



Language Learning Strategies Used by the Turkish EFL Learners to Improve their Reading Skill

Burak Tomak 

Dr. Lecturer, Marmara University, Turkey, buraktomak@marmara.edu.tr

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated strategies of the learners who started their learning process from A1 level to improve their reading skill. 10 different students were chosen considering their range of learner profiles. Thus, 3 of them were chosen from high-achievers, whereas 3 of them were chosen among low-achievers. The other 4 students were among the ones whose success level was on average. These students were interviewed at the end of the first term when they were supposed to complete the A2 level. Additionally, they were taken to think-aloud-protocols right after the interviews to evaluate their reading performance and to monitor what kind of strategies they were using to do the tasks given to them and to check whether they were doing what they had said in the interviews. The same procedure, which included the interviews and think-aloud protocols, were applied at the end of the second semester. It was found that in the second term the hardworking group changed the strategies that they had been using in the first term, Changes in learners' responsibilities whereas there seemed to be no change in the strategies used by the other group members.

Keywords

language learning strategies,
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Introduction

The changes in the language classroom and the philosophy of language teaching and learning require learners to think about their own learning process and take over the responsibility of it. The focus on individual learners and the choices they make as well as the responsibilities that they have to take have all been a pervasive influence on language learning and teaching for more than three decades (Brindley, 1989; Holec, 1981, 1987; Holec *et al.*, 1996; Nunan, 1988; Rubin, 1975; Tudor, 1996).

These new trends in the field which make individual learners more responsible for their own learning have led to individual language learning. White (2008) has come up with some of its principles: optimizing or extending learner choice, focusing on the needs of individual learners, not the interests of a teacher or an institution, and the diffusion of decision-making to learners. Thus, independent language learning means more learner-centered language learning which pays attention to the needs and right of language learners. They should be provided with the options considering their needs, preferences and the language level so that they will be able to make their own choices for on their learning as

Anderson and Garrison (1998) have suggested. Therefore, Dickinson (1994) argues that the most effective way of creating such an independent language learning environment is for the teachers to get their learners think about their needs and the objectives that they have to accomplish.

When learners think about their needs, they will decide upon their own choices that will bring the success that they have been seeking for. Thus, good language learners should be the one that makes up his/her mind to find the right path that will take him/her to the goals that s/he has set in his/her mind. Chapelle and Roberts (1986) assert that good language learners are more flexible so they can make some adaptations in terms of their learning style to fit a learning task or purpose, while poor language learners rigidly refuse to change their learning styles, no matter what the task or purpose is.

As learners become more independent in their language learning journey, this might mean that they will be more autonomous. However, there is a slight difference between these two terms. Little (1991) thinks that autonomy emphasizes interdependence over independence. Dickinson (1994) makes a sharp distinction between these two concepts. He relates independence to responsibility of one's own learning whereas autonomy requires a person to learn alone. Littlewood (1997) defines autonomy as "an ability to operate independently with the language and use it to communicate personal meanings in real, unpredictable situations" (p. 81). Thus, this means that students should be studying more independently to be an autonomous learner. In this study, it was investigated what learners were doing to improve their reading and writing skills taking over the responsibility of their own learning with the help of the learning strategies that they had been using.

Learning Strategies

The importance of learning strategies has become more apparent as learners are now more responsible for their own learning process. Peculea and Bocos (2015) elaborate on the significance of learning strategies by saying:

The interest of education in learning strategies has increased due to the innovative concept of competencies; in fact, the strategies are considered part of the resources that the student should engage in order to put in practice the competences. The learning to learn ability that is to become autonomous, independently in the learning is often valorized in the pedagogy of competencies (p.16).

According to Weinstein et al. (2000), learning strategies are "any thought, behaviors, beliefs, or emotions that facilitate the acquisition, understanding, or later transfer of new knowledge and skills" (p. 727). Thus, learning strategies, plans or steps taken in an organized way, facilitate learning and they can be considered as a psychological gateway to L2 learner autonomy (Dickinson, 1992; Littlewood, 1996; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991). It is necessary for learners who can be identified as "autonomous students" to do self-evaluation, organization, goal-setting, planning, information-seeking, record-keeping, self-monitoring, environmental structuring, giving oneself consequences for performance, rehearsing, memorizing, seeking social assistance, and reviewing (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1988, 1990).

Learning strategies are a good indication for whether the learner is autonomous or not but if the learners are using the strategies just to pass tests or exams instead of learning

the language or as a tool to facilitate their learning language, it means that they are not using learning strategies in the deep sense (Oxford, 2008). Learning strategies cannot be thought in that simple way. They are the clues that show learners the path that they will follow and gain the benefits in the long run. As long as they make use of the strategies in an efficient way, the strategies will have an effect on their language performance, achievement, proficiency, and autonomy beliefs (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995; Pressley & Woloshyn, 1995). Therefore, it is really vital for learners to be better able to make use of learning strategies in language learning process. They can learn strategies with strategy training that can be given by their teachers so that they will improve their sense of agency, self-efficacy judgments, motivation, confidence, and L2 performance (Chamot & O'Malley, 1996; Chamot et al., 1999; Dadour & Robbins, 1996; Oxford & Leaver, 1996). The efficient use of strategies has a significant effect on the improvement of language skills like reading and writing so that they are in a way interconnected.

The purpose of the study

This study was conducted to determine the strategies used by the Turkish EFL learners who started their language learning from A1 (beginner) level and whether the strategies used by different learner profiles worked well as for the development of their reading skill.

This study aims to answer these questions:

- 1) What strategies did learners that started from A1 level use to improve their reading skill at the initial stage of their learning process?
- 2) What strategies did learners use in and out of their class time to improve their reading skill compared to their real performance in think-aloud tests?
- 3) Was there any change in the strategies that they had used through the months as they developed their linguistic competence?
- 4) Was there any difference between the different learner profiles in terms of the strategies chosen to develop language skills?

Methodology

Research design

When all the data collection process is considered, this study is based on a qualitative design examining a case by means of a rich repertoire of data collection. Gall et al. (2003) define case study research as “the in-depth study of instances of a phenomenon in its natural context and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon” (p. 545). In other words, a case study researcher does fieldwork by watching people in their own territory and interacting with them in their own language in their own natural settings. This study targeted students at a certain language level in a certain institution so the focal point was A1 English language learners in a state university at the School of Foreign Languages, which made this study a case study at the same time. According to Yin (1994), case studies “investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (p.23).

Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) suggest that “the case study approach is particularly valuable when the researcher has little control over events” (p. 322). However, according to Shaughnessy et al. (2003), this might lead to a problem because treatments in case studies

can rarely be controlled systematically. What is more, it is difficult to make inferences and draw conclusions from case studies. Thus, they claim that the participant researcher may overstate or understate the case. However, Bailey (1994) disagrees with their ideas stating that participant observation contributes positively to the case study because of several reasons. First of all, a participant observer can notice what is going around in the contextual setting which is one of the significant parts of the case studies. Secondly, as case studies require extended period of time, researchers have the chance to develop more intimate and informal relationships with the participants in their own natural environment where the research has been conducted. Last but not the least, a participant observer has the possibility and the opportunity to reach the participants easily and notice the slight changes that come out during the data collection process, which cannot be achieved by an outsider.

Study group

The participants of this study were the learners who started their language learning in the School of Foreign Languages in one of the state universities located in Istanbul (Turkey) from A1 level. These students were the ones chosen from the A1 level, which means they started the program with beginner level. They were also chosen from the ones who would get 100 % English medium instruction in their departments if they passed the proficiency final exam because their program was denser and more intensive than the program of the ones whose departments provided 30 % English medium instruction.

With regard to all the A1 level students who took part in this study by filling in the questionnaires given by the researcher to be able to collect the quantitative data of this research, there were 10 students who were chosen among the 169 students according to the results of the questionnaire. The focus of this study was on these ten student participants so they will be given more concentration on this paper excluding the ones who participated in the questionnaire which was used as a tool to choose the participants of this study.

These ten students were categorized into three groups in accordance with their questionnaire results. Strategy Inventory for language learning (SILL) was used as a questionnaire for this categorization. (Oxford, & Burry-Stock, 1995). This questionnaire was distributed to 169 students and the frequencies of the questionnaire results were used to divide the participants into three groups considering the averages that they got from the questionnaires. Thus, three of them were the ones whose results were above the average of the total 169 students, three of them were chosen from the ones whose averages were below the total students and the other four of them were chosen from the ones whose results were almost the same as the general average of the whole students. Therefore, the categories of the participant students will be like this respectively: Higher Average group, which will be named as HA; Below Average group, which will be named as BA; and Average group, which will be named as A. Therefore, due to the anonymity reasons, the real names of the participants will not be given but instead they will be introduced to the reader with codes like A1, HA1, BA1.

Research instruments and procedure

Two different data collection instruments were used for the purpose of this study: interviews and think-aloud protocols.

The Interviews

The interview questions were written by the researcher depending on the results of students' questionnaires. The interview questions were semi-structured because, as Merriam (1998) stated, this format "allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (p. 74). Therefore, the participants felt themselves free to state their opinions on the question with a certain framework on which the question was created. Gall et al. (2003) also verify this by saying "in qualitative research the interview format is not tightly structured because the researcher's target is to make respondents feel free to express their view of a phenomenon in their own terms" (p. 239). Thus, the researchers did their best to make the interviewees to tell all the things related to the research topic so as to be able to gather as many data as possible.

It was really important for the students to understand what was asked to them in the interviews. Schellings (2011) warns that students tend to choose neutral responses to the questions unless they understand them properly so that they will be able to avoid replying inaccurately from their perspective. Berger and Karabenick also (2016) point out that students will touch upon different perspectives of the issue that has been asked to them as long as the items of the questionnaires are either vague or too large. Therefore; during the interviews, it was assured that every item was understood well by the students and when there was a confusion or misunderstanding from the participants' side, everything was explained in detail by the researcher especially some of the terms that might be unfamiliar for the learners.

The interviews were conducted in students' mother language, which is Turkish to make them feel free to express themselves well. All these interviews were recorded so as to be transcribed by the researcher later for the easier analysis of the data.

There were two different interviews that had been arranged with all these ten different students. The first interviews were organized after the questionnaire results were evaluated by a software program and the average of the target groups was calculated. After this analysis, interview questions were written considering the aim of this research as well as the contextual case and the items in the questionnaire. After the interview questions were written, they were shown to some other academics so that some of them could be edited to make them clearer and directly related to the purpose of this study. After this feedback, the interview questions were shown to a colleague of the researcher to check the comprehensibility and whether the questions were clear enough and serving for the purpose of the study.

As soon as the researcher had got the feedback of the colleague, the interview questions were ready to apply. However, before the application of the whole interviews, one student was needed for piloting the interview questions. As these questions were piloted with one academic, a different perspective, especially from the students' side was also required. One of the students, whose questionnaire result was equal to the general average of the target group, was chosen and asked whether he would be a volunteer to participate in this study. He accepted the offer and he was asked the questions so as to check whether there were any problems with them. This first interview was done for piloting the interview questions and the process as well. During the interview, the student also stated the points where he found misleading and confusing so that the researcher could correct those unclear parts of the interview questions.

The first interview went well and the researcher also gained some experience about the ongoing of the interviews that would be held with the other participants. The interview of this participant student (A2) was also included in the data and the analysis of it was also taken seriously because the researcher did not want to lose this valuable data so he did not throw it away. Then the other interviews were also conducted successfully with other participant students. The first interviews were done just before the end of first semester when the participants were about to finish their A2 level learning process. The participants were interviewed after their classes had finished so they were not taken from the lessons so they were done out of their class time. They were invited to an empty class where there was no one but the researcher and the interviewee so there was no interruption, either. Each interview with 10 different participants lasted almost from 40 to 60 minutes. The participants in higher average group talked more than the other two groups. The participants under below average category talked less than the others.

The second interviews were conducted three weeks before the end of the second (spring) semester when they were going to take the final exam. It was difficult for the researcher to arrange these interviews as it was close to the end of the academic year and some students were not attending the school regularly because it was almost near the end of the academic year and students who had the absenteeism right were using them. However, as the researcher had the participant observer, he was able to arrange all the interviews some of which were done outside the campus because of some participants who were not coming to school any more. However, there was a logical reason for the time of the second interviews even though they might seem to be arranged late. When these second interviews were done, the participants were supposed to be B1 levels and they were expected to be B2 in the final exam that they would take in the following three weeks so the final exam was the chance for them to show their language proficiency. Thus, these interviews were done at that time to serve the purpose of this study which was longitudinal.

The second interview questions were written in accordance with the data collected by means of the first interviews and considering the process that the learners had gone through all those months when they were trying to develop their language level. The questions were prepared and shown to another researcher and a colleague so as not to lead to any misunderstanding from the participants' side. After the piloting of the questions with an academic, the initial interview of the second interviews was done with the student coded as "A2" for piloting reasons so as to check the flow of the whole interview and to determine any flaws that might come out so that they would be corrected for the following interviews. Everything went well in that interview with A2 so it was also included in the data that were going to be analyzed just like the first one. The durations of the second interviews lasted between 20 and 90 minutes. The participants who were in higher average group talked more than others just like the first interviews whereas the students in below average category talked the least among others.

Think-aloud protocols

Think aloud protocols are also called as "verbal protocols" (Ericsson & Simon, 1993), which are defined by Kasper and Roever (2005) as "respondents' reports of internal cognitive processes that occur as they are working on a task (concurrent verbal protocols) or their recollections of processes after the task has been completed (consecutive verbal protocols)"

(p.329). It is a kind of flow that shows the inside of the learners' brains, what comes to their minds at the time of the task given to them.

Think-aloud protocols was an efficient way to collect data for the purpose of this study because students were given a certain task and asked how to handle it or how to sort it out. The responses were valuable in terms of the strategies that they were using in order to develop their skills in English language. These think-aloud protocols revealed a solid example of what they were doing in terms of language learning strategy uses and this also gave a bright picture of what they were doing to improve themselves in terms of their linguistic competence. Zimmerman (2008) confirms that "think-aloud methodology is an effective way to assess students' self-regulatory processes online, but this research needs to be extended to see if planning and motivation will emerge as significant predictors of students' mental models" (p. 173). Thus, think-aloud protocols are important ways to measure how students use the self-regulated learning strategies that are used to learn a language, which is the primary purpose of this study. Veenman (2005) also agrees the efficiency of think-aloud protocols when they are compared to the questionnaires.

One of the most important advantages of think-aloud protocols is that it provides the participants with only small amount of time between the thought and its articulation so the shared thoughts that come to their mind while performing a task are more accurate and less subject to "embellishment or decay of information" (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995) than other more structured self-report methods just like questionnaires which had been already applied for the purpose of this study. By applying think-aloud protocols, there won't be any data loss because the participant students had to say what came to their minds during the task given to them. Another important benefit that think-aloud protocols provide the researchers is that they have the potential to sustain the information on context and strategy use as well as cognitive and affective processes (Afflerbach, 2000). However, it is really difficult for the students to do a certain task and share the opinions that come to his/her mind with the researcher simultaneously. Ericsson and Simon (1980) suggest selecting tasks that are a little bit complex and difficult for the learner so that they will not be able to say something automatically because the complicated tasks will require them to think first and say what they do. In spite of such difficulties and possible weaknesses, Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995) exclaim that that "think-aloud protocols offer the most detailed information of all because the student describes strategies while doing a language task" (p.2).

With the help of think-aloud protocols, the researchers tried to determine the strategies that learners used to improve their language. In order to do this, one of the researchers gave the participants a particular task and wanted them to handle it. The participant student told the researcher how s/he completed the task and the whole process, which gave the researcher an idea about the learning strategies that these students had used. Ericsson (2006) points out that a think-aloud protocol contains students' reports about their own thoughts and cognitive processes while they are carrying out a task.

For this study the think alouds were shaped in accordance with the pilot study conducted by Hurd (2008). In this study, there was a reading test with three different comprehension questions. By doing the task, students were required to tell the researcher the strategies that they used while they were completing the tasks given to them. This was carried out twice during the whole academic year. There were not any think aloud protocols for the speaking and listening skills since Kasper and Roever (2005) have mentioned as limitation of think aloud protocols researcher should "exclude spoken tasks because participants cannot produce task-related talk and verbal protocol talk at the same time" (p. 329). What is more,

Roever (2005) articulates that students should be given the chance to choose the language in which s/he will express himself/herself while s/he is doing the think aloud protocol tasks. Thus, even if the tasks are required to do in English language, students can express themselves in their mother tongue. Therefore, here in this research students were allowed to speak in their mother tongue, Turkish, to tell what came to their minds while they were doing the tasks given to them and all of them used Turkish to express themselves during the think-aloud protocols.

The first think-aloud protocols were applied to students just after the first interviews had been done right before the end of the first (fall) semester when they were about to finish their A2 level. In accordance with their language level, a reading text which was for A2 level learners were chosen by the researcher and given for these participants along with five reading comprehension questions. All of the questions were multiple-choice, which made it easier for the participants to solve them all. Thereby, they did not need to write down long sentences so as to answer the questions as the options were already available. The students were required to read the passage and do the comprehension questions while they were telling what they were thinking in their minds to do the questions. After they had finished the reading task, the researcher asked them what they would do if they were given this task as an assignment that should be done at home later. The participants talked about what and how they would do at home.

The second think aloud protocols were also prepared by one of the researchers. They were applied just after the second interviews two weeks before the final exam. One reading text was chosen in accordance with the language level of the learners which was expected to be B1 at the time of the protocol that was applied to them. A reading passage which was taken from a magazine, which made it an authentic one, was given to the participants along with three comprehension questions. All these three questions were with multiple choices but the reading passage itself was a challenging one because the language level of the learners was higher than the time when the first think-aloud protocols were applied. What is more, the students were going to take a final two weeks after the second think aloud protocols so they would be a good exercise for them to get aware of the difficulty that they were going to face in the final so that they would get prepared for it accordingly.

Again, firstly the second think-aloud protocols were initiated with the participant coded as "A2" for piloting reasons to check whether everything would go well. The data collected from A2 were also included for the analysis. In the same way as the first think-aloud protocols right after the students had done the reading task of the second think-aloud protocols they were asked what and how they would do it at home later.

Data Analysis

In order to better analyze the data collected via interviews and think-aloud protocols, all the recordings that were made with the permission of the participants during the interviews and think-aloud protocols were transcribed by one of the researchers himself because of the confidentiality agreement between the researcher and the participants.

The researcher who made the interviews tried to find some different categories from what the participants had shared with the researcher. Gall et al. (2003) defined a category as "a construct that refers to a certain type of phenomenon mentioned in the database" (p. 454). These categories which were found by the researcher were sent to the other researcher along with the transcriptions which did not include any names of the participants so as to keep their

anonymity for member-checking purposes, which requires “the researcher to ask one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account” (Creswell, 2011, p. 259). She also read the transcriptions and the categories that were created by her research partner to assure that they were relevant and made sense for the purpose of the study. The researcher who made the interviews and think-aloud protocols also met with some of the participant students during the data analysis process for member-checking purposes so as to give these students the chance to change, clarify and elaborate more on what they had said in the interviews. These member checks contribute a lot to the accurate reflection of the participants beliefs on the findings of the study (Merriam, 1998). There were also some subcategories under each category created by the researcher to make the findings of this study clearer for the reader. This was done so as to better relate the findings to the purpose of the study and the research questions. These categories and subcategories were also checked by another academic so as to increase the inter-rater reliability of the data.

Findings

Students were asked what kind of strategies they used for reading both in the class and out of class during the first (fall) and the second (spring) term. Their responses were shown in different categories according to the three different groups in which the participants were divided so table 1 shows the answers of the average group participants.

Table 1. Strategies used by average group participants for reading skill development

Participants			
A1	First term	Class	Synonyms, structures, grammar, vocabulary
		Home	No
	Second term	Class	Synonyms, structures, grammar, vocabulary
		Home	No
A2	First term	Class	Scanning, Vocabulary, synonym
		Home	No
	Second term	Class	Scanning, Vocabulary, synonym
		Home	No
A3	First term	Class	Synonyms, structures, grammar, vocabulary
		Home	Synonyms, structures, revising vocabulary
	Second term	Class	Synonyms, structures, grammar, revising vocabulary
		Home	Synonym, grammar, vocabulary
A4	First term	Class	Synonym, structures, reference
		Home	No
	Second term	Class	Structures, Synonyms, Format of the text
		Home	Reference, structures, synonyms

As it can be seen from table 1, the participants in the average group focused on the structural pattern of the reading passages more such as vocabulary, synonyms, structures but they did

not use any learning strategy to focus on the meaning of the text such as skimming and scanning. What is more, most of the participants except from A3 said that they did not do reading exercises when they were back at home so the only place that they concentrated on reading was within the class time. Additionally, it was shown on the table 1 that they did not change the strategies that they had used for reading in the first term even when their language level improved in the second term so they used the same strategies.

These participants also had the think-aloud protocols both in the first (fall) term and the second (spring) term so as to determine what they were doing in the reading. By doing so, the researcher had the chance to observe what kind of strategies they were using at the first hand. After each think-aloud process was over, the researcher asked them what they would do if they were given that reading text at home as an assignment. Table 2 shows what they did in the think aloud protocols prepared by the researcher and what they would do with the same reading task if they were given at home.

Table 2. Strategies used by average group during the think aloud sessions

			The strategies that they used
A1	First term	Class	Reading the text first, trying to find the answers considering the questions, not detailed reading, some unknown words in the text
		Result	2 correct out of 5 questions
	Second term	Home	Looking up the unknown words in the dictionary (bilingual), detailed reading
		Class	Reading the questions, 80 % of unknown words in the passage, trying to find the answer associating the familiar words
		Result	0 out of 3 questions
		Home	Looking up the unknown words in the dictionary (bilingual), detailed reading
A2	First term	Class	Reading the questions first, trying to find the answer from the options given by looking for it in the text
		Result	2 correct out of 5 questions
		Home	The same strategies as the ones used in class
	Second term	Class	Reading the questions first, trying to find the answer from the options given by looking for it in the text
		Result	2 correct out of 3 questions
		Home	Looking up the unknown words in the dictionary (bilingual), detailed reading
A3	First term	Class	Reading the questions, underlining some important words such as without, only while reading, trying to find the answers considering the questions
		Result	1 correct out of 5 questions
		Home	Looking up the unknown words in the dictionary (bilingual), detailed reading, focusing on the structures
	Second term	Class	Reading the text, found it difficult in terms of vocabulary and grammar, too many unknown words, couldn't understand the text well, trying to find the answers considering the questions
		Result	1 correct out of 3 questions
		Home	Looking up the unknown words in the dictionary (bilingual), detailed reading, focusing on the structures
A4	First term	Class	Reading the text first, found the questions difficult, having a look at the text again, trying to find the answers considering the questions
		Result	3 correct out of 5 questions

	Home	Looking up the unknown words in the dictionary (bilingual), detailed reading
Second term	Class	Reading the text, found it difficult in terms of vocabulary and grammar, too many unknown words, couldn't understand the text well, trying to find the answers considering the questions
	Result	2 correct out of 3 questions
	Home	Looking up the unknown words in the dictionary (bilingual), detailed reading

It may seem from table 2 that all the average group participants started the think-aloud sessions by reading the text first both in the first and the second think-alouds arranged at the end of the first and second term respectively. All of them wanted to find the correct answers of the questions by trying to associate the words that were given in the options of the questions with the ones that existed in the reading passage.

What was interesting was that all of the participants except from A2 found the reading text given in the second think-aloud protocols quite difficult and they could not perform as well as they did in the first think-aloud protocols as they all said they could not comprehend the text well enough to be able to answer the questions properly. This might be because of their language level which did not reach the level expected from them.

When they were asked about what they would do if that text was given to them as homework, all of them said they would look up the unknown words in the dictionaries that would give the Turkish equivalences of the words that they did not know. They did not change this strategy and they said the same thing in the second think aloud sessions as well.

When it comes to the participants in the higher average group, they were also asked about what kind of strategies they were using for reading both in the class and out of their class time. Table 3 summarizes what they said.

Table 3. Strategies used by higher average group participants for reading skill development

Participants			
HA1	First term	Class	Skimming, scanning, vocabulary
		Home	Skimming, scanning, vocabulary (detail)
	Second term	Class	Skimming, scanning, format of the text, vocabulary
HA2	First term	Home	Skimming, scanning, vocabulary (detail)
		Class	Skimming, scanning, finding key words
	Second term	Home	Detailed reading, vocabulary
HA3	First term	Class	Skimming, scanning, structures, synonyms
		Home	No
	Second term	Class	Skimming, scanning, structures, synonyms
		Home	Skimming, scanning, vocabulary (detail)

From table 3 it can be understood that in contrary to their peers in the average group who focused mostly on the structural part of the language in readings without showing much focus on the meaning, the participants in the higher average group said they did skimming and scanning to get the main idea of the text and to focus on the details such as numbers and dates respectively both in the class and out of class time. They also gave importance to vocabulary and they all said that they were trying to make sentences with the new words that they had learned from the reading passages that they were analyzing at home. They were using “cognitive” strategy by “practising” (Wang & Pape, 2005) as shown in table 2. Thus, they were trying to activate their vocabulary knowledge by studying reading as well.

These participants also experienced the think-aloud process for the researcher to determine what they were doing during the reading text analysis in real world. Table 3 shows what they did during the think-aloud protocols both in the first term and the second term. They were also asked what they would do if they were given these reading texts as homework. Table 4 shows the think-aloud results for the reading skill from the perspective of the higher average participants.

Table 4. Strategies used by higher average group during the think aloud sessions

The strategies that they used			
HA1	First term	Class	Reading the questions first, trying to find the key words in the text directly related to the questions, skimming, scanning
		Result	5 correct out of 5 questions
		Home	Looking up the unknown words in the dictionary (monolingual), detailed reading
	Second term	Class	Reading the questions first, trying to find the key words in the text directly related to the questions, skimming and scanning
		Result	1 out of 3 questions
		Home	Looking up the unknown words in the dictionary (monolingual), trying to guess the meanings first
HA2	First term	Class	Reading the questions first, trying to find the key words in the text directly related to the questions, skimming, scanning, almost no unknown words
		Result	5 correct out of 5 questions
		Home	Looking up the unknown words in the dictionary (monolingual), taking notes of some advanced words in the text
	Second term	Class	Reading the questions first, trying to find the key words in the text directly related to the questions, skimming, scanning, guessing the meanings of unknown words
		Result	3 correct out of 3 questions
		Home	Looking up the unknown words in the dictionary (monolingual), taking notes of some advanced words in the text
HA3	First term	Class	Reading the questions first, trying to find the key words in the text directly related to the questions, skimming, scanning, guessing the meanings of unknown words
		Result	2 correct out of 5 questions

	Home	Looking up the unknown words in the dictionary (monolingual), taking notes of some advanced words in the text
Second term	Class	Reading the questions first, trying to find the key words in the text directly related to the questions, skimming, scanning, guessing the meanings of unknown words
	Result	2 correct out of 3 questions
	Home	Looking up the unknown words in the dictionary (bilingual), detailed reading, focusing on the structures, synonym writing

During the think aloud sessions, the participants in the higher average group read the questions of the passage first and then they started to read the text contrary to their peers in the average group who read the text first and tried to answer the questions. They also made use of skimming and scanning strategies in the think-aloud protocols as they stated in the interviews. All of them tried to catch the key words in the reading passage that would make the answer explicit and they did this with the help of skimming and scanning strategies. What is more, they used “guessing the meaning of unknown words from context” strategy which was not used by their peers in the average group.

The participants in the higher average group also used almost the same strategies in the second think-aloud protocols as they did in the first ones. They just added one more strategy which was “guessing the meaning of the unknown words”. This was because they did not come across many unknown words in the reading text given to them in the first term but in the second think-aloud protocols as the level of the language had risen, they felt the need to make an addition to the strategies that they had already been using. This also showed that they could find the appropriate strategy that suited their needs. Thus, they performed much better than their peers in the average group in the second think-aloud protocols in which the difficulty level of the reading text was much higher. In contrast to their peers in the average group who said that they found it difficult to comprehend the text in the second think-aloud sessions, the ones in the higher average group did not have such complaints.

When they were asked about what they would do with the reading texts given to them in the think-aloud protocols as homework, they said they would do detailed reading with them trying to find the meaning of the unknown words from monolingual dictionaries that would provide them with the definition in English along with sample sentences that would give them an idea about how to use those words. Thus, this choice also made them different from the other participants in other categories.

When it comes to the participants in the below average group, they were also asked about what kind of strategies they were using for reading both in the class and out of their class time. Table 5 summarizes what they said.

Table 5. Strategies used by below average group participants for reading skill development

Participants			
BA1	First term	Class	Scanning
		Home	No
	Second term	Class	Scanning, structures
		Home	No
BA2	First term	Class	Vocabulary, structure
		Home	No
	Second term	Class	Vocabulary, structure
		Home	No
BA3	First term	Class	Structure, synonym
		Home	No
	Second term	Class	Structure, synonym
		Home	No

Table 5 shows that all the participants in the below average group except from BA1 just focused on improving their lexical knowledge of the language when they were dealing with a reading text. They did not pay attention to any other contextual skills that they might need when analyzing a reading text such as skimming and scanning. Also, it can easily be noticed that they did not change the strategies that they had been using in the first (fall) term when they were asked about them in the second (spring) term.

Another important point that should be taken into account was that they all did not do any reading exercises at home both in the first (fall) term and second (spring) term so as to be able to use strategies.

These participants were also taken to think-aloud process by researcher so as to be able to observe what they were doing while they were analyzing a reading text at first hand. Table 6 shows what they did during the think-aloud protocols both in the first (fall) term and the second (spring) term. They were also asked what they would do if they were given these reading texts as homework. Table 6 shows the think-aloud results for the reading skill from the perspective of the below average participants.

Table 6. Strategies used by below average group during the think aloud sessions

The strategies that they used			
BA1	First term	Class	Reading the text first, trying to find the answers considering the questions
		Result	4 correct out of 5 questions
	Second term	Home	Looking up the unknown words in the dictionary (bilingual)
		Class	Reading the text, 80 % of unknown words in the passage, no comprehension
		Result	0 out of 3 questions

BA2	First term	Home	No
		Class	Reading the text first, trying to find the key words in text to find the answer, couldn't understand the question, unknown words
	Result	1 correct out of 5 questions	
Second term	Home	Looking up the unknown words in the dictionary (bilingual)	
	Class	Reading the text, 80 % of unknown words in the passage, no comprehension	
	Result	0 correct out of 3 questions	
BA3	First term	Home	Looking up the unknown words in the dictionary (bilingual)
		Class	Reading the questions, reading the text paragraph by paragraph, translating the sentences in his mind, many unknown words, trying to find the answers considering the questions
		Result	2 correct out of 5 questions
	Second term	Home	Looking up the unknown words in the dictionary (bilingual), detailed reading, focusing on the structures
		Class	Reading the text, found it difficult in terms of vocabulary and grammar, too many (80 %) unknown words, no comprehension
		Result	0 correct out of 3 questions
Home	Looking up the unknown words in the dictionary (bilingual), using translation applications to understand the text		

It might seem clear from table 6 that the strategies that they used during the first think-aloud protocols were almost the same as the ones used by their peers in the average group. This might be because of the fact that the difference between the average group and the below average group was not that high until the end of the first (fall) semester in terms of their language level. Similarly, they started to read the text first before having a look at the questions and they did their best to reach the correct answer considering the question types and taking the options given to them into account by trying to find the familiar words in the passage.

In the second think-aloud protocols, none of them could even answer one single question accurately. All of them could not comprehend the text in the second think-aloud properly because its difficulty level was much higher than their level. They all said that the text was full of words that they did not know the meanings of, which prevented them from comprehending it and answering the questions. Thus, this showed that they could not keep up with the pace of the curriculum.

When they were asked about what they would do if they were given these texts given in both first and second think-aloud sessions, they all said that they would look up the unknown words in bilingual dictionary that would provide them with the Turkish equivalence of the words. They talked about the same strategy for the text that they did not understand at all in the second think-aloud. Thus, they believed that they would understand the text well as long as they knew the meanings of the words because nobody in this group said that they would have a look at the grammar structures so as to better understand the passage.

Participant instructors were also asked whether they taught the students any reading strategy in the class and all of them said that they focused on several strategies that could facilitate their reading analysis such as skimming, scanning, vocabulary formation, synonym finding, reference and guessing the meaning of the unknown words from the contexts. This means that the instructors were providing the students with the strategies that they might need but some of them acquired them but some of them did not.

Conclusions and Suggestions

The strategies used by the higher average group participants stand out because they analyze the reading text in depth both structurally and meaningfully. They watch out for synonyms and different structures used in the text both to understand it and to use them later in their writing and speaking tasks in addition to strategies that they use to figure out the whole reading texts such as skimming and scanning that will help them save time to answer the comprehension questions. Marton and Säljö (1976) modify these strategies as “deep” for reading skill. However, the participants in the average group either use skimming and scanning or look for the synonyms and structures that will help them understand the text. These were all observed by the researcher during the think-aloud protocols as well. Also, the participants in the higher average group state that they do reading practice out of the class time by focusing on the text and analyzing every bit of it whereas the participants in below average group and average group do not read out of their class time so the only time they are exposed to reading texts is during the class time, which is not enough to improve themselves in terms of academic reading for their departments within a short period of time which lasts eight months for preparatory school students. Thus, students should be encouraged by their instructors to do reading out of their class time and they should do it with deep analysis so as to benefit from a text as much as possible by using both structural strategies such as looking out for synonyms and structures and strategies applied for meaning such as skimming and scanning.

Even though the focus of the reading lessons should be on comprehension of the text, vocabulary and grammar awareness of the students can be raised. Students should be encouraged to use dictionaries and grammar books all the time. Although students can be triggered by their teachers to guess the meaning of the unknown words in the text, they should look them up in the dictionaries in the lessons as the texts are covered for learning purposes in the lessons. However, they can use that strategy in the exams in which they are not allowed to use dictionaries. Schmitt (1997) thinks that the strategy of guessing the meanings from the context is not subordinated to looking the words up in the dictionaries in language learning. What is more, Ahmed (1989) claims that good language learners can use both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries as effectively as possible. Thus, teachers should encourage learners to use these two different dictionary kinds effectively instead of imposing them on the use of one type of it.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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