings show that in typical language learning situations females use significantly more learning strategies than males and use them more often (Oxford 1988, 1989).

Oxford and Nyikos (1989) found that females showed greater use of three out of five strategy categories than males did. Similarly Ehrman and Oxford (1989) found females reported significantly greater use of language learning strategies in four strategy categories. Dreyer and Oxford (1996) also found males and females reported different patterns of strategy use with females using strategies more often than males did. In the diary study by Oxford et al. (1996) among a group of 26 female and 16 male learning Spanish as a foreign language, they found that significantly more females than males reported using Memory, Cognitive and Social strategies. In a study on Korean learners by Ok (2003), it was found that Korean high school girls scored significantly higher in five of the six strategy categories than boys did. However the study by Kaylani (1996) revealed that gender is related in complex ways to the frequency of strategy use. Although she found significant Memory, Cognitive, Compensation and Affective strategies use differences between males and females in favor of females, it was found

successful female students' language learning strategy profile resembled more the strategy profile of successful males than that of the unsuccessful female.

D. Liu (2004) investigated EFL learning strategy use among a group of 428 technological institute English majors in China and the factors affecting their strategy choice. This author focused on the frequency of EFL learning strategy use and its two affecting factors: gender and language proficiency. This study revealed significant gender differences in strategy use with females surpassing males in overall strategy use, and in Memory strategies and Affective strategies.

The first conclusion we can draw from the research literature on metacognitive awareness of reading strategies reviewed above indicates the need to increase our understanding of readers' metacognitive knowledge about reading and reading strategies to develop them into active, constructively responsive readers. The studies analysed tend to conclude that it is important for all readers to be aware of the significant strategies proficient reading requires. Moreover, they show that students who receive strategic reading instruction improve their reading comprehension performance.

These studies also revealed that in general students display some awareness of reading strategies without much difference between native and non-native students in the types of strategies reported as used more often. Finally, a series of studies conclude that the females report significantly higher frequency of strategy usage.

Bearing all these studies in mind, the present paper is aimed at increasing our understanding of readers' metacognitive knowledge about reading and reading strategies in the context of Spanish university students. We intend to analyse the strategy awareness of chemistry and engineering students from the University of Oviedo. Specifically, our objective is twofold. First, we want to analyse the relationship between reported strategy use and self-rated reading ability. Second, we intend to provide more conclusive results of the gender effect (the females report significantly higher frequency of strategy usage). Thus, we will approach the following issues:

1. Analysis of Spanish students' reported strategy use and its relationship to their self-rated reading ability.
2. Analysis of any differences between male and female students in their perceived use of reading strategies while reading academic materials.

2. OUR STUDY

2.1. *Subjects*

The participants in this study were 157 Spanish students from the University of Oviedo. Of these, 43.3% were chemistry students and 56.7% were students from the Technical School of Engineering. With respect to their sex, 48% were women and 52% were men. The students' average age was 19.44.

2.2. Dependent variable *Self-perceived reading ability*

Self-perceived reading ability was determined by having the study participants rate themselves on their self-perceived reading ability in English. Although in previous studies (e.g. Sheorey and Mokhtari, 2001) reading ability was determined by having the study participants rate themselves on their self-perceived reading ability in English on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent), we followed advice from statistics experts who recommended to follow a qualitative rating procedure. To this end, we elaborated a four-item questionnaire. The items asked students to rate their self-perceived reading ability on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) through the following statements: When I read in English, I can understand the main ideas of the text; When I read in English, I can summarise what I have read; When I read in English, I can answer comprehension questions about the text; When I read in English, I can understand details about the content of the text. The reliability of the answers was calculated by Cronbach's Alpha. The Cronbach's Alpha's value considered to be acceptable is 0.6. A value higher than 0.7, as in this case (0.898), is then very positive. Construct validity was tested by factor analysis. It shows us that the construct is an indicator of a single variable because the construct explains more than 50% of the answers' variability (76.888). Another reason is that the factor loadings (Factor 1 column) have values that are higher than 0.5, which indicates that there is a correlation between them, that is, that they increase or decrease simultaneously. Table 1 shows the main results.

Items	Factor	Mean
1	0.846	3.7500
2	0.898	3.3984
3	0.908	3.4609
4	0.854	3.0313
Cronbach's Alpha	0.898	
Eigenvalue	3.076	
Accumulated percentage of explained variance	76.888	

Table 1. *Factor loadings of self-perceived reading ability*

2.3. Independent variables

According to the literature review we have included four independent variables that are addressed next. All of the items were ranked by five-point scales, where 1 means that the item had no importance or very little importance and 5 if it was of very high importance.

Comprehension effort strategies. The construct was created after studying several papers' ideas, which included scales related to awareness issues like Sheorey and

Mokhtari (2001) and Mokhtari and Reichard (2002). This construct is related to the effort students make to understand the text. It includes “I try to get back on track when I lose concentration”, “When text becomes difficult, I pay closer attention to what I’m reading.”, “I check my understanding when I come across conflicting information”, “When text becomes difficult, I reread to increase my understanding” and “I try to guess the meaning of unknown words or phrases”. We have calculated Cronbach’s Alpha in order to value the reliability of the answers. Cronbach’s Alpha’s value is 0.761, that is very positive. With regard to the construct validity, a factorial analysis was carried out. It shows us that the construct is an indicator of a single variable because the construct explains more than 50% of the answers’ variability (51.892). Factor loadings (Factor 1 column) have values that are higher than 0.5, which indicates that there is a correlation between them, that is that they increase or decrease simultaneously. Table 2 shows the main results.

Items	Factor 1	Mean
11	0.743	4.1346
16	0.717	4.2115
25	0.662	3.5355
27	0.777	4.2323
30	0.698	3.9484
Cronbach’s Alpha	0.761	
Eigenvalue	2.595	
Accumulated percentage of explained variance	51.892	

Table 2. *Factor loadings of comprehension effort strategies*

Interpretation effort strategies. The construct was created after studying several papers’ ideas, which included scales related to awareness issues like Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) and Mokhtari and Reichard (2002). It is related to the effort students make to interpret the text. It includes “I stop from time to time and think about what I’m reading.”, “I paraphrase (restate ideas in my own words) to better understand what I read” and “I try to picture or visualize information to help remember what I read”. We have calculated Cronbach’s Alpha in order to value the reliability of the answers. Cronbach’s Alpha’s value is 0.609, that is acceptable. With regard to the construct validity, a factorial analysis was carried out. It shows us that the construct is an indicator of a single variable because the construct explains more than 50% of the answers’ variability (56.094). Factor loadings (Factor 1 column) have values that are higher than 0.5, which indicates that there is a correlation between them, that is that they increase or decrease simultaneously. Table 3 shows the main results.

Items	Factor 2	Mean
18	0.659	3.3399
20	0.794	3.2532
21	0.786	3.1742
Cronbach's Alpha	0.609	
Eigenvalue	1.683	
Accumulated percentage of explained variance	56.094	

Table 3. *Factor loadings of interpretation effort strategies*

Strategies based on the use of external tools. The construct was created after studying several papers' ideas, which included scales related to awareness issues like Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) and Mokhtari and Reichard (2002). It is related to external tools the subject makes use of to understand the language. It represents a set of reading strategies which involve use of outside reference materials, taking notes, and other practical strategies. It includes "I take notes while reading to help me understand what I read", "I summarize what I read to reflect on important information in the text" and "I underline or circle information in the text to help me remember it". We have calculated Cronbach's Alpha in order to value the reliability of the answers. Cronbach's Alpha's value is 0.639, that is acceptable. With regard to the construct validity, a factorial analysis was carried out. It shows us that the construct is an indicator of a single variable because the construct explains more than 50% of the answers' variability (57.901) Factor loadings (Factor 1 column) have values that are higher than 0.5, which indicates that there is a correlation between them, that is that they increase or decrease simultaneously. Table 4 shows the main results.

Items	Factor 3	Mean
2	0.780	2.6306
6	0.664	2.5962
12	0.829	3.0581
Cronbach's Alpha	0.639	
Eigenvalue	1.737	
Accumulated percentage of explained variance	57.901	

Table 4. *Factor loadings of strategies based on the use of external tools*

Self-assessment strategies. The construct was created after studying several papers' ideas, which included scales related to awareness issues like Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) and Mokhtari and Reichard (2002). It is related to the effort the subject makes for self-assessment. It includes "I ask myself questions I like to have answered in the text" and "I check to see if my guesses about the text are right or wrong". We have calculated Cronbach's Alpha in order to value the reliability of the answers. Cronbach's Alpha's value is 0.617, that is acceptable. With regard to the construct validity, a factorial analysis was carried out. It shows us that the construct is an indicator of a single variable because the construct explains more than 50% of the answers' variability (67.793). Factor loadings (Factor 1 column) have values that are higher than 0.5, which indicates that there is a correlation between them, that is that they increase or decrease simultaneously. Table 5 shows the main results.

Items	Factor 4	Mean
28	0.823	2.3742
29	0.823	3.0516
Cronbach's Alpha	0.617	
Eigenvalue	1.356	
Accumulated percentage of explained variance	67.793	

Table 5. *Factor loadings of self-assessment strategies*

3. RESULTS

We will now present the main results obtained from this empirical study. After having undertaken the factorial analysis, we next carried out a multiple regression analysis using a step by step selection method (we checked that there were not any colineality problems among the independent variables introduced in the model.). The regression analysis was intended to allow us to find out if there was any significant relationship between the factors above and the students' perceived reading comprehension ability. Table 6 shows the regression models which are tested in accordance with this hypothesis.

	H.1	H.2	H.3
Constant	2.30E-017 (.....) 0.000 1.000	3.77E-017 (.....) 0.000 1.000	9.31E-017 (.....) 0.000 1.000
CONSTRUCT 1	0.183 (0.183) 2.311 0.022		
CONSTRUCT 2		0.255 (0.255) 3.277 0.001	
CONSTRUCT 3			0.372 (0.372) 4.997 0.000
R square	0.033	0.065	0.139
Adjusted R square	0.027	0.059	0.133
F	5.342	10.742	24.970
Sig. FN	0.022	0.001	0.000

Table 6. *Regression analysis of the four different hypotheses*

The results of the regression analysis show that the use of self-assessment strategies influences positively perceived reading comprehension performance. The relationship was found to be statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. The level of explanation is 2.7%. That is, the use of self-assessment strategies explains 2.7% of the differences in perceived reading comprehension performance. The more students use self-assessment strategies, the better their self-perceived reading comprehension performance.

We can also state that the use of interpretation strategies influences positively perceived reading comprehension performance. The relationship was found to be statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. The level of explanation is 5.9%. The more students say they use interpretation strategies, the better their self-perceived reading comprehension performance.

Finally, the use of comprehension strategies influences positively perceived reading comprehension performance. The relationship was found to be statistically significant at

$p < 0.05$. The level of explanation is 1.3%. The more students use comprehension strategies, the better their self-perceived reading comprehension performance.

There is not any significant relationship between the use of strategies based on the use of external tools and perceived reading comprehension performance.

Finally, we analysed if there were any differences between male and female EFL students in their self-assessed strategy use. We analysed the data using ANOVA. The results obtained revealed statistically significant differences ($p < 0.005$) for the use of the following strategies: I take notes while reading to help me understand what I read.; I summarize what I read to reflect on important information in the text; and I underline or circle information in the text to help me remember it. Women tend to use these strategies more than men. They are all strategies based on the use of external tools.

4. CONCLUSION

The previously presented research has enabled us to conclude that different types of reading strategies influence self-perceived reading competence. The main conclusions we have arrived at after conducting the empirical study is that the use of self-assessment strategies, interpretation strategies and comprehension strategies influences positively perceived reading comprehension performance.

Moreover, we have found differences between male and female EFL students in their self-assessed strategy use. Women tend to use strategies based on the use of external tools more than men. This is the only type of strategies that does not influence self-perceived reading competence according to the results of our empirical study. Therefore we can see that women tend to use more those strategies which are less significant for reading performance.

The gender effect found in previous studies that shows that the females show greater awareness of reading strategies, that is, they report significantly higher frequency of strategy usage is now supported by the present work's results although only related to one type of strategies. The fact that this type of strategies is not significant for reading performance, according to the results of the statistical analysis, seems to show that women still tend to use tools as a result of education that are not useful in practice. As they have traditionally focused on some formal aspects, they consequently develop more these strategies based on the use of external tools which in themselves do not influence significantly reading performance.

We guess that this may have to do with self-esteem. Perhaps, women tended to undervalue their reading comprehension performance, which would indicate the need for a more objective dependent variable. Therefore, the next step would be to carry out again this study using a more objective measure of reading comprehension performance. This is the objective for another research work.

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