



The Correlation between Age and Use of Reading Strategies by the Iranian EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Reading is a very valuable source of input which plays an important role in the language learning process and boosts learners in gaining information, broadening their understanding of different subjects, and thus achieving their academic goals. The present study's focus is on discovering the correlation between age and use of reading strategies by the Iranian EFL learners while reading EFL texts. The findings from the quantitative phase data analysis through Pearson correlation coefficient showed significant ($P=0.025<.05$) correlation between the participants' age and their use of EFL reading strategies. The results of interviews, half supported and half contradicted these results. Based on the present study findings, also according to the sixteen interviewees' viewpoints, it could be concluded that EFL reading strategy teaching should turn into a must in the Iranian educational system; however, the type of strategies taught at each educational and age level should be decided based on the EFL proficiency of the language learners and not merely based on their age. Also, the fact that the older participants who came out to be more proficient too use more EFL reading strategies was a good support for the claim that reading strategy instruction is basically disregarded in the Iranian educational system, and a good reason to insist on a place for their instruction as early as the beginning of EFL instruction in the educational system. Also, the fact that age increase equalled strategy use increase was a good support for emphasis on persuasion of the students to read actively to get more experienced in use of appropriate strategies.

Keywords: Reading Strategies, Iranian EFL Learners, Age

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a very valuable source of input which plays an important role in the language learning process and boosts learners in gaining information, broadening their understanding of different subjects, and thus achieving their academic goals (Renandya & Jacobs, 2002). A possible definition of reading activity can be the understanding of written words through translation of symbols, or letters into words and sentences that have meaning to the individual. To understand a text's meaning the reader should also make use of his knowledge and understanding to be able to make sense of the written word (Martinez, 2006). The ability to read is an indispensable element in life in every corner of the world. The illiterate does not experience individual and social life fully. The struggle against illiteracy is one of the most gigantic and demanding tasks of any generation which concerns everybody (Bracken & Malmquist, 1971). Rivers (1981) propounds reading as the most important activity in the language classes and looks at it as a source of information, a pleasurable activity and a means of consolidating and extending one's knowledge of the language. Strevens (1977) introduces two reasons for the great

importance of reading to the learners; first, its providing the learners with access to a great quantity of further experience of the language, and second, its opening the window into the normal means of continuing the learners' personal education.

According to Candlin (1983) the comprehension of any reader while reading a second or foreign language text is affected by many factors such as the text type, the reader's background knowledge, cultural and social inheritance, age, preferred reading strategies, linguistic competence, purposes behind reading the target text, reader's affective involvement with the text, the tasks the reader is pursuing, etc. He further emphasizes that comprehension of any text is the result of the interaction between the reader and the text and different readers' comprehension of the same text may be different as a result of the differences between the mentioned factors.

The present study's focus is on discovering the correlation between age and use of reading strategies by the Iranian EFL learners.

Methodology

The population, from which the sample was drawn, was the Iranian students in Kerman, a city in southeast Iran where the researcher lives now. The sample number was 200 (400 questionnaires were spread; however, only 200 were filled properly by the participants and were useable in the study).

The sampling procedure used in the present study was convenience sampling (L. Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 88). The researcher collected the data from the schools and classes to which she was introduced by the department of education in Kerman, in addition to the co-workers', who agreed to cooperate, classes at universities. To calculate the sample size the researcher was introduced to online sample calculation software in <http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm>, through USM statistician consultant in IPS. Since the population of 3rd grade male and female students at Kerman high schools and university students who were passing general English course at Kerman universities at the second semester of the educational year 2012-2013 (when the researcher gathered the data) equaled about ten thousand, the sample size needed to gather the necessary data to answer the present study's questions equaled 196. The researcher rounded the number and made use of a sample of 200 high school and university female and male students. Consulting the statistician, the confidence interval was decided to be 7 (the proper number for confidence interval ranges from 5-10) and the confidence level was decided to be at 95%. The confidence level can be at 95% (usually used in all research areas other than medicine) or 99% (usually used in medical studies). The researchers mostly design the studies based on 95% level of confidence which is more logical and common. The pilot study sample consisted of 50 participants which equaled a quarter of the main sample.

With the support of the statistical package for the social science (SPSS), probability (P) values of 0.05 or less were employed to reveal the significant results in the quantitative phase of the study. The probability of 0.05 was chosen because the accepted p-value for research in second language studies and in other social sciences is generally accepted to be at the value of 0.05 (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

Results



A Pearson product moment correlation coefficient was conducted to check the significance of the relationship between the participants' age (as a continuous variable) and their use of SORS EFL reading strategies in general. The test results are presented in the following tables.

Table 1. The descriptive statistics related to the relationship between the participants' age and their use of SORS EFL reading strategies in general.

Descriptive Statistics			
Reading strategy use (1-5)	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Age	3.20	.530	200
	19.41	4.40	200

Table 2. The relationship between the participants' age and their use of SORS EFL reading strategies in general.

		Age (15-45)
Reading Strategy Use	Pearson Correlation	.159*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.025
	N	200

As shown in the above table, there existed a significant relationship between the two variables ($r=.159^*$, $n=200$, $p=.025<0.05$), with high level of reading strategy use being significantly correlated with higher age of the participants. This significant relationship is illustrated in Figure 1.

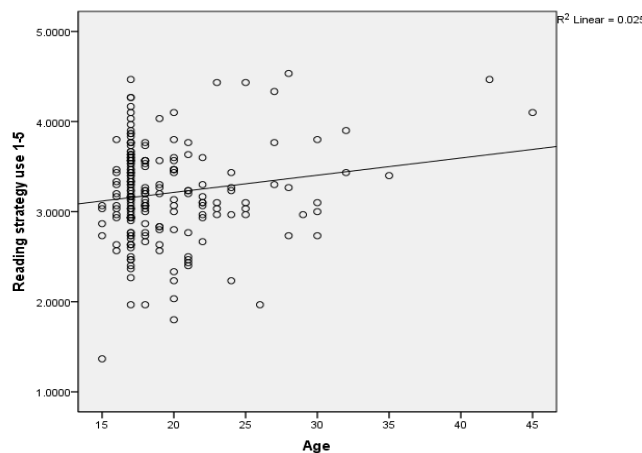


Figure 1. The relationship between the use of general SORS EFL reading strategies and age of the participants.

As it can be seen in Figure 1, a significant relationship existed between the SORS EFL reading strategy use of the participants and their age, i.e. the reading strategy use of the participants has significantly increased as a result of their age increase; though, the participants mostly were at medium ($M=3.20$) EFL reading strategy use range (2.41-3.49).

In addition to the mentioned analyses, the two age groups were also compared in their use of any of the subscales of reading strategy use (GLOB, PROB, SUP).



The T-test results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The descriptive statistics related to the differences of the two age groups in their use of the SORS subscales (GLOB, PROB, SUP).

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
GLOB	High school	120	3.19	0.56
	university	80	3.16	0.64
PROB	High school	120	3.42	0.63
	university	80	3.34	0.64
SUP	High school	120	3.03	0.64
	university	80	3.11	0.67

Table 4. The results of the independent samples t-test to compare the two age groups in their use of SORS subscales (GLOB, PROB, SUP).

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
GLOB	Equal variances assumed	0.071	0.79	0.35	198	0.72
	Equal variances not assumed			0.36	152.59	0.73
PROB	Equal variances assumed	0.25	0.62	0.80	198	0.42
	Equal variances not assumed			0.80	169.18	0.42
SUP	Equal variances assumed	0.075	0.78	-0.78	198	0.43
	Equal variances not assumed			-0.77	163.68	0.44

As it is clear from Table 4, there existed no significant difference between the two age groups in their use of SORS EFL reading strategy subscales.

Was there any significant correlation between the age of the participants and their use of the EFL reading strategies?

While being interviewed, ten out of the sixteen interviewee participants thought that age did not necessarily affect the use of EFL reading strategies.

"I do not think mere higher or lower age can affect use of reading strategies, while the person might lack proficiency in the target language." one of the interviewees said.

According to these ten interviewees, the most effective matter in the use of EFL reading strategies was a person's proficiency in the target language rather than his/her age.



"A person might only be a high school student who has attended private language classes from childhood but still use more and better strategies than a university lecturer who has never attended private language institutes and his/her knowledge of English language is confined to what s/he has learnt along years of studying in the Iranian educational system which is not that much helpful in making you the least proficient in English." another interviewee commented.

However, the other six interviewees believed that as a result of the university students' being more mature minded and experienced in studying, in addition to attending university entrance exam preparation classes, they might be more active users of strategies and be more familiar with such strategies than high school students.

"I think, the university students might use the EFL reading strategies more actively because first, they have got more mature and logical ways of thinking because of being older and more experienced in thinking and studying and next, they are more familiar with strategies as a matter of attending university entrance examination preparation classes. For example, I myself learnt a few strategies with which I am familiar now in these classes and not at high school." another university student interviewee believed.

Some of the interviewees thought that the older you get, the better strategies you may use as a result of getting more experienced in reading and identifying your own needs and priorities while reading:

"I think there should of course exist some differences between younger and older language learners in their use of reading strategies. The older you get the more experienced in reading you get and you will also learn how to solve your problems in lack of understanding. However, this maturity depends on your being a persistent reader and not everybody becomes a better reader just as a result of getting older. I mean, if you compare two persistent readers of the same language proficiency, one 15 and one 25, with no doubt the 25-year-old participant will outperform the younger one." another interviewee argued.

Also Pearson correlation coefficient test was used to analyse the SORS completion in the interview results of the sixteen participants. The results showed significant correlation between the age of the interviewee participants and their use of SORS EFL reading strategies in general. The results of Pearson product moment correlation coefficient ran over the interviewee participants' report of SORS use are presented in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5. The descriptive statistics related to the relationship between the participant interviewees' age and their reported use of the SORS strategies in the interview.

Descriptive Statistics			
Reading strategy use (1-5)	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
	3.22	.626	8
Age	19.12	3.26	8

Table 6. The relationship between the participant interviewees' age and their reported use of the SORS strategies in the interview.

	Age (16-25)
Pearson Correlation	.565*



Reading Strategy Use	Sig. (2-tailed)	.022
	N	16

Discussion

The findings from the quantitative phase data analysis through Pearson correlation coefficient showed significant ($P=.025<.05$) correlation between the participants' age and their use of EFL reading strategies, i.e. the older the participants were the more strategic they were. The older participants' being more strategic might be a result of their being more experienced in reading. The results of interviews, half supported and half contradicted these results. Ten out of the sixteen interviewees thought that age did not affect the use of EFL reading strategies. According to this group, the most effective matters in use of strategies were the persons' EFL proficiency and EFL reading comprehension ability and not his/her age. However, the other six interviewees believed that as a result of the university students' being more mature minded and experienced in studying, in addition to attending university entrance exam preparation classes, in which a lot of attention is directed toward strategy teaching to increase the university entrance examination attendants speed of test answering, might be more active users of strategies and be more familiar with such strategies than high school students.

Also, analyzing the results of the interviewees' oral completion of SORS along the interview phase through T-test, were in the same line with the quantitative phase results. The Pearson test revealed a significant positive relationship between the participants' age and their use of SORS EFL reading strategies.

The results of this section of the study were consistent with Victori and Tragant (2003) and Chesterfield and Chesterfield (1985) study findings. They reported that as their studies' participants got older, they used higher number and more useful strategies. The same as the present study results, one of the reasons they introduced for their studies' participants use of greater number of strategies was their getting more proficient in the target language by the passage of time which is still accurate based on the present study findings. Also, Victori and Tragant's (2003) study participants of the beginning and ending years of high school did not show significant differences in their use of strategies as a result of being similarly proficient in their second language and their 10-year-old participants used less strategies because of being less proficient and less experienced in their second language. Furthermore, Chesterfield and Chesterfield (1985), reported the link between their study participant's proficiency improvement, ageing and improvement in their use of more successful strategies, emphasizing the importance of the learners' proficiency role in their use of strategies and not their age as an individual factor apart from their attempts for becoming more proficient in the target language. However, based on the results of the fourth research question data analysis which showed no significant correlation between the language proficiency and reading strategy use of the participants, the present study did not support Chesterfield and Chesterfield's (1985) claim in their study. The present researcher's conclusion based on the present results was to link the increase in use of strategies to the readers' experience which increased by the passage of time. On the other hand, Javadi et al. (2010) did not report of any correlation between their study



participants' age and metacognitive awareness of reading strategies which is opposite to the present study's findings.

In the qualitative phase of the study, all the 16 interviewees, based on their own personal experiences, suggested that the teaching of more useful reading strategies was, with no doubt, useful and the useful strategies should be a must from the beginning, i.e. when a person starts learning the target language and has not still formed habits in reading and comprehending the target texts which will later be very difficult to be changed after being established.

The two age groups were compared in their use of any of the 30 SORS EFL reading strategies separately.

One of the other analyses conducted under the first research question, was comparing the two age groups in their use of any of SORS subscales, which showed no significant difference between the two age group participants in their use of any of the subscales.

Based on the present study findings in this section, also according to the sixteen interviewees' viewpoints, it could be concluded that EFL reading strategy teaching should turn into a must in the Iranian educational system; however, the type of strategies taught at each educational and age level should be decided based on the EFL proficiency of the language learners and not merely based on their age. Also, the fact that the older participants who came out to be more proficient too use more EFL reading strategies was a good support for the claim that reading strategy instruction is basically disregarded in the Iranian educational system, and a good reason to insist on a place for their instruction as early as the beginning of EFL instruction in the educational system. Also, the fact that age increase equaled strategy use increase was a good support for emphasis on persuasion of the students to read actively to get more experienced in use of appropriate strategies.



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