The Relationship between teaching reading strategies to hotel staff and its effects on their attitudes: Learners' Autonomy, Reading Strategies, and Reading Comprehension

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Abstract
The purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationship between teaching reading strategies to hotel staff and its effects on their attitudes: Learners' Autonomy, Reading Strategies, and Reading Comprehension. To accomplish this object, 130 ESP learners were asked to take part in a piloted PET reading comprehension test and two questionnaires on learner autonomy (Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan, 2002), and reading strategies (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002). After removing incomplete answer sheets, 106 (82 female and 24 male) acceptable cases were used in statistical analysis. Pearson Product Correlation analysis pointed out a statistically significant relationship between ESP learners' autonomy and reading strategies. It was also exposed that the participants' reading comprehension is positively correlated with their reading strategies. Though, a statistically significant relationship was not established between autonomy and reading comprehension.

Keywords: learner autonomy, reading strategies, reading comprehension

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Introduction

Reading is one of the indispensable skills for daily life. People usually read to be admonished about a topic, to be educated, or just to be amused. The importance of reading is far more severe for EFL and ESP learners. Paying attention to this fact, Farhadi, Jafarpoor, and Birjandi (1994) said, "Reading is the most important of all skills for most language learners in general, and for EFL learners in particular" (p. 247). Despite the importance and difficulty of reading, it is sometimes mistakenly considered just as an inactive process of recreating the author's proposed meaning that is conveyed through language (Nunan, 1999). Declining such a standpoint to reading as a meticulous skill that relies on a single cognitive process, current views of reading development embrace it as a progressive close series of variables that shift from the visual representation recognition to the text comprehension (Kendeou, Lynch, Broek, Espin, White, & Kremer, 2005).

Reading comprehension as the "essence of reading" (Durkin, 1993, p. 4) takes place when a mental perception of meaning is produced from the written text. To do this, Koda (2005) stated: "The reader extracts and integrates a range of information from the text and combines it with what is already known" (p. 4). Unnecessary to say that, although this process is a tool of interaction between writer and reader, it is also interrelated to some variables. Along with a definition stated by RAND Reading Study Group (2002), reading comprehension involves issues related to the text, the reader, and the activity. At the first place, comprehension comes from the expression of the ideas in a text that readers make as they read. These depictions are disposed by language features, such as terms and sentence structure (language rules and complexity) and the author's writing style and clearness of expression (Armbruster, 1984; Freebody & Anderson, 1983, as cited in Lehr, Osborn, & Hiebert, 2005). Reading comprehension is also affected by non-linguistic features which can be either internal or external.

Internal factors include reader's cognitive and affective variables for instance: intelligence, learning style, motivation, self esteem, etc. External factors include the physical environment of reader, the approach and materials used in instructions, and the teacher-student instructions (Cooper, 1993). Similarly, RAND Reading Study Group (2002) states that all readers convey to their reading differences in capabilities, such as oral language aptitude, confident word recognition, and awareness of the world. They also take an array of social and educational influences, including home situation, society and cultural traditions, and socioeconomic condition. The grouping further notes that reading is not done in meaninglessness. It is done to achieve some ending. This is the dimension of reading addressed by the term "activity". A reading activity can be a session with a teacher working with an entire class, a small group of students, or one-on-one with a student. It can be students reading alone or with others.

It is commonly accepted that among the significant aspects in reading comprehension, strategies are of great interest for many researchers in both L1 and L2 studies. In this regard, the National Reading Panel (2000) reported, "the past two decades of research appear to support the enthusiastic advocacy of instruction of reading strategies" (p. 4-46). Looking for the causes of this trend, Grabe (1991) declares that the changing sight of reading from a linear, bottom-up approach to a concept driven, top-down approach had a strong influence on reading instruction. Reading was distinguished as an active process and students needed to be taught strategies to read more efficiently. The goal of reading instruction began to present students with a range of efficient strategies to text, such as helping students describe objectives and strategies for reading, to use pre-reading activities to build up conceptual willingness, and to provide students approaches to deal with complicated syntax, vocabulary, and organizational structure. The strategies approach designed to boost reading comprehension expanded from models of thinking and learning processes in respond to models of intellectual processing (McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009).

Stressing on the key role of reading strategies, Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris (2008) characterize them as "deliberate, goal directed attempts to control and modify the reader's efforts to decode text,

understand word, and construct meanings out of text" (p. 15). They vary from uncomplicated fix-up strategies such as simply rereading compound segments and guessing the meaning of an unfamiliar word from context, to more comprehensive strategies such as shortening and relating what is being read to the reader's background knowledge (Janzen, 1996). Reading strategies can be classified according to the instance they are employed; before, during, or after reading. They also can be organized as either comprehensive or local along with the part of the text on which they concentrate (Young & Oxford, 1997). Mokhtari and Sheorey's (2002) Study of Reading Strategies (SORS) uses another categorization system to classify the reading strategies. SORS categorizes the reading approaches into three different types of strategies: "Global Reading Strategies" (GLOB) that are planned, carefully planned techniques by which learners study or control their reading, such as having a principle in mind or previewing the text as to its length and structure; "Problem Solving Strategies" (PROB) which are actions and procedures that readers use while working directly with the text, like regulating one's speed of reading when the text becomes difficult or easy; "Support Strategies" (SUP) that are basic support methods intended to assist the reader in comprehending the text such as applying a dictionary or taking notes.

Learner's autonomy is another dominant factor in reading comprehension which its contribution has become a critical argument. According to Benson (2001) a reason for the issue is that, "researchers are increasingly beginning to understand that there is an intimate relationship between autonomy and effective learning. However, this relationship has largely been explored at the level of theory and lacks substantial empirical support" (p. 189). The original theory and practice of autonomy came out from research on adult self-directed learning (Zhe, 2009), a process in which individuals accept responsibility for all the decisions worried about their learning. In the field of foreign language learning it was Holec's (1981) seminal study "Autonomy and foreign language learning" which triggered a growing interest in the concept of learner autonomy in the last two decades. In his idea, autonomy is defined as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" where to take charge of one's learning is to have and to hold the responsibility for all the decisions regarding all aspects of this

learning (as cited in Spratt, Humphrys, & Chan, 2002, p. 249). Holec (1981) sees ability and accountability as working in five main areas: shaping objectives, defining contents and development, choosing methods and techniques to be used, observing the procedure of acquisition, and appraising what has happened (as cited in Spratt, Humphrys, & Chan, 2002, p. 249). Nunan (2000) stated that the idea of autonomy in language learning can be linked to communicative language teaching (CLT) both historically and theoretically. It was the rejection against the drill-and-practice theories of behaviorism that leads to the rise of CLT in which language functions, learner needs, and learner autonomy are emphasized.

Learner autonomy is both a social and an individual construct, which contains the personal improvement of each learner and, at the same time, interaction with others (La Ganza, 2001). Autonomous learners are able to select and realize appropriate learning strategies. In the meantime, they can monitor the efficiency of their use of strategies and make necessary changes for them (Dickinson, 1993). Regarding the main characteristics of autonomous learners, Chan (2001) who carried out a study to determine her students' awareness of learner autonomy known the following features: highly motivated, goal oriented, well organized, hard working, invention, eager about learning, elastic, active, keen on asking questions, and making use of every probabilities to improve their learning.

To put in a nutshell, success in reading comprehension entails investigation considering so many factors that might contribute to or correlate with such a complex process. Moreover, determining the impact of context in the relationship of reading comprehension with reading strategies (Brantmeier, 2002) and autonomy (McClure, 2001) is a good reason why it is essential to replicate research on these elements within different cultures and learning environment. Therefore, to come up with a more in-depth picture, the present study aims to investigate the relationship among ESP learners' autonomy, reading strategies, and reading comprehension. Accordingly, the following research questions were prepared:

Q1. Is there any significant relationship between ESP learners' reading strategies and reading comprehension?

Q2. Is there any significant relationship between ESP learners' autonomy and reading strategies?

Q3. Is there any significant relationship between ESP learners' autonomy and reading comprehension?

Method

- Participants

Participants of the present study were a total number of 130 students (102 females, 28 males), with the age range of 19-42, studying Hospitality and Tourism at university and working in hotel. All the participants were chosen from among the students whose major was Hospitality and Tourism at university in a non-random sampling way. Also all the participants had passed 5 sessions for learning reading strategies before conducting the research. In order to make sure all the participants are familiar with reading strategies and reading comprehension, the researchers decided to hold the reading strategies course for participants. During the administration of the study, a number of participants were excluded from data analysis due to subject mortality or their incomplete answers. Eventually, 106 students consisted of 82 females (77%) and 24 males (23%) with the age range of 19-42 were appointed as the main subjects of the study. Moreover, to ensure the reliability of the research instruments, 30 other students who had almost the same characteristics as the main sample of the study took part in piloting a PET reading comprehension test and translated version of reading strategies and learner autonomy questionnaires.

- Instrumentation

In order to attain the purpose of the study, a questionnaire of learner autonomy, a questionnaire of reading strategies, and a reading comprehension test were utilized.

Learner Autonomy Questionnaire

To assess the participants' level of autonomy, a questionnaire of autonomy including 52 items in four sections was administered. The questionnaire was developed by Spratt, Humphreys, and Chan (2002) who state that the questionnaire design is strongly influenced by Holec's definition of autonomy. The scoring method of the instrument was in a Likert-scale, sequentially conveying values of 1,2,3,4, and 5 to options of "not at all", "a little", "some", "mainly", and

"completely" in section one (13 items); including 1 for "very poor" to 5 for "very good" in section two (11 items); setting 5 to 1 alongside the first to the last choices in section three (1 item); and traiting values of 1,2,3, and 4 to choices of "never", "rarely", "sometimes", and "often" in part four (27 items). In this view, the result could differ from 52 to 233, and the higher the mark, the more autonomous was the participant. In view of the fact that the questionnaire is premeditated for native speakers, to stay away from any misunderstanding in part of cultural differences and lack of lexis and syntax knowledge, the researcher used the Persian translated version of the questionnaire which had been prepared by Sheikhy Behdani (2011).

Reading Strategies Questionnaire

To establish the degree of participants' use of reading strategies, the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS), which involves of 30 statements related to different types of reading strategies, was used. The SORS was prepared by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002) to determine non-native English speakers' metacognitive awareness and perceived use of reading strategies. SORS includes three categories of strategies: 13 items on Global Reading Strategies (GLOB); 8 items on Problem Solving Strategies (PROB); and 9 items on Support Strategies (SUP). The questionnaire uses a five-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 for never to 5 for always. In this regard, the results could be different from 30 to 150 and the higher the mark, the more reading strategies were used by the student. This instrument is originally written in English but in the present study the Persian translation by Amiri and Maftoon (2010) was managed to ensure the researchers about the participants' fully comprehension of the questions.

Reading Comprehension Test

The reading comprehension test that the researchers used in this study was adopted from reading comprehension parts of PET Practice Tests developed by Quintana (2003) which has been written in level format of Preliminary English Test provided by University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations. This instrument included of six reading comprehension passages followed by five multiple-choice reading comprehension questions on each.

- Procedure

At the first step, the PET reading comprehension test and the two questionnaires on learner autonomy, and reading strategies were piloted to 30 students (24 males and 6 females) who had almost the same characteristics as the target sample to uncover any probable problem before the main study is done. After calculating item facility and item discrimination of the PET reading comprehension test, two of its items were revealed to be malfunctioning and thus were removed from the test. Cronbach alpha reliability of the test was calculated at 0.896 before and 0.91 after deletion of two malfunctioning items. This indicator of reliability were found at 0.829 and 0.87 correspondingly for the questionnaires on learner autonomy and reading strategies, and as "an alpha of 0.70 or higher is often measured satisfactory for most purposes" (Vogt, 2007, p. 115), the reliability analysis of all three instruments were considered well enough.

At the next step, the two piloted questionnaires were distributed in 6 classes among 130 other students who were appointed as the main participants. The respondents were explained about the instructions of filling the questionnaires and were posed to complete them in approximately 40 minutes, bearing in mind that there were no right or wrong answers. It should also be noted that to enable the researchers to trace back the students during different stages of the study, all participants were assigned to an individual code which was constant in their whole papers.

In another session of each class, the students who had participated in the former stage of data collection were requested to take part in the piloted PET reading comprehension test in 25 minutes. Out of 130 students who took part in the main administration, some of them were expelled from data analysis because of sloppy coding, deficient answers, and subject mortality, bringing the final number of 106 participants amongst which 82 ones (77%) were female and 24 ones (23%) belonged to male students. The validation for the lower number of males as compared to females in this study is that female candidates commonly outnumber the opposite gender in selecting English as their favorite language to learn.

At the last step, the statistical procedures were carried out by the researchers to observe whether or not there was any significant relationship among ESP learners' autonomy, reading strategies and reading comprehension. It is important to mention that in order to persuade the participants to respond with more care and honesty, they were confident that their responses to the instruments were proposed to be used only for gathering information for purposes of the study and nobody but the researchers would have access to them.

Results

With the purpose of replying the three questions stated in the study and to achieve certain results, the researchers conducted a series of calculations and statistical schedules that its results are presented in this section.

Regarding the first research question, a correlational analysis was run. As it is pointed to in Table 1, the Pearson Product Correlation between the participants' reading strategies and their reading comprehension is found to be (r = .747) at significant level of (.000). Consequently, it is concluded that there is a statistically significant and positive relationship between ESP learners' reading strategies and their reading comprehension at 0.05 level of significance. In other words, increasing of each one matches to increasing of another.

Table 1- Correlation between Reading Strategies and Reading Comprehension

	Reading Comprehension
Reading Strategies	Pearson Correlation.747[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed) .000
	N 106

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

In order to answer the second question dealt with in the study, a correlational analysis was conducted by the researchers. As Table 2 shows, the Pearson Product Correlation between the participants' autonomy and their reading strategies is estimated as (r = .760) at significant level of (.000). Therefore, it is revealed that a statistically significant and positive relationship exists between ESP learners' autonomy and their reading strategies at 0.05 level of significance. In another words, the more autonomous are the learners, the more reading strategies they use.

Table 2- Correlation between Autonomy and Reading Strategies

	Reading Strategies
Learner Autonomy	Pearson Correlation.760**
	Sig. (2-tailed).000
	N 106

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

In conclusion, concerning the third research question, a correlational analysis was again administered. As Table 3 illustrates, the Pearson Product Correlation between the participants' autonomy and their reading comprehension is found to be (r = .060) at significant level of (.544). Therefore, it is concluded that there is no statistically significant relationship between autonomy and reading comprehension of ESP learners.

Table 3- Correlation between Autonomy and Reading Comprehension

	Reading Comprehension
Learner Autonomy	Pearson Correlation .060
	Sig. (2-tailed) .544
	N 106

Discussion

With respect to the questions proposed in the study and based on the statistical analysis of the data, various degrees of correlation were found among the three variables of this research. To come up with a plain idea and to provide pedagogical implications, discussion of these results would be of use.

To start with, findings of this research which shows a statistically significant relationship between ESP learners' reading strategies and their reading comprehension scores is inferred regarding the essential role of reading strategies to aid readers cope with a variety of problems which face while reading in a foreign language. This outcome is sustained by the findings of Al-Nujaidi (2003); Hosseini Nezhad (2006); Park (2010); and Wu (2005) who found reading strategies to be utilized significantly more by skillful ESP readers. On the contrary, Soi Meng (2006) in a study revealed that good and weak readers knew and used the same strategies, and employed bottom-up strategies similarly. The major variation was the greater use of top-down strategies by good readers. It was also showed that weak readers used metacognitive strategies more regularly.

Furthermore, according to the results of this study, a statistically significant relationship exists between ESP learners' autonomy and their reading strategies which mean that, the more autonomous are the learners, the more reading strategies they use. In this sense, autonomous learners are more able to select and apply appropriate reading strategies. For example, an autonomous learner will go through the reading text to see whatever available in the text (pictures,

diagrams, title, subtitles, etc.) more willingly than trying to read and comprehend it immediately (Dickinson, 1993).

Lastly, since no statistically significant relationship was found between ESP learners' autonomy and their reading comprehension scores, it can be interpreted that although autonomy may eventually lead to greater proficiency of ESP language learners (Benson ,2001; Dafei ,2007; Zhang & Li ,2004), when the relationship is considered between autonomy and reading comprehension in particular, a significant correlation is not established. This outcome is in line with the findings of Heidari (2010) whose correlation analyses established that learner autonomy did not have a significant relationship with the participants' reading comprehension scores.

With regard to the general findings of the present study, ESP teachers and syllabus designers are expected to realize their role as a provider to improvement of ESP learners' reading comprehension by exposing them to different reading strategies and providing a way to progress gradually to be more independent. Furthermore, since reading strategies awareness and purposeful use of them are supplementary, make the learners aware of reading strategies and assist conscious use of them are as the same value. Teachers of ESP courses specifically in Hospitality and Tourism major should choose readings which are most related to this major due to developing the learners' awareness and information regarding different cultures, customs and nationalities. The more the hotel staffs are aware of various features of tourists, the more they will be successful in their work.

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