

## Closing the Loopholes in Becoming Better Readers

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### ABSTRACT

*Students' comprehension of a text relies much on the strategies exploited during the session. The use of such strategies would enhance students' comprehension of the text, which, in turn helps them in their academic at large. This study aimed to investigate the reading strategies used by English as a Second Language (ESL) low achievers at tertiary level. Particularly, it aimed to identify the reading strategies frequently used by the respective ESL learners. Furthermore, it aimed to find out whether there was any significant difference in the type of strategies used by ESL low achievers? Forty undergraduate students were randomly selected as the respondents for this study. A twenty-eight-item questionnaire, which focused on the frequency of use of pre, while, and post-reading strategies was utilised in the study. It was found that ESL low achievers frequently used certain reading strategies to grab the meaning of the text. The ESL low achievers were also reported to significantly use while-reading strategies as their typical remark. The findings suggest that the use of proper reading strategies should be disclosed to students to help them enhance their reading comprehension and make them become effective readers.*

**Keywords:** reading strategies, ESL, reading comprehension

### Introduction

Strategy used is said to be the hallmark of efficient reading. Many empirical studies have linked success in reading to the quality and quantity of strategies used (Noli & Sabariah, 2011; Alderson, 2000; Oxford, 1990). It has been found that effective readers are more aware of strategy use than less effective readers (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002). This suggests that one needs to be a strategic reader to be an effective reader. Employing appropriate strategies is vital in construct meaning effectively from written texts.

It is crucial to offer a definition of reading strategies due to possible confusion as to what constitutes strategies. A series of characterization is offered by Ng (2005) whereby it embodies the much-argued notion of strategies in general as "techniques, tactics, potentially conscious plans, consciously employed operations, learning skills, functional skills, cognitive abilities, problem processing procedures". Referring to reading strategies in particular, Gardner (1983) extends that they are an action or sequence of actions used to create meaning.

There are two main theoretical models of reading that currently dominate the literature. These models, namely bottom up approach and top down approach or generally known as schema theory, place heavy emphasis on the importance of reading comprehension process (Goodman, 1990); *Bottom-up* Approach to Reading: The previously acquired knowledge structures (Schemata) are hierarchically organized from most general information at the top to most specific information at the bottom. *Top-down* Approach to Reading: by constructing background knowledge, including knowledge of language, with text information .

In relation to this, Gardner (1983) points out that human beings do not share the same types and levels of intelligence, which are referred to as 'multiple intelligences'. In other words, what is emphasised here are individual differences and abilities. Such emphasis is supported by Noli and Sabariah (2011) who state that a variety set of skills and preferred strategies are used by different learners to approach a task. In this light, this study attempts to find out the reading strategies used by English as a Second Language (ESL) low achievers at tertiary level.

## Objectives

1. To investigate the reading strategies frequently used by English as a Second Language (ESL) low achievers.
2. To identify whether there is any significant different in the type of strategies used by ESL low achievers.

## Methodology

Forty undergraduate students were randomly selected as the respondents for this study. The selection was based on their performance in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). A twenty-eight-item questionnaire, adapted from Salleh's questionnaire (2007) based on major reading strategies listed by Gardner (1983) which focused on the frequency of use of pre, while, and post-reading strategies was utilised in the study. The data from the questionnaire were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was run on the data to test for any significant difference in the types of reading strategies used within the ESL low achievers.

## Result and Discussion

### Pre-reading strategies frequently used by ESL low achievers

As can be seen in Table 1, the ESL low achievers tended to use pre-reading strategy S6 (mean=2.55) that is to think about the best way to understand a new chapter or a text. The ESL low achievers do plan on certain reading methods by 'thinking of the best way to understand a text' before actually reading them. In plain words, constructing meaning from texts can begin even before reading. They prepare themselves mentally as to obtain maximum understanding of the reading text and this method relates very much to the use of metacognitive strategies as quoted from Ng (2005) in which planning is considered as a crucial step before reading, other than monitoring and evaluating. In fact, these results challenge the claim made by Paris and Jacob (1984) that novice readers seem unaware of these strategies (i.e. planful thinking) and the need to use them in conducting reading sessions.

Table 1. Means of frequency of use of pre-reading strategies among the ESL low achievers

	Pre-reading strategies	Mean score of ESL low achievers	Rank
S1	I set my purpose for reading.	2.35	5
S2	I determine the points that I want to look for before reading a text.	2.45	3
S3	I scan through the chapter introduction/chapter summaries before reading the whole text.	2.40	4
S4	I ask a lot of WH-questions related to the subject matter to myself before I read.	2.30	6
S5	I predict the content of a text before reading it.	2.50	2
S6	When I start reading a new chapter or text, I first think about the best way to understand it.	2.55	1

### While-reading strategies frequently used by ESL low achievers

As shown in Table 2, the ESL low achievers tended to use while-reading strategies S19 'rereading difficult expressions and sentences'. This finding suggests that nearly all ESL low achievers reread sentences that they did not understand while reading a text. This may be a sign of a lack of tolerance of ambiguity among the participants. This observation actually strengthens the finding of Brown (2000), which revealed that the ability to tolerate ambiguity in any reading text portrays the characteristics of effective readers but not the weak readers.

Table 2. Mean of frequency of use of while-reading strategies among the ESL low achievers

	While-reading strategies	Mean score of ESL low achievers	Rank
S7	I give my complete attention as I read.	2.75	3
S8	As I read the text, I make notes simultaneously.	2.35	14
S9	I highlight main ideas as I read the text.	2.45	10
S10	I use different colours or highlighters to differentiate main ideas from supporting details.	2.00	16
S11	I imagine what I read	2.70	4
S12	I work through a chapter in a textbook item by item and I study each part separately.	2.40	12
S13	I repeat the main parts of a subject matter until I know them by heart.	2.45	11
S14	I try to find the key words of a text as I read.	2.60	6
S15	I do not proceed to the subsequent chapter until I have mastered the current chapter in detail.	2.40	13
S16	I try to see the connection between topics discussed in different chapters of a textbook.	2.55	9
S17	I try to construct an overall picture of a text for myself.	2.35	15
S18	When I am reading a topic, I try to think of cases I know from my own experience that are connected to that topic.	2.75	2
S19	When I don't understand an expression/ sentence, I read it again.	2.90	1
S20	I guess meanings of difficult words from contexts.	2.65	5
S21	I use dictionaries/ encyclopedias while reading.	2.55	7
S22	I communicate with myself as I read.	2.55	8

### Post-reading strategies frequently used by ESL low achievers

As seen in Table 3, the ESL low achievers preferred to use post-reading strategies S28 'recalling contents' (mean=2.95) but not in favour of S24 'finding other sources' (mean=2.60) and S25 'approaching lecturers for further explanation' (mean=2.65). The results also illustrate that the ESL low achievers did not have problem using the socioaffective strategy only if it involves their colleagues. However, if the strategy calls for engagement with lecturers (S25), they seem to avoid it. Thus, Cabral's (2002) statement that many students tend to stay away from interacting with teachers is again confirmed by the ESL low achievers as only 25% of them were frequently used the strategy. It is possible to say that colleagues are easier to relate to

whereby lecturer are regarded as somebody of higher authority and this perception eventually draws students away from lecturers.

Table 3 Means of frequency of use of post-reading strategies among the ESL low achievers

Item	Mean score of ESL low achievers	Rank
S23 I summarize the major ideas in a text after reading it.	2.30	4
S24 If I don't understand a text well, I try to find others sources (i.e. books, articles from websites, etc) about the subject concerned.	2.20	5
S25 If I don't understand a text well, I approach my lecturer for further explanation.	2.00	6
S26 I solve my doubts/exchange opinions with the people around me about the text that I read.	2.50	2
S27 When I have difficulty in understanding a text, I try to analyze why it is difficult for me.	2.45	3
S28 I try to recall what I have read.	2.60	1

#### Comparison in the use of pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading strategies used by the ESL low achievers

Table 4 and Table 5 present detailed information of the means and standard deviation of each type of strategy, and the result of the ANOVA, respectively.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of the ESL low achievers for pre, while, and post-reading strategies

Strategies	Mean	Std Deviation	Std Error
<b>Pre-reading</b> (n=120)	2.4250	.64381	.05076
<b>While-reading</b> (n=320)	2.5250	.51558	.61282
<b>Post-reading</b> (n=120)	2.3333	.44714	.66526
<b>Total</b> (n=560)	2.4625	.51385	.63473

Table 5. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) result for the ESL low achievers

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Between Strategies	3.421	2	1.710	4.295	.014*
Within Strategies	221.792	557	.398		
Total	225.212	559			

As shown in Table 5, the ANOVA results indicated that there was a significant difference [ $F(2, 557) = 4.29, p = 0.014$ ] in the use of reading strategies by the ESL low achievers at  $p \leq 0.05$  level of significance. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean frequency of use for while-reading strategies was significantly different from that of the post-reading strategies, in that the mean frequency of use of while-reading strategies was higher than post-reading strategies ( $\bar{X}_{\text{while}} = 2.52, \bar{X}_{\text{post}} = 2.33$ ). However, the post hoc Tukey HSD test did not reveal any significant difference between the pre-reading and while-reading strategies, or between the post-reading and pre-reading strategies. These results suggest that the while reading strategies were more frequently utilized by the ESL low achievers. These findings support the findings of an earlier study which illustrate that the use of strategies tended to differ according to the readers' learning stages (Takeuchi, 2002).

## Conclusion

It was found that ESL low achievers frequently used certain reading strategies to grab the meaning of the text. The ESL low achievers were also reported to significantly use while-reading strategies as their typical remark which does not help them much in being better readers. The findings suggest that the use of appropriate reading strategies should be exposed to students to help them enhance their comprehension of a reading text and make them become better readers.

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