materials. Instructions about reading comprehension strategies can be added into regular classroom activities in a natural, comfortable, but explicit way and students' knowledge of reading comprehension strategies as well as their effective use of such strategies can be evaluated and possibly corrected by the teachers. Since female students indicated to be higher strategy users, they might be able to help their male classmates in becoming better readers through activating appropriate strategies.

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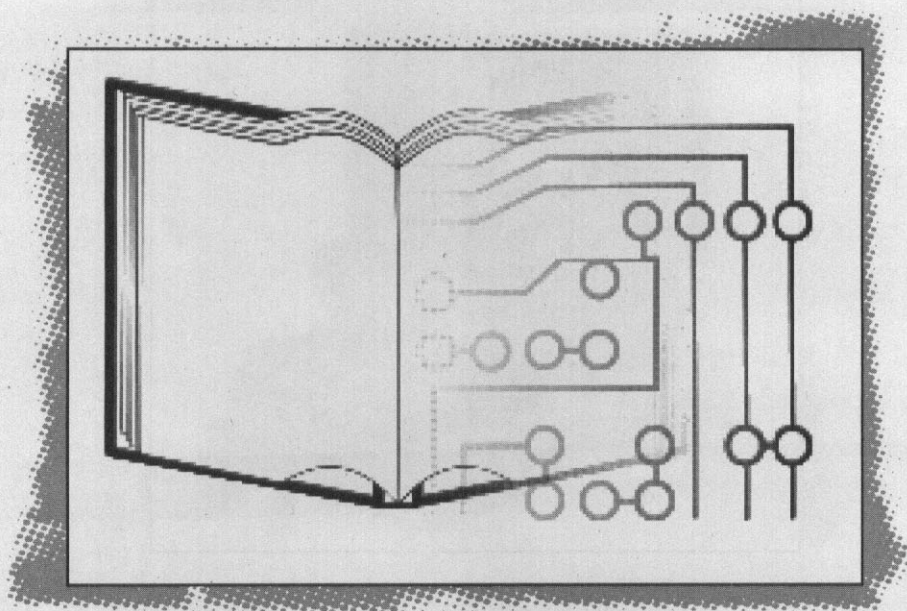
fact that exploiting reading comprehension strategies effect EFL learners' reading comprehension performance. In particular, cognitive strategies highly accounted for reading performance (beta equal to 0.45). This category of strategies includes integrating information, questioning information in the text, interpreting the text, paraphrasing, and so on. In contrast, metacognitive strategies had the least power of predicition on readers' reading performance (beta equal to 0.13). Nevertheless, what can be implied by an overall regression coefficient of 0.96 is that students' success in reading comprehension in this specific domain is obviously dependent on their using of RC strategies.

The fact, however, should not be ignored that other facotrs are involved in reading comprehension success. As Swanson (1999) states failure in reading comprehension is sometimes attributable to other factors such as lack of interest, lack of concentration, learners' characteristics (e. g., age, experiences, knowledge, intelligence) and intervention parameters (e. g., number of instructional sessions).

Conclusion

Research on learning strategies has been motivated, in part, by the desire to discover the factors that may help less effective learners. The present research intended to examine the relationship between EFL learners' level of English proficiency and gender and their reading comprehension strategy use on the one hand, and the impact of using RC strategy use on their reading performance on the other hand. Findings of the study indicated that, overall, females were higher users of RC strategies and that high proficient learners used more RC strategies. It was also found that RC strategies can be considered as a good predictor for EFL learners' reading performance. Of different categories of strategies, cognitive strategies had the highest rate of prediction; while metacognitive strategies had the least power of prediction for this domain of EFL learners.

Findings of the study are self-explanatory in emphasizing that instruction of reading comprehension strategies should form an essential part of reading comprehension courses and
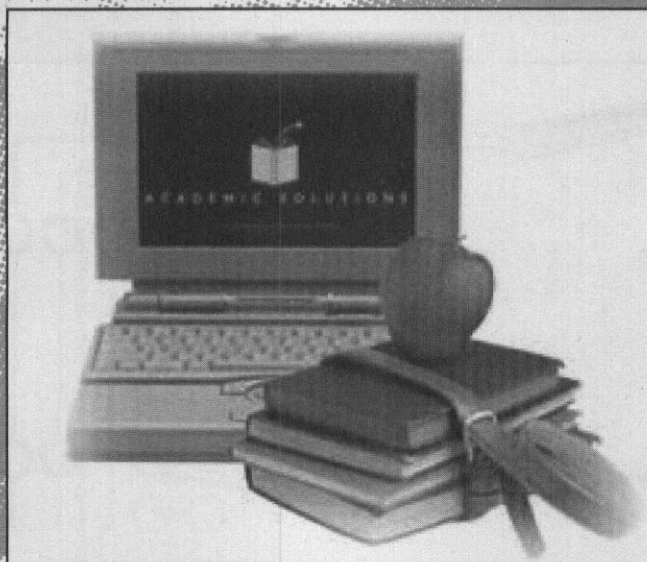
use, with females showing a greater tendency than males to engage in out of class social interactions. Also, McGroarty's study (1987) showed a gender difference in strategy use with the females using significantly more strategies than males. Table 2 also indicates that social strategies had the highest rate of usage (Males' mean=2.29, Females' mean=2.91). Using social strategies, students asked their teachers and other people including their classmates to clarify the parts or points in the texts for them which they had difficulty with. This might be an indication that social strategies were more familiar and feasible for the students. In contrast, metacognitive strategies had the lowest rate of usage (Females' mean= 2.1, Males' mean= 1.73), signaling that metacognitive strategies were unfamiliar and unknown to students. A major aspect of metacognition in reading is the awareness of the learner of his or her own characteristics, background knowledge, degree of interest, skills, and deficiencies, and of how these might affect their reading. Students' unfamiliarity with the above factors results in lower use of metacognitive strategies.

Another finding of this study was that high proficient students and low proficient ones were different in their use of strategies. The high proficient learners turned out to use a wider range of strategies as compared to low proficient students. Result of the One-Way ANOVA analysis and the Scheffe Test supports the fact that there is a strong relationship between reading strategies used by readers and their proficiency levels (F= 196.19, P<0.001). With this finding the second research hypothesis is refuted meaning that more proficient EFL students use more reading comprehension strategies. This finding of the study supports the earlier findings as reported by Barkon (1986) as he also inferred that adequate language proficiency largely leads readers' attention to text integration and comprehension. Also, it is in line with Schuller's (2000) findings which indicated that proficient language learners were aware of the strategies they used and that they could modify them according to task demands.

Results of the present study demonstrated that readers had developed strategies which could serve them in their reading comprehension performance. This finding also refutes the third research hypothesis of the study supporting the

Table 2: Independent t-test on different categories of strategies as reported by males and females

Reading strategies	Gender	Number	Mean	SD	df	t	Level of significance
Cognitive Strategies	Male	30	2.03	0.45	69	5.83	
	Female	41	2.62	0.42			0.001
Metacognitive Strategies	Male	30	1.73	0.45	69	4.14	
	Female	41	2.1	0.45			0.001
Affective Strategies	Male	30	1.93	0.98	69	4.15	
	Female	41	2.76	0.55			0.001
Social Strategies	Male	30	2.29	0.86	69	3.42	
	Female	41	2.91	0.56			0.001
Memory Strategies	Male	30	2.06	0.61	69	6.05	
	Female	41	2.48	0.41			0.001
General Fix-up Strategies	Male	30	1.94	0.67	69	2.85	
	Female	41	2.38	0.60			0.001
Comprehension Strategies	Male	30	1.95	0.54	69	4.63	
	Female	41	2.55	0.52			0.001

Table 3: Mean of strategy use among the three proficiency group for the seven categories of the strategies

	Low	Intermediate	High
Cognitive Strategies	1.91	2.34	2.87
Memory Strategies	1.95	2.54	2.98
Metacognitive Strategies	1.62	2.01	2.31
Social Strategies	2.05	2.8	3
Affective Strategies	1.78	2.54	2.8
Comprehension Strategies	1.85	2.33	2.67
Fixed-up Strategies	1.7	2.22	2.61

To find out the relationship between students' level of proficiency and their rate of strategy use, a one-way ANOVA was used. The result of the one-way ANOVA indicated that there was a significant difference of strategy use as related to students' level of proficiency. A Scheffe-Test showed that there was a significant difference among the three proficiency levels, namely, high, intermediate, and low, and the use of RC strategy use. That is, the higher the level of proficiency the more strategies were used. The same results were obtained for all the seven categories of strategies through ANOVA and subsequent Scheffe-tests. For cognitive and memory categories of strategies the difference was significant among all the three levels of proficiency; however, in the other five categories of strategies significant results were found only between intermediate and low and high and low groups. Table 3 shows the mean of strategy use for all the three levels of proficiency.

A Multiple Regression analysis was performed on the students' use of RC strategies and their scores on the reading comprehension test. The seven categories of reading comprehension strategies were considered as predicators for reading comprehension performance as a dependent variable. Findings from the Multiple Regression analysis suggested that one category of strategies, namely, cognitive strategies, significantly predicted the reading comprehension performance (beta was equal to 0.45). The regression coefficient of metacognitive strategies was 0.13 which was the least among the seven categories of strategies. The overall index of regression coefficient was equal to 0.96.

Discussion

As indicated in Table 1, females' mean of overall strategy use (2.4) was significantly higher than that of males' (1.90). This significant difference was further supported in Table 2 where females, compared with males, indicated to be better strategy users in all the categories. With this finding the first research hypothesis of the study is refuted indicating that female EFL learners use more RC strategies. This finding is in line with previous studies done by Politzer and McGroarty (1985) on French, Spanish and German students is that they also found sex differences in strategy

Method

Participants

Seventy-one sophomore students (41 female and 30 male) of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at one of the Iranian universities took part in this study voluntarily. They were all native speakers of Persian with the average age of 22. After graduation, most of these students hoped to teach English at Iranian schools.

Instruments

Data were collected through a RC questionnaire and students' performance on an English language proficiency test and a reading comprehension test.

The constructed reading comprehension questionnaire was based on Block's (1986), Ehrman and Oxford's (1990), and Oxford and Crookall's (1989) reading strategy inventories. Forty one strategies in seven categories were listed on the questionnaire for the students to report, using a Likert scale, the type of the strategies and the rate of their use while reading English texts. Also, an open-ended question was provided at the end of the questionnaire for the students to add any other strategies they used, but not included in the questionnaire. The reliability of the questionnaire was checked through Alpha Cronbach coefficient and was found to be 0.81. A copy of the RC strategy questionnaire is available upon request.

For the English proficiency test, the Oxford Placement Test (Allen, 1985) was used which consisted of 50 multiple choice questions. Students' scores on the test were used to divide them into different proficiency levels. We used the 27 percent of the top and low students to represent the high and low proficiency levels and the rest to represent the intermediate level.

The third instrument used in this study was a reading comprehension test constructed by the researchers which included 30 multiple choice items on five passages. Reliability of the test calculated through alpha coefficient was 0.80. The correlation between the students' scores on the reading comprehension test and that of Oxford Placement Test was 0.98 indicating a high criterion-related type of validity.

Results

Table 1 presents the results of an independent t-test on the overall pattern of strategies use by male and female students.

Table 1: Independent t-test on the males and females overall use of RC strategies

Gender	Number	Mean	SD	df	t	level of sig.
Male	30	1.90	0.23	69	10.84	0.0001
Female	41	2.40	0.20			

As Table 1 shows there was a significant difference between male and female students' use of reading comprehension strategies with female students using more strategies. Also, in order to compare students' use of strategies in each of the seven categories, independent t-tests were used for each category of strategies. As can be seen in Table 2, in all strategy categories female students indicated use of more strategies than male students. Table 2 also indicates that social strategies, one of the seven categories, had the highest mean while metacognitive strategies, one of the seven categories, had the highest mean while metacognitive strategies had the lowest mean for both male and female students.

aware of how or when to apply the knowledge they do have (Alderson, 2000). Nyikos and Oxford (1993) contended that in academic settings, learning strategies are technically defined as steps taken by learners to facilitate acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information. Several studies (see, for example, Forlizzi (1992); Barkon (1993); Jordan (1996); Zhang (2001); Sheoryey and Mikhtari (2001); Singhal, (2003) have studied the pattern of RC strategy use by language learners and discuss the importance of reading strategies in understanding the text, their effects in improving students' reading skill, and the relationship that the strategies have with some of the learner variables. According to Farrell (2001), studies in second language reading have shown that reading strategies cannot only be taught to students, but that their use will help students with their performance on tests of comprehension and recall.

As relates to the factors affecting the choice and rate of strategy use, Politzer and McGroarty (1985) indicated that many variables were influential in strategy use including professional interests, sex, motivation, course level, teaching methods, and study goal. Therefore, a given strategy is not intrinsically suitable for all situations, purposes, or people. They also found an intriguing sex difference in Language Learning Strategies (LLS) use, with females showing a greater propensity than males to engage in out of class social interactions.

Al-Melhi (2000) also conducted research on a group of fourth-year Saudi college students. This study examined the reported and actual reading strategies and the metacognitive awareness of a random sample of fourth-year Saudi college students as they read in English as a foreign language. Results of the study showed among other things, that some differences did exist between skilled and less-skilled readers in terms of their metacognitive awareness, their perception of a good reader, and their self-confidence as readers.

In brief, we can say that strategic competence and strategic processing is the ability to control and manage one's own cognitive activities in a reflective, purposeful fashion so that one can get the best from his/her language learning endeavors. In other words, strategic processing and metacognition can help learners overcome their comprehension problems.

Objectives of the study

Among various factors that may affect language learner's use of strategies, gender and level of proficiency have a major role in the learners' choice and frequency of strategy use. As such, the present research studied the relationship between EFL learners' gender and level of English proficiency and their use of reading comprehension strategies on the one hand, and the effect of RC strategy use on the students' reading performance. Drawing on the previous studies as a theoretical platform, the present study was inspired to particularly test the following research null hypotheses:

1) There is no significant difference in EFL male and female students' use of RC strategies.
2) There is no significant difference in EFL students' use of RC strategies as relates to their level of English proficiency.
3) EFL students' use of RC strategies does not have any significant effect on their reading performance.

sophomore students (30 male and 41 female) participated in the study. The required data for the study were collected through a questionnaire, an English proficiency test, and an English reading comprehension test. Students filled out a 41-item RC strategy questionnaire, and took proficiency and reading comprehension tests. Results of the study revealed that while both sexes used reading comprehension strategies, females indicated to be higher strategy users. It was also found that level of English proficiency had a significant effect on the rate of strategy use with more proficient students using more strategies. Also, results of a Multiple Regression indicated that RC strategy use accounted for 96 percent of reading performance indicating the importance of RC strategies. Based on the results of the study we can suggest that training and using reading comprehension strategies are included in EFL curriculum.

Key Words: *Reading comprehension strategies, Reading comprehension, Proficiency, Gender*

Introduction

Language learning strategies, in general, and reading comprehension strategies, in particular, have inspired a lot of empirical research in the last few decades. Findings of the empirical research have enhanced our understanding of this aspect of language learning and have enriched our pedagogical practices.

Of the four language skills, namely, listening, reading, speaking and writing, reading is extensively used by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, mostly in academic settings. University students need to have efficient reading skills and strategies to comprehend a large mass of materials both in their studies at university and at home. Viewing reading as a communicative process, Chastain (1988) argues that "language teachers shall encourage students to guess, to tolerate ambiguity, to link ideas, to paraphrase, and to summarize so that they stop dwelling in isolated words which often do not provide comprehension (p. 224)." This is a clear point of departure and a demand for going beyond the mere teaching of unknown words and grammatical structures in teaching reading to encourage students to use

strategies to become more proficient readers.

Strategic reading involves the use of techniques and clues in the process of deciphering meaning from the written text in an effective and efficient way. With regard to studies on reading comprehension, the following two issues seem crucial and are worth attending to:

1 Determining factors affecting EFL readers' use of reading comprehension strategies.
2 The rate of reading comprehension (RC) strategy use affecting reading comprehension performance.

The present study intended to attend to these two issues.

Background to the study

Comprehension strategies reveal a reader's resources for understanding. As Block (1986) contended, comprehension strategies indicate how readers conceive a task, what textual cues they attend to, how they make sense of what they read, and what they do when they do not understand. It is generally believed that poor readers do not possess knowledge of strategies, and are often not

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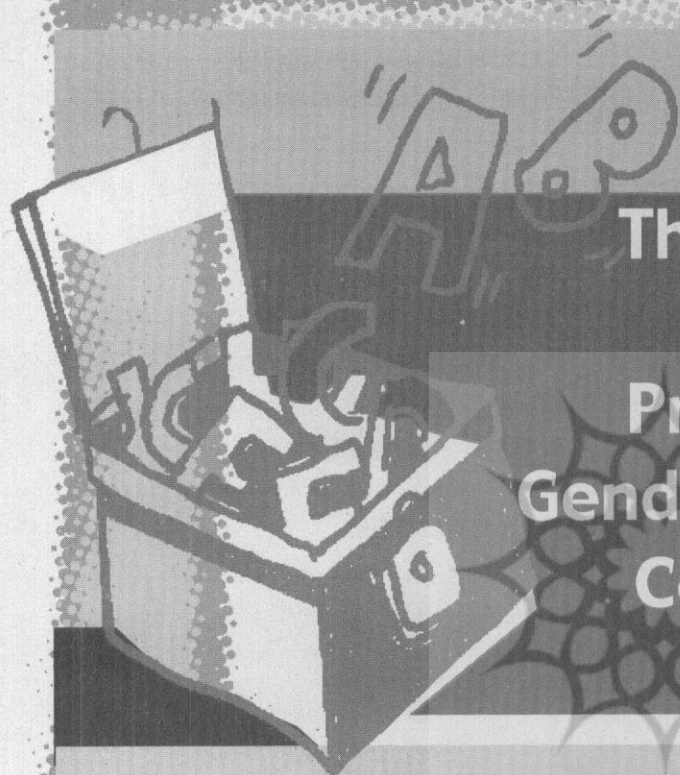
چکیده

تحقیق حاضر، تأثیر کاربرد راهبردهای درک مطلب، سطح بسندگی زبان انگلیسی و جنسیت زبان‌آموزان انگلیسی را روی میزان خواندن و درک مطلب آن‌ها در زبان انگلیسی مورد مطالعه قرار داد. ۷۱ نفر از فراگیران زبان انگلیسی (۴۱ دختر و ۳۰ پسر) از دانشجویان سال دوم، در این تحقیق شرکت کردند. اطلاعات مورد نیاز تحقیق با استفاده از سه ابزار جمع‌آوری اطلاعات به‌دست آمد. این دانشجویان پرسش‌نامه‌ای ۴۱ ماده‌ای را تکمیل و دو آزمون بسندگی انگلیسی و خواندن و درک مطلب انگلیسی را انجام دادند. نتایج تحقیق نشان داد، درحالی‌که هر دو گروه دختران و پسران از راهبردهای درک مطلب استفاده می‌کنند، میزان استفاده از این راهبردها توسط دختران بیشتر است. هم‌چنین، مشاهده شد که سطح بسندگی زبان تأثیر معناداری بر به‌کارگیری راهبردهای درک مطلب دارد؛ به‌نحوی که میزان استفاده‌ی دانشجویان با سطح بسندگی بالاتر از راهبردهای درک مطلب بیشتر بود. درنهایت نیز، نتایج رگرسیون نشان داد، کاربرد راهبردهای درک مطلب قادر به پیش‌بینی ۹۶ درصد از واریانس خواندن و درک مطلب هستند. این موضوع اهمیت استفاده از راهبردهای درک مطلب را نشان می‌دهد و لذا پیشنهاد می‌شود، آموزش و به‌کارگیری راهبردهای درک مطلب در برنامه‌ی درسی آموزش زبان انگلیسی گنجانده شود.

کلید واژگان: راهبردهای درک مطلب، درک مطلب، سطح بسندگی، جنسیت.

Abstract

This study examined the relationship between EFL learners' reading comprehension (RC) strategy use, level of proficiency, and gender and their reading performance in English. 71 Iranian EFL