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THE EXPLORATION OF VARIABLES AFFECTING THE USE OF READING STRATEGIES IN ESP EDUCATION

Abstract: This study delves into variables influencing the use of reading strategies, which belong to the wider concept of language learning strategies (LLS) within the realm of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) education. There are numerous influential variables affecting the use of these strategies, encompassing motivation, learner characteristics (including language competence reflected in test results and years of studying English), instructional methodologies, and contextual elements. By thoroughly exploring well-studied variables like age, gender, and language proficiency, this research aims to discern the multifaceted dynamics that shape the integration and effectiveness of LLS in ESP learning environments. The study endeavors to offer insights into optimizing the application of reading strategies tailored to the specific needs and contexts of ESP students. The respondents in this study were ESP students who completed the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS). Consequently, the findings of this study could be utilized to upgrade ESP education.

Keywords: variables, reading strategies, language learning strategies, ESP

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's global world, students are not only expected to learn, but they are also expected to know how to learn. The importance of developing both knowledge and the ability to learn effectively in a rapidly changing, interconnected world implies that students are expected to acquire knowledge and skills in various fields. Equally, they must develop the ability to identify and apply effective strategies, adapt to new challenges, and manage their learning processes independently. Accordingly, the modern world demands continuous learning due to advancements in technology, industries, and communication.

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Knowing how to learn equips students to remain adaptable and relevant in this dynamic environment.

Being able to learn independently enables them to navigate these complexities effectively and develop skills beyond what is taught in formal education. Therefore, dual responsibility of mastering subject matter while also becoming proactive, self-directed learners prepared for the challenges of the modern world. Learning strategies belong to those skills required for global communication.

Reading strategies (RS) refer to specific actions that students undertake to improve their reading comprehension or to achieve particular reading objectives. These strategies fall under the broader category of language learning strategies (LLS), which are, in turn, a part of the overall learning strategies, regarded as steps, tools, behaviors, thoughts, mental operations, or actions aimed at enhancing one's learning process. They help individuals comprehend, learn, or retain new information (O'Malley and Chamot 1990, 1). The utilization of these strategies is influenced by a variety of factors that significantly affect their application. Numerous elements shape the exploration of reading strategies, including motivation, learner characteristics (such as language proficiency indicated by assessment results and duration of studying English), teaching methods, and contextual factors, which encompass the differences between mandatory and optional courses, among others. This paper examines the variables that affect the use of reading strategies in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) education.

By thoroughly investigating well-established factors like age, gender, and language proficiency, this research seeks to understand the complex dynamics that influence the incorporation and efficacy of language learning strategies in ESP educational settings. Through this exploration, the study aims to provide insights for optimizing the use of reading strategies tailored to the specific needs and contexts of ESP learners, thereby promoting improved language acquisition and proficiency in specialized fields. The participants in this study were ESP students who completed the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS). As a result, the findings from this research could be used to enhance ESP educational practices.

2. READING STRATEGIES

As a subset of language learning strategies, reading strategies consist of specific conscious or subconscious efforts students make to enhance their reading comprehension and overall language acquisition. These encompass tools, techniques, thoughts, behaviors, activities, or steps that students undertake to improve their learning process. O'Malley and Chamot (1990:1) underscore that language learning strategies are special thoughts and/or actions individuals use for understanding, learning, and memorizing new information. In contrast, Cohen (2011) considers them as processes consciously selected by learners and/or actions taken to enhance second language acquisition (SLA) by means

of storage, retention, recall, and application of information about second or foreign language learning. Furthermore, students mainly use language learning strategies in order to improve their communicative competence (Ellis 1994, 696).

However, there isn't a unanimous definition of language learning strategies. Scholars and researchers have not agreed on one universal or standardized definition for the term. Instead, various definitions exist, reflecting different perspectives, frameworks, and approaches in the field of language learning. These differences arise because language learning strategies are a multifaceted concept, encompassing cognitive, metacognitive, social, and affective dimensions, and researchers prioritize different aspects based on their theoretical orientations and research goals.

In general, Oxford (1990) defines language learning strategies as specific actions taken by learners to make language learning easier, more effective, and more enjoyable, while O'Malley and Chamot (1990) describe them as techniques, approaches, or deliberate actions that learners use to facilitate the comprehension, retention, and retrieval of new information. Each definition emphasizes different aspects, such as learner autonomy, effectiveness, or the process of learning itself, contributing to the lack of a singular, universally accepted definition.

Language learning strategies are categorized into cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies (O'Malley and Chamot 1990). Cognitive strategies involve mental operations, while metacognitive strategies focus on reflecting on the learning process, including its planning, regulation, and evaluation. Social strategies emphasize collaboration with others, whereas affective strategies address managing emotions, such as techniques to reduce anxiety during learning.

Based on language skills, they can also be divided into reading strategies, writing strategies, listening strategies, and speaking strategies, as well as vocabulary learning strategies. Strategy use, on the other hand, is typically assessed using Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford 1990, 1992).

Students can improve their achievements in language learning through the effective use of strategies, as suggested by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2011), and a number of research studies (Cohen and Macaro, 2007). Moreover, the concept of language learning strategies (LLS) is closely linked to learner-centered approach, learner autonomy, and self-directed language learning. Since language learning is a continuous process, the development of language skills, communicative competence, and application of language learning strategies extends beyond classroom activities and continues after passing exams, as a part of lifelong learning.

Language learners who consciously implement and coordinate effective strategies, adjusting them according to the learning task at hand, exhibit metacognitive awareness regarding their strategy use. Metacognition is mainly

used as an umbrella term for metacognitive strategies, metacognitive knowledge, and metacognitive awareness. Hence, metacognitive awareness is concerned with being able to reflect on one's own learning process, involving self-regulated learning skills, such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating progress achieved in learning. Furthermore, learners who possess metacognitive awareness are considered to be strategic learners with metacognitive knowledge about themselves as learners, or insight into their learning approaches and reflections on the learning process.

Reading is a highly complex language skill that entails a series of complex cognitive operations involving both low-level processes of word recognition and high-level processing of ideas, where readers connect what they read with their existing knowledge to interpret meaning (Koda 2005). Therefore, reading is an active cognitive process of meaning construction, as well as a social process in which the writer conveys ideas that the reader subsequently decodes (Nunan 1999).

The primary aim of reading is text comprehension. Additionally, there are specific reading objectives, such as understanding the main idea or extracting particular information from the text. In that respect, students need to deploy various reading strategies, ranging from local strategies, such as inferring the meanings of unfamiliar words from context, to global strategies, including previewing and identifying the author's intentions, in order to develop into strategic readers (Grabe 2007).

2.1. Factors affecting strategy use

The use of language learning strategies is impacted by various factors, or variables, that shape how learners approach the process of acquiring a new language. These factors are crucial in understanding individual differences among learners and in designing effective instructional methods. Factors that affect strategy use include age, gender, learning style, motivation, teachers' requirements, and the purpose of the learning (Oxford 1990, 13).

Numerous studies have shown that gender plays a significant role in the choice and frequency of language learning strategies. Research indicates that female learners tend to use a wider range of strategies compared to their male counterparts (Oxford 1990, Griffiths 2003). Females are often reported to employ more social and affective strategies, as they generally emphasize collaboration and emotional management in learning, whereas males may rely more on cognitive strategies.

Age is another critical variable influencing strategy use. Younger learners often utilize strategies more intuitively, while older learners tend to adopt metacognitive strategies, reflecting their ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning process (Griffiths 2008). Adults, with their developed cognitive skills, often focus on strategies that involve problem-solving and inferencing, making them adept at handling complex linguistic tasks.

Proficiency level also significantly affects the selection of strategies. Learners with higher proficiency are more likely to use metacognitive strategies, such as self-monitoring and evaluating their performance, or cognitive strategies like summarizing and analyzing. In contrast, lower-proficiency learners may focus more on memory-based strategies, such as repetition and rote learning (Chamot 2005).

Motivation is a powerful determinant of strategic behaviour as highly motivated learners tend to employ a greater variety of strategies and use them more frequently than less motivated learners (Dörnyei 2001). For instance, intrinsically motivated learners may be more likely to adopt strategies that promote deep learning and long-term retention, such as elaboration and critical thinking.

Cultural norms and expectations significantly shape learners' strategic preferences. Learners from collectivist cultures, such as many Asian societies, often favor social and memory strategies that align with group-oriented learning environments. In contrast, learners from individualist cultures may prioritize metacognitive and cognitive strategies that emphasize independent learning (Oxford and Burry-Stock 1995).

The context in which learning occurs also influences strategy use. Formal learning environments, especially classrooms, encourage the use of strategies that align with instructional goals, such as note-taking and test preparation. On the other hand, informal settings might promote the use of communication strategies, such as guessing the meaning from context or other knowledge sources, or asking for clarification, as students engage in real-world language use (Chamot 2005).

In addition, individual personality traits, such as extroversion, openness or conscientiousness, have been linked to the use of specific strategies. Extroverted learners, for example, are more likely to employ social strategies, while conscientious learners often excel in organizing and planning their learning activities (MacIntyre and Noels 1996).

Emotions are seen as another factor that affects students' strategic behaviour. In that sense, students with lower levels of anxiety tend to use strategies more effectively, as excessive anxiety can hinder cognitive processing and strategy application. Affective strategies, such as relaxation techniques and self-encouragement, can help mitigate the negative effects of anxiety and thus enhance learning outcomes (Oxford 1990).

3. METHODOLOGY

The research aims to identify and examine factors, including learner characteristics, gender, age, and linguistic competence, that impact the use of strategies. In that sense, language competence is usually analyzed by means of the number of years of learning English as a foreign language or high school grades.

The participants in this study were ESP students who completed the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) (Mokhtari and Sheorey 2002). Initially, the strategic behaviors of students will be investigated through responses to the questionnaire. Following this, the relationship between the frequency of strategy use and other variables, such as gender and age, will be explored.

The hypothesis is that there are differences in strategy use based on gender, age, and linguistic competence. Thus, the research objectives are to examine the correlation between the frequency of strategy use and variables like gender, age and high school grades, and descriptive statistics is being applied to meet these objectives.

The study sample consisted of 150 first-year ESP students. This sample included 150 participants ($N=150$), with 70 male (46.7%) and 79 female (52.7%) participants. One participant did not provide their gender. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 28, with an average age of 19.35 ($M=19.35$, $SD=1.322$). The average high school grade of the participants at the end of their fourth year of secondary school was 3.76 ($M=3.76$, $SD=0.968$), which may serve as the indicator of their level of language competence.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Survey of Reading Strategies (Mokhtari and Sheorey 2002), used to assess students' metacognitive awareness of the reading strategies, includes 30 statements. These strategies are categorized into three types: global reading strategies, problem-solving strategies, and support reading strategies. Participants rated their use of strategies using a Likert scale, with five response options ranging from "always" to "never."

The findings, as presented in Table 1, show that reading strategies are used to a moderate extent by the respondents. Problem-solving strategies are the most frequently used, as indicated by the arithmetic mean ($AM = 3.23$). One key strategy within the problem-solving reading strategies is inferring the meaning of unfamiliar words from context. In that sense, Nassaji (2004, 107) established a link between the depth of lexical knowledge, as a factor enhancing the effective use of inferencing strategies, and students' success in making inferences and employing specific strategies, such as evaluation. This supports the conclusion that inferencing is a meaning-construction process that relies on the richness of a student's semantic system (Nassaji 2004).

On the other hand, support strategies exhibit the lowest standard deviation (SD), indicating the least variation in students' responses.

Table 1. Groups of reading strategies

Groups	AM	SD
Global reading strategies	3.15	.779
Problem solving strategies	3.23	.843
Support reading strategies	3.21	.768
Overall reading strategies	3.19	.733

In Table 2, students’ strategic behaviour is displayed. The frequency of global reading strategies, depicted through Arithmetic mean (AM), shows that they are moderately used by most respondents, Therefore, it entails that strategic instruction would help ESP students to develop useful strategies that could help them solve both global and specific reading tasks.

Table 2. Global reading strategies

Category	No.	Strategy	AM	SD
GLOB	1	I have a purpose in mind when I read.	3.64	1.239
GLOB	24	I try to guess what the content of the text is about when I read.	3.59	1.127
GLOB	3	I think about what I know to help me understand what I read.	3.56	1.141
GLOB	4	I take an overall view of the text to see what it is about before reading it.	3.45	1.277
GLOB	12	When reading, I decide what to read closely and what to ignore.	3.41	1.281
GLOB	23	I check my understanding when I come across new information.	3.34	1.076
GLOB	17	I use context clues to help me better understand what I am reading.	3.24	1.097
GLOB	8	I review the text first by noting its characteristics like length and organization.	3.17	1.308

GLOB	27	I check to see if my guesses about the text are right or wrong.	3.15	1.123
GLOB	6	I think about whether the content of the text fits my reading purpose.	3.02	1.155
GLOB	15	I use tables, figures, and pictures in text to increase my understanding.	2.94	1.327
GLOB	21	I critically analyze and evaluate the information presented in the text.	2.72	1.085
GLOB	20	I use typographical features like bold face and italics to identify key information.	2.63	1.232

4.1. Gender-related variations in strategy use

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for strategy use among male and female respondents. AMm represents the arithmetic mean for male students, while AMf represents the arithmetic mean for female students. The findings indicate that both male and female students rely on guessing strategies more frequently than using dictionaries in their strategic behaviour. In this context, guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words, also referred to as lexical inferencing, serves as both a reading strategy and a vocabulary learning strategy. It helps students determine when to consult a dictionary, when to infer the word's meaning from the context, and when to skip it and continue reading, depending on the significance of the given word for meaning comprehension.

Table 3. Gender-related variations

Reading Strategy	AMm	SDm	AMf	SDf
I use reference materials (e.g. a dictionary) to help me understand what I read. SUP	3.16	1.33	3.54	1.10
I use context clues to help me better understand what I am reading. GLOB	3.47	1.06	3.89	1.03
I try to guess what the content of the text is about when I read. GLOB	3.53	0.99	4.00	1.09
I check to see if my guesses about the text are right or wrong. GLOB	3.37	1.22	3.43	1.14
When I read, I guess the meaning of unknown words or phrases. PROB	3.57	1.19	3.75	0.97

Statistical differences in strategy use based on gender were examined. The Mann-Whitney U test was applied to each questionnaire item to identify potential gender-based variations, analyzing both individual strategies and groups of reading strategies.

A significant difference between male and female participants was observed for the statement: "I think about what I already know to help me understand what I have read" ($Z = -2.523$, $U = 2123.00$). This strategy involves using prior or general knowledge about the subject of the text, which is essential for drawing conclusions and interpreting the content. Male participants ($AM = 3.81$, $SD = 1.107$) reported using this strategy more frequently than female participants ($AM = 3.34$, $SD = 1.142$).

The hypothesis regarding a correlation between gender and the frequency of strategy use was confirmed. However, since this was the only significant gender-based difference identified, the study did not find substantial differences in strategy selection overall.

Accordingly, research by Maubach and Morgan (2001) does not suggest that biological factors significantly impact foreign language learning abilities. Yet, many studies, such as Griffiths (2003), have reported gender-based differences in language learning strategy use. Additionally, Oxford and Nyikos (1989) conducted a study with 1,200 students, finding that female students were more likely to employ formal rule practice, general learning strategies, and social strategies aimed at acquiring input during oral communication.

4.2. Variations in strategy use based on linguistic competence and age-related variations

The correlation between reading strategies and given variables was examined by means of Spearman's correlation coefficient. This analysis aimed to determine whether there was a connection between the reading strategies students use and factors such as students' age and their final English grade at the end of their fourth year of high school. Only statistically significant correlations were determined, those with a p-value less than 0.05. In some cases, if the p-value is below 0.00, the statistical significance is exceptionally high.

High school grades regarded an indicator of language competence correlated with the use of bilingual dictionaries and guessing word meanings from context. Students with higher levels of language competence reported using these strategies more frequently, and statistical significance confirmed their impact on the process of making inferences.

In terms of age as a factor affecting strategic behaviour, statistical significance was identified in one reading strategy: "When the text becomes difficult to understand, I pay more attention to what I am reading." Older participants reported using this strategy more frequently, which indicated that they managed challenging texts more effectively. Additionally, problem-solving strategies showed a weak positive correlation with participants' age.

The impact of age on language learning is often linked to the critical period hypothesis, which suggests that language acquisition is most effective during a specific developmental stage. However, adults can excel in certain aspects of language learning, as their success is influenced by their level of cognitive development (Griffiths 2003).

Since the participants in this study were of similar age, and comparisons were not made between distinct age groups (e.g., children, adolescents, and adults), age was not a significant variable for the pedagogical intervention, proposed to follow and complement this research.

5. CONCLUSION AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The initial hypothesis about the correlation between gender, age and high school grades, on one hand, and reading strategies employed by participants, on the other one, has been confirmed. The pedagogical implications of the study suggest that the findings could enhance ESP education by improving the ESP teaching process.

The results of this study highlight that students can benefit from explicit instruction or knowledge about reading strategies through strategic input, as the use of language learning strategies, including reading strategies, is tied to their academic success. Accordingly, ESP teachers should adopt a flexible, student-centered approach.

In a globalized world, students interact with diverse cultures, languages, and perspectives. Thus, students are expected to learn, but they are also expected to know how to learn. Students who are metacognitively aware of their strategic behavior understand how it influences learning outcomes. Teaching students language learning strategies, referred to as strategic training by Oxford (1990), or strategies-based instruction (SBI) by Cohen (2011), emphasizes the effective application of strategies in various contexts where they serve their intended purpose. This enables students to efficiently use available information to master material more easily and to overcome specific learning goals.

Students can be taught language learning strategies either explicitly or implicitly, within specific teaching activities. However, research has shown that explicit instruction is more effective (Chamot 2005).

The steps for explicit strategic training, as proposed by Oxford (1990) comprise: identifying students' needs and available time; selecting appropriate strategies; adopting an integrated approach to strategy instruction; fostering motivation; preparing materials and activities for implementation; conducting the instruction; and, finally, evaluating the teaching process and reviewing the material learned. Conversely, the SBI model, as outlined by Chamot et al. (1999), consists of several stages: preparation, which involves activating prior or background knowledge; presentation, where the teacher explains the strategy model; practice, during which the teacher introduces strategies, provides

feedback, and guides students in applying them; and evaluation and expansion, which is the final stage that transitions responsibility to the students. At this point, students summarize, assess, and independently implement the strategies, transferring their use of strategies to new tasks.

At the preparation stage, the teacher explicitly explains what the strategy is and when it is beneficial. Then they demonstrate how to apply the strategy. Namely, the teacher models how to apply the strategy in real-time by working through examples. After modeling, the teacher provides opportunities for students to practice using the strategy under their guidance. Feedback is given as students attempt to apply the strategy, ensuring they are on the right track and correcting errors. Once students become familiar with the strategy, they are encouraged to apply it independently in various situations. The goal is to build autonomy and ensure the strategy becomes a habitual part of their learning process.

Regarding reading skills, students should understand that knowing the meaning of every word in a text is not necessary to grasp its overall meaning or message. Therefore, they should make thoughtful decisions about when to look up the meaning of an unfamiliar word, focusing only on those crucial for understanding the text's main message.

In this context, strategic interventions led by teachers, involving explicit teaching of reading strategies, could be incorporated into ESP instruction. Teaching students language learning strategies to enhance their metacognitive awareness helps them independently apply the knowledge they acquire.

Targeted strategic interventions by teachers have the potential to optimize the use of strategies based on students' needs, thereby enhancing learning outcomes. Teachers should consider the specific needs and characteristics of their students when planning lessons. For example, older students or those with higher language competence may benefit from strategies that promote deeper information processing and inference-making. Conversely, other students might require more support with basic strategies, such as skimming techniques for identifying key details or understanding the overall message of a text.

The use of language learning strategies is shaped by a complex interrelation of factors, including gender, age, proficiency level, motivation, cultural background, learning environment, personality traits, and emotional factors. Understanding these variables can help educators design targeted interventions and create supportive environments that foster effective strategy use, ultimately enhancing language learning outcomes. Further research is essential to explore how these factors interact and influence strategy use across diverse learner populations

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ИСПИТИВАЊЕ ВАРИЈАБЛИ КОЈЕ УТИЧУ НА УПОТРЕБУ СТРАТЕГИЈА ЧИТАЊА У НАСТАВИ ЕНГЛЕСКОГ ЈЕЗИКА СТРУКЕ

Резиме

Ова студија се бави варијаблама које утичу на употребу стратегија читања, које припадају ширем концепту стратегија учења језика, и то у области наставе енглеског језика струке. Постоје бројне варијабле које утичу на употребу стратегија, укључујући мотивацију, карактеристике ученика (укључујући језичку компетенцију које се огледа у резултатима тестова и дужини учења енглеског као страног језика), методологију наставе и контекстуалне елементе. Темељним истраживањем изучаваних варијабли као што су старост, пол и језичка компетенција, ово истраживање има за циљ да препозна вишеструку динамику која обликује интеграцију и ефикасност стратегија учења у енглеском језику струке. Студија настоји да понуди увид у оптимизацију примене стратегија читања прилагођених специфичним потребама студената у контексту енглеског језика струке. Испитаници у овој студији били су студенти енглеског језика струке који су попунили Упитник о стратегијама читања. Након тога, испитиване су корелације између употребе стратегија и датих фактора, односно варијабли. У складу с тим, резултати истраживања би могли бити искоришћени за унапређење наставе енглеског језика струке.

Кључне речи: варијабле, стратегије читања, стратегије учења језика, енглески језик струке