METACOGNITIVE AWARENESS OF READING STRATEGIES IN EFL CONTEXT

Serkan BOYRAZ
Ertan ALTINSOY

Abstract
It has been acknowledged that comprehending a text is a challenging process, as it requires a series of metacognitive strategies (Cubukcu, 2008). As academic achievement in a wide range of subject depends largely on the reading skill, it is critically significant for the students to be able to read critically and extract information from the text by executing the metacognitive strategies successfully. In this respect, this study aims to investigate university students’ metacognitive reading strategy awareness in academic context. The study employs the quantitative design and survey method and observes the level of using metacognitive reading strategies by 122 EFL student teachers who study at Aksaray University and were sampled through convenient sampling method. The data was collected through Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies inventory developed by Mokhtari and Reichard (2002) that consists of 30 items and three subscales, namely, global reading strategies, problem-solving reading strategies, and support reading strategies. According to the results, students that are in senior and prep level have a higher metacognitive awareness than the other levels, but the difference is not statistically significant. The most commonly used metacognitive reading strategy in all groups is PROB. Participants’ use of metacognitive reading strategies differs in a statistically significant way in terms of their plans on academic career.

Keywords: Reading strategies, Metacognitive awareness, EFL context

INTRODUCTION
McDonough, Shaw & Masuhara (2013) indicate that if foreign language learners need reading in the foreign language for their specialist subject but do not need to speak it, reading becomes the most important skill and Gilakjani & Ahmadi (2011) explain that this situation is common among foreign language learners. However, when it comes to the non-native teachers of English, they are supposed to master the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) at a level that they can effectively use and teach them to their students after completing their undergraduate studies. In Turkey, prospective teachers of English are placed in undergraduate level after taking only a written exam mainly based on vocabulary, grammar and reading. Therefore, their prior study at high school level also depends on the parts of English that are mentioned in the previous sentence. While this causes an insufficiency in writing, listening and speaking skills, these students are expected to have a high level of reading skill. The main issue in this

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2 Lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, Aksaray University, e-mail: serkan.boyraz@gmail.com
3 Lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, Aksaray University, e-mail: ertanaltinsoy@gmail.com
point is that students study reading through practicing reading passages to answer following multiple questions but not through cognitive and/or metacognitive reading strategies that are seen as the key for successful comprehension (Cubukcu, 2008). In short, ELT context in Turkey does not fit the expectations in terms of skill development through metacognitive strategies.

**Literature Review**

Reading is a major source for comprehensible input (Krashen, 1989), and as stated before, effective comprehension of the text is not an unconscious process. Recent literature emphasizes that reading is an “interactive process” that includes the interaction of four elements: the reader, the text, the fluent reading and strategic reading (Anderson, 2003; Constantinescu, 2007; Wooley, 2011, p. 15; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Successful comprehension depends on appropriate strategy use and directed cognitive effort as cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies and schemata that readers utilize play important roles in constructing meaning from text (Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass, & Gorsuch, 2004). Research have shown that successful readers know when and how to use these reading strategies efficiently (Brown & Briggs, 1989; Uzunçakmak, 2005; Yaemtui, 2015). Reading strategies show how readers approach a text, what textual cues they attend to, how they make sense of what they read, and what they do when they do not understand (Block, 1986).

Since reading comprehension has been distinctly important both in first and second/foreign languages, both cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies are of great interest in the field of reading research (Susser & Robb, 1990). The term “metacognition” has become an important research area and its applications in education continue to grow (Hacker, Dunlosky, & Graesser, 2009, p. 1). An old definition of the term by Flavell (1976, p. 232) explains it as “the active monitoring and consequent regulation and orchestration of one’s own cognitive processes in relation to the cognitive objects or data on which they bear, usually in the service of some concrete goal or objective.” Metacognitive strategies are different from cognitive ones as they can be used in multiple subject areas while cognitive strategies are more likely to be subject-specific (Ahmadi, Ismail, & Abdullah, 2013). While learning a foreign language, metacognitive strategies function to monitor or regulate cognitive strategies and they involve thinking about the learning process, planning for learning, monitoring of comprehension or production while it is taking place, and self-evaluation of learning after the language activity is completed (Skehan, 1993; as cited by Ozek & Civelek, 2006). Devine (1993) explains the difference between cognitive and metacognitive strategy use in reading with the following example: skimming a text for key information involves using a cognitive strategy, whereas assessing the effectiveness of skimming for gathering textual information would be a metacognitive strategy (cited by Akyel & Erçetin, 2009).

Reading research has also shed light on metacognitive awareness of reading strategies, perception of strategies, and strategy training and use in reading comprehension. Huang (1999) indicates that more proficient readers use more complex metacognitive processing strategies in reading more challenging texts to monitor their reading (cited by Huang, Chern, & Lin, 2009).

It is generally agreed that good language learner is someone who is metacognitively aware of the processes in language learning and uses metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies flexibly and effectively (Zhang, 2003). According to McKeown & Back (2009, p. 8), the connection between metacognition and reading comprehension is rooted in a good number of studies that search for a solution to the inadequate performance of students on various post-reading tasks which included even simple identifying the main idea tasks that is the core of reading. The researchers have agreed that efficient readers
are aware of their own comprehension and can monitor and control the process and as metacognitive strategies provide learners to have a control on their own learning process, they can become more successful readers by handling their understanding and utilizing appropriate strategies where necessary, rather than relying on the teacher direction (Yaylı, 2010). During reading, metacognitive processing is put into action through strategies, which are —procedural, purposeful, effortful, willful, essential, and facilitative in nature, and the reader must intentionally invoke strategies (Alexander & Jetton, 2000, p. 295), and does so to control and increase comprehension from text.

Metacognition helps students to be aware of what they have read and learned so that they succeed in text comprehension. According to O’Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Mazanares, Russo and Kupper (1985) if a learner does not use metacognitive approaches they might get lost on the way to understanding reading or might not re-evaluate their own progress, achievements and potential direction. Paris, Cross and Lipson (1984) add that only knowing strategies is not enough for readers to use them; instead they should understand the value or reason of using these strategies. If we want learners to be self-directed and independent readers, we should explain them how, when, and why to use various comprehension strategies. In general, the role of metacognition is to help students be aware of what they have read and learned to achieve text comprehension. O’Malley et al. (1985) say that learners who lack metacognitive approaches are those who have no direction or opportunity to reassess their progress, achievements and potential direction. Paris, Cross and Lipson (1984) believe that readers will not adopt and use actions as reading strategies if they do not understand the value or reason for doing so. Learners ought to be taught on how, when, and why to use various comprehension strategies so that they could become self-directed, independent readers (Fitrisia, Tan, & Yusuf, 2015). Meta-cognitively aware readers know what to do when they face difficulties in learning, they would use strategies for recognizing what to do. Metacognitive strategies explain one’s thinking and can aid better learning and developed performance, especially among students who try extremely hard to understand the written context (Ahmadi, Ismail, & Abdullah, 2013).

Research Questions

Based on the literature and context explained in introduction, the study aims to find answers to the following questions:

1. What reading strategies do English Language Teaching (ELT) students use when reading academic texts in English?

2. Is there a statistically significant difference among the grades in terms of exploited metacognitive reading strategies?

3. Is there a statistically significant difference in preferred reading strategies in terms of academic expectations?

Limitations of the Research

This study is limited to:

1. Data from the sample

2. Items in Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory (MARSI) Questionnaire

METHODOLOGY

The study employs quantitative design and survey method that is generally used to measure or evaluate the general characteristics of a topic, universe or program (Cohen,
Manion, & Morrison, 2007) and aims to gather people’s perceptions, opinions, attitudes, and beliefs about a current issue in education (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). The survey method was preferred for the study, as the participants were expected to explain their use of metacognitive reading strategy by themselves.

**Instrument**

The data was collected through Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory (MARSI) Questionnaire that was developed by Mokhtari and Reichard (2002), and consists of 30 items and three sub-dimensions, named as Global Reading Strategies (GLOB), Problem-Solving Strategies (PROB), and Support Reading Strategies (SUP). GLOB can be thought of as generalized or global reading strategies aimed at setting the stage for the reading act (e.g., setting a purpose for reading, previewing text content, predicting what the text is about, etc.) PROB are localized, focused problem solving or repair strategies used when problems develop in understanding textual information (e.g., checking one’s understanding upon encountering conflicting information, re-reading for better understanding, etc.). SUP involves using the support mechanisms or tools aimed at sustaining responsiveness to reading (e.g., use of reference materials like dictionaries and other support systems) (Karbalaei, 2010).

**Sampling**

The sampling was done through convenient sampling method and the participants were selected from students who were conveniently available to participate in the study. The data was collected from 122 ELT students who study at Aksaray University in 2016-2017 academic year and the demographic information about the participants is given in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prep</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>122</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The total number of participants is 122, and they are grouped into 5 grades. There are 34 students in prep (28%), 28 in freshman (23%), 17 in sophomore (14%), 25 in junior (20%) and 18 in senior (15%) level.

**FINDINGS**

This part reveals the qualitative data about the research questions and analysis results. The data shows participants’ metacognitive reading strategy awareness, type of metacognitive reading strategy that they use most and analysis results present if the participants statistically differ in strategy use in terms of their grade and academic plans.
As can be seen in Table 2, the highest metacognitive reading awareness is in junior group (X=109.36) and they are followed by prep (X=106.06). The means of the senior (X=103.67) and freshman (X=103.29) are close to each other and the lowest mean is in sophomore (X=97.82).

As presented in Table 3, PROB is the most commonly used strategy in all grades and in total, while it does not mean that the other two metacognitive reading strategies are not used. Students at prep level use GLOB (X=3.53) more commonly than SUP (X=3.25). At freshman level, use of SUP (X=3.27) is higher than GLOB (X=2.20). Sophomore group’s use of GLOB (X=3.22) and SUP (X=3.14) are close to each other. Junior students’ use of GLOB (X=3.59) and SUP (X=3.57) strategies is also close. At senior level, use of GLOB (X=3.52) is higher than SUP (X=3.14).

As the data for strategy use was not normally distributed, the difference in strategy use compared in terms of grade was tested through Kruskall Wallis test, and the results show that there is not a statistically significant difference (p=.238; p>.05) among the groups (Table 4).
Table 5. Strategies compared in terms of Academic Expectation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean Rank (MR)</th>
<th>Chi-Square</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NFS (1)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>54.45</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA (2)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>59.54</td>
<td>11.081</td>
<td>.004**</td>
<td>1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD (3)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>84.98</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>104.60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) No further studies; (2) Master of Arts; (3) Doctor of Philosophy

The participants were grouped into three, depending on their plans on academic studies in the future. While 53 participants (43%) indicate that they do not plan any further studies after completing their undergraduate degree, 49 (40%) plan to have an MA and 20 (17%) plan to have a PhD degree. As the data was not normally distributed, the difference among the three groups were tested through Kruskall Wallis test. When the three groups are compared in terms of metacognitive strategy use, there is a statistically significant difference between groups 1 (MR=54.45) and 3 (MR=84.98) and 2 (MR=59.54) and 3 (Table 5).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study reveal that ELT student teachers’ use of metacognitive reading strategies differ in terms of their level; however, the difference is not statistically significant. According to Oxford (1994), students’ strategy usage increases when they are in upper classes (cited by Gungör, 2005) and such a finding is revealed by Cogmen & Saracaloglu (2009) who studied education faculty students’ strategy use and found a significant difference in favor of fourth graders. While the participants might be expected to have higher levels of metacognitive strategy use as their grade increases due to the increasing need for reading effectively, the situation is nearly the opposite as prep students have higher use of the strategies, and it increases through the senior level except the juniors. This result is contradictory with the findings of Malcolm (2009) who studied with students at a medical university in Bahrain and used the same questionnaire (Marsi) in this study. Malcolm (2009) indicated an increased awareness of metacognitive strategy awareness over the years. Prep students have a “Reading” course in which they are taught reading strategies, and there is not such a course in the following years. As students are expected to use their knowledge on reading strategies from prep class while dealing with reading tasks, we can conclude that strategy use is limited to cognitive dimension instead of metacognitive. Razi (2008) also reveals that ELT students are more likely to use metacognitive reading strategies less compared to foreign language learners. In this regard, it is important to note that the reading strategy training does improve EFL college students’ reading proficiency (Song, 1998) although high metacognitive awareness does not always mean being a qualified reader (Monos, 2005).

Another finding indicates that participants are more likely to approach the reading tasks in a pragmatist way, as the most commonly used metacognitive reading strategy is problem-solving regardless of the grade. A similar result is observed in the study by Karbalaei (2010), who studied strategy use in EFL and ESL college student context, and reported that students select problem-solving strategies such as reading slowly and carefully, or re-reading for better understanding as the most used strategies. Their major requires ELT students to be high-achieving readers in English and the empirical research findings show that successful and less successful learners are different in strategy use.
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(Zhang, 2003), and research in second language reading has also demonstrated that strategy use is different in more and less proficient readers, and that more proficient readers use different types of strategies, and they use them in different ways (Song, 1998). Therefore, Huang, Chern, & Lin (2009) argue that the integration of strategy instruction into the reading classroom is essential, because students in general tend to use a fixed set of reading strategies that they have long been accustomed to regardless of the difficulty level of the text.

Finally, participants’ plans for further study creates a difference in their use of metacognitive reading strategies as the use increases in parallel to their expectation of MA or PhD degree. The difference between those who plan no further study and MA, and those who plan MA and PhD degree is statistically significant. We can conclude that students who expect a higher level of education deal with reading tasks in a more “metacognitively” approach.

For further studies, it might provide valuable information to compare reading achievements of ELT students who use different levels of metacognitive reading strategies. Similarly, researchers can carry out an experimental study in which experimental group receives a metacognitive reading strategy course but control group does not; then the effectiveness of the course can be checked through pre and post reading achievement tests.

REFERENCES


