

COGNITIVE STRATEGIES IN READING CRITICALLY BY HIGH AND LOW ACHIEVERS

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Abstract

This study aims to answer the following questions: 1) What are the cognitive strategies employed by high and low achievers? 2) What are the differences in cognitive strategies employed by high and low achievers? The participants were six second-year students from the English Education Study Program; three considered high achievers and three others low achievers in reading. This is a qualitative study. Three observations and retrospective interviews were conducted to obtain the data. The topics of the reading text for the three meetings are all different. The results showed that the high achievers used resourcing, repetition, summarizing, and inferencing cognitive strategies; while, the low achievers used resourcing, repetition, and summarizing cognitive strategies. Therefore, there were two significant differences in cognitive strategies in reading employed by the high and low achievers.

Keywords: *Cognitive strategies, critical reading, high and low achievers*

Introduction

In the process of learning, it is possible to find people who can learn things very quickly and well. On the other hand, some people may have problems with understanding things fast. Many researchers have tried to find out how learners learn something, what makes learners successful in learning something, and why some people are more effective in learning than others. These questions can possibly be answered by investigating the learning strategies used by the learners (William & Burden, 1997). In the recent era, there have been numerous studies focusing on learning strategies used by language learners. Basically, research on learning strategies had two major goals. The first is to identify and compare the learning strategies used by more and less successful language learners. Secondly, to provide instruction to less successful learners that help them to become more successful in their language learning (Chamot, 2001). In addition, many researchers such as Dreyer and Oxford (1996), Grenfell and Harris (1999), Harris (2003), and Wharton (2000) state that language learners utilize a variety of learning strategies, whether consciously or unconsciously. However, successful language learners usually employ more effective and various language learning strategies than less successful learners. Thus, one of the factors in English language teaching which needs to be

taken into account is learning strategies. In order to help language learners in general and less successful learners in particular, researchers have recommended integrating strategy training into language curricula (Chamot & Kupper, 1989; Tyacke, 1991).

Learning reading has never been easy, especially for Indonesian students since English is only taught as a foreign language. As a matter of fact, students only learn and use English in the classroom as the demand for the curriculum and not in daily activities. Reading difficulties faced by students in EFL settings come from different sources: poor interpretation of the texts, poor vocabulary, the use of inappropriate reading strategies, and poor grammatical competences (Behroozizad & Bakhtiyarzadeh, 2012). Research shows that Indonesian students' ability to read English text is very low (Hamra & Satriyana, 2012). In reading, we find a technical term called Critical reading. Critical here does not mean being "critical" about some idea, argument, or piece of writing or claiming that it is somehow faulty or flawed. More than that, critical reading means a process of analyzing, interpreting, and sometimes evaluating. Moving beyond comprehension, advanced EFL learners need to approach texts with a critical mind. When reading critically, readers use their critical thinking skills to question both the text and their own reading of it. In doing all these processes, it is not as easy as what we see. Learners need to employ strategies in enhancing their critical reading. Suppose reading is an interactive process between the text and the reader to co-construct meaning. In that case, teachers need to know which reading strategies students are successfully using to facilitate that interaction and the students' further interpretation. Before reading, a good reader usually plans their activities from the beginning, the subgoals of action, the means, etc., through which the reader will increase the possibilities to achieve their ultimate goal. According to Gourgey (as cited in Dermitzaki et al., 2008), once actual reading begins, skilled readers are able to distinguish important information or to skip information that is not relevant to their reading goals, to predict what is coming up next, and to analyze and combine activities and information. Skilled readers while reading might also activate prior knowledge, generate questions and pay attention to confusing or inconsistent points (Pressley & Hilden, 2006). Critical reading can be a part of advanced reading courses for they have a positive impact on students' capability to differentiate facts from opinions, make inferences, recognize bias and prejudice, and identify various types of propaganda. Khabiri and Pakzad (as cited in Suacillo et al., 2016) state that the application of critical reading strategies helps students improve their vocabulary and make its retention easier, thus helping them become more independent and successful readers. Furthermore, Kadir (2014, as cited in Suacillo et al., 2016) posits that students become critical thinkers by learning first the critical reading skills wherein they were asked to comprehend the text by analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating.

As this field has been investigated before, the previous study conducted by Ratna (2014) under the title "The Use of Cognitive Reading Strategies to Enhance EFL Students' Reading Comprehension" used a questionnaire administered to 76 students and TAP (Think-Aloud Protocol) conducted with 15 students who represented three categories as high, middle, and low achievers. The study found that the cognitive reading strategies most frequently used by students are title prediction, guessing word meaning, using the dictionary for the important words, and considering other sentences in the paragraph to figure out the meaning. However, the use of Think-Aloud Protocol (TAP) in the research might not be effective because no

informant training was conducted by the researcher before attempting to do the Think-Aloud Protocol (TAP). As Ericson and Simon (1980, as cited in O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) state that "informant training is strongly recommended for the think-aloud procedure because of the potential confusion over what to report in the interview." Besides, the study reported that during data collection using Think-Aloud Protocol, the participants were typically interrupted at various points as they were working on the test given while listening and answering to the questions asked by the researcher; thus, the participants might be confused and possibly lead to unascertainable answers which could lead to the unreliable result.

Furthermore, Khasanah (2014) conducted research to analyze learning strategies used by the three students who have high, middle, and low marks in reading to develop vocabulary, pronunciation, and understanding of implicit information. The study used observation and interviews to collect data and found that these students employed metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective strategies differently. However, what was missing from this study was that the researcher did not provide clear information regarding how she conducted the observation toward the participants whether or not the observation was taken in a formal class to keep the circumstances as natural as possible.

Therefore, this present study is different from the previous studies in several ways as it was conducted qualitatively, where six second-year university students who are classified as high and low achievers in reading were involved. Besides, the instruments used in the study were observation and retrospective interview to investigate how low and high achievers use their cognitive strategies in reading and examine whether or not there were any differences of strategies employed by these two types of learners.

Literature Review

According to Oxford (1990, p. 8), "learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations." Wenden and Rubin (1987, p. 23) say that "learning strategies are strategies which contribute to the development of the language system in which the learner constructs and affects learning directly." Brown (2000, p. 113) states that "strategies are specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation for achieving a particular end, and planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information. In addition, Griffiths (2007, cited in Gerami & Baighlou, 2011) defines language learning strategies as activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning. Finally, O'Malley and Chamot (1990, p. 1) state that "learning strategies are special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information." For O'Malley and Chamot (1990), learning strategies may include focusing on selected aspects of new information, analyzing and monitoring information during acquisition, organizing or elaborating new information during the encoding process, and evaluating the learning when it is completed or assuring oneself that the learning will be successful as a way to allay anxiety. In other words, when learners start to learn something, they have the ability to respond to particular learning situations. Learners use strategies in order to learn something successfully. In this study, learning strategies are actions and behaviors used

by learners to help their learning be more successful, especially in reading. According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), there are three categories of learning strategies depending on the level or type of processing involved: Metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective strategies. Cognitive strategies are divided into two: covert and overt strategies.

Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive strategies are higher-order executive skills that may entail planning, monitoring, and evaluating the success of a learning activity. Metacognitive strategies are applicable to a variety of learning tasks. Among the processes that would be included as metacognitive strategies for receptive or productive language task are selective attention for special aspects of a learning task, as in planning to listen for keywords or phrases; planning the organization of either written or spoken discourse; monitoring or reviewing attention to a task, monitoring comprehension for information that should be remembered, or monitoring production while it is occurring; and evaluating or checking comprehension after completion of receptive language activity, or evaluating language production after it has taken place.

Metacognitive are employed by the learners to help them coordinate the learning process by centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating their learning; this helps the learners to control their own learning. Students will also be able to plan what their strategies should be and change the strategies if they are not suitable. For example, overviewing with already known material and deciding in advance what to pay attention to.

Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive strategies refer to the steps or operations used in learning or problem-solving, which require direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Cognitive strategies are the various rehearsal, elaboration, and organizational strategies, such as analyzing and combining activities and choosing between main and trivial information (Mayer, 1998; Pintrich, 1999; Pressley & Hilden, 2006; Weinstein et al., 2000; Wolters & Pintrich, 1998). Cognitive strategies enable students to make progress and to build knowledge. Cognitive strategies are mental steps or operations that learners use to process both linguistic and sociolinguistic content (Wenden, 1991). Cognitive strategies operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). They help students to understand and produce the new language by repeating, summarizing, reasoning deductively, predicting, analyzing, using context clues, note-taking, and practicing with the specific aspects of the target language such as sentence structure and unknown vocabulary. The advantage of cognitive strategies in reading becomes the consideration of why the strategy is chosen. Several previous studies have also revealed that the use of cognitive learning strategies in classroom instruction and learning is fundamental to successful learning (Ozek & Civelek, 2016; Ratna, 2004).

In learning, learners need to be provided with appropriate ways of instruction to use cognitive strategies as efficiently and effectively as possible. Rubin (1975, as cited in Wenden & Rubin, 1987) identified six main cognitive learning strategies contributing directly to language learning: clarification/verification, guessing/inductive inference, deductive reasoning, practice, memorization, and monitoring. The cognitive strategies mentioned before

are also in line with those identified by O'Malley and Chamot (1990), including resourcing, repetition, grouping, deduction, imagery, getting an idea quickly, elaboration, and inferencing, note-taking, and summarizing.

Cognitive reading strategies, according to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), that is going to be investigated by the writer in this study are resourcing, repetition, grouping, note-taking, summarizing, getting the idea quickly, inferencing, deduction, imagery, and elaboration.

Resourcing refers to a way of using target language reference materials such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, or textbook (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990).

Repetition means imitating a language model, including overt practice and silent rehearsal. Repetition means repeating a chunk of language (a word or phrase) in the course of performing a language task. Oxford (1990) states that in reading, the strategy of rereading passage more than once to understand the material completely. The repetition strategy can be used by the students as they want to remember important points. For example, the students reread a sentence or reread a text to remedy failures.

Grouping means classifying words, terminology, or concepts according to their attributes or meaning. Grouping strategy in reading involves classifying or reclassifying what is read into meaningful groups, thus reducing the number of unrelated elements. For example, classifying the words according to their grammatical categories.

Note-taking means writing down keywords and concepts in abbreviated verbal, graphic, or numerical form while listening or reading. Note-taking makes students become active participants in their learning, helps them organize important concepts, remember information, and becomes one of their study aids.

Summarizing means making a mental, oral, or written summary of new information gained through listening or reading. The process of summarizing enables learners to grasp the original text better. The knowledge gained by summarizing makes it possible for learners to analyze and critique the original text.

The strategy of getting the idea quickly involves skimming and scanning strategy. Skimming involves searching for the main ideas the speaker wants to get across, while scanning means searching for specific details or interest to the learner. Skimming is also usually defined as quick, superficial reading or a text in order to get the gist of it, whereas scanning is looking for specific information in the text and ignoring the rest.

Inferencing means using available information to guess the meaning of new items, predict outcomes, or fill in the missing information. This strategy can be used as learners attempt to comprehend the text. For example, the strategy of using the title to predict the content of the text and paying attention to words or phrases that show how text is organized.

Deduction strategy means applying rules to understand or produce a second language or making up rules based on language analysis. This strategy is a top-down strategy leading from general to specific. For example, reading the first line of every paragraph to understand the whole text.

Imagery means using visual images (either mental or actual) to understand or remember new information. This is a good strategy for remembering what has been read in the new language to create a mental image of it. An example of this strategy is looking at an illustration/picture of the events in mind.

Elaboration means relating new information to prior knowledge, relating different parts of new information to each other, or making meaningful personal associations with the new information. Elaboration refers to additional processing of the text by the reader, which may increase comprehension. It involves forming a connection between the text and the reader's background knowledge of the subject.

Socio-Affective Strategies

Socio-affective strategies are the mental and physical activities that language learners consciously choose to regulate their emotions and interactions with other people during their language learning process. Socio-affective strategies represent a broad grouping that involves either interaction with another person or ideational control over effect (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), there are 3 kinds of socio-affective strategies. First, question for clarification. This strategy means eliciting from a teacher or peer additional explanation, rephrasing, example, or verification. Next, cooperation, meaning working together with one or more peers to solve a problem, pool information, check a learning task, model a language activity, or get feedback on oral or written performance. Next, self-talk, a strategy aiming to reduce anxiety by using mental techniques that make one feel competent to do the learning task. Finally, self-reinforcement, meaning provide personal motivation by arranging rewards for oneself when a language learning activity has been successfully completed.

Overt and Covert Strategies

Some learning strategies occur overtly and are relatively easy to observe. In contrast, other strategies occur only covertly and require introspective forms of data collection in which the informant provides a description of the strategy used (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Overt learning strategies are "readily apparent" and observable by the observer, and covert learning strategies are "only mental activity" and thus not directly observable like overt learning strategies. Cognitive strategies, which are classified as overt learning strategies, are resourcing, grouping, note-taking, and summarizing. While cognitive strategies that are classified as covert learning strategies are repetition, deduction, imagery, getting the idea quickly, elaboration, and inferencing.

Research Methodology

The data obtained from three observations and a retrospective interview with six participants who have passed the previous compulsory reading classes (Intensive Course Reading and Pronunciation, Oral and Literal Reading, and Interpretive and Affective Reading). The classification of high and low achiever was made based on (1) the score/mark they obtained during the time they enrolled in the previous reading classes and (2) an informal interview aiming for confirmation to the lecturers who taught the previous reading classes just to really make sure that the chosen students really deserve to be classified as high and low achievers in reading based on their scores. Students who are considered as high achievers in reading are the students who got A or A-. Meanwhile, students who are considered as low achievers in reading

are the students who only got C+ or C constantly in all the previous reading classes they have passed. In each meeting, the participants were given a reading text by the lecturer, and the writer observed the overt cognitive strategies.

Enrolling in critical reading class means that the students as the readers should apply certain processes, models, questions, and theories that result in enhanced clarity and comprehension. In critical reading class this year, to facilitate students' learning, the lecturer prompted the use of CommonLit (<https://www.commonlit.org/>) in the classroom. CommonLit is a free digital tool that helps students make measurable gains in reading and writing. Lecturers and/or teachers can go to CommonLit website, create a free account, and access a free library of high-interest, standards-aligned lessons. This channel is a set of analytics tools that will enable lecturers and/or teachers to track students' progress toward students' mastery of specific literacy skills. One key aspect is that it is leveled. Students can come in at a range of different levels and make progress fast. It is not just for struggling readers or advanced readers. It helps the lecturers and/or teachers personalized instruction so that they can better address the unique needs of individual students. In critical reading class this year, all the students were asked to access, created an account, and the lecturer will just tag them the link of the reading they should read and work on. Every week, the lecturer gave a different reading text with its own level of difficulty. To measure the level of difficulty of a text, there is a system known as the Lexile Framework. There are 2 Lexile measures: the Lexile reader measure and the Lexile text measure. A Lexile reader measure represents a person's reading ability on the Lexile scale. A Lexile text measure represents a text's difficulty level on the Lexile scale. Basically, the higher the Lexile of a text, the harder the text would be. The first text given has a Lexile number of 1330, the second text was 970, and the last text was 590. Meaning that according to the theory and the result of retrospective interviews, the text given at the first meeting was the most difficult text, followed by the text at the second meeting, and lastly, the very last text given at the third meeting was the easiest one

In observing the participants, the writer took the videos of them working on the tasks, and later the video will be used for conducting the retrospective interview. After the class meeting, the writer conducted a retrospective interview to elicit the covert cognitive strategies and make sure all the participants used the overt cognitive strategies. In analyzing the data, there are several steps the writer took. Firstly, the writer transcribed the results of the observations and retrospective interviews. Secondly, the writer did a data reduction." This process whereby the mass of qualitative data the writer obtained in the form of interview transcripts and observations were reduced and organized by discarding all the irrelevant data. Thirdly, data display. The data was interpreted and described, and displayed in the form of tables. Lastly, the writer drew a conclusion to consider what the analyzed data mean and to assess their implications for the questions which need to be answered.

Findings and Discussion

To address the first question, Table 1 shows the cognitive strategies employed by the high and low achievers.

Table 1
Cognitive Strategies by Low and High Achievers

Cognitive Strategies	Activities	Users
Resourcing	Consulting to bilingual and monolingual dictionaries and using google translation for getting meaning of difficult words found on the text.	High achievers
Repetition	Rereading the whole text to get a clear understanding of the contents of the text	High achievers
Note-taking	Taking notes to new and important information found in the text	Low achievers (participant 3 and 4)
Summarizing	Writing the summary of each text and or summarizing orally.	High Achievers
Getting the idea quickly	Implementing the strategy of skimming and scanning	Participant 4 and 5
Inferencing	Using the title to predict the contents of the text	Participant 1
Deduction	Reading the first line of each paragraph to understand the whole text	Participant 6
Imagery	Observing and looking at the pictures provided in the text to predict the content of the text	Participant 3 and 4
Elaboration	Connecting the prior knowledge with the new information to increase comprehension	Participant 3, 4, and 6

After observations and interviews, it can be concluded that low achievers applied fewer cognitive strategies, such as resourcing, repetition, and summarizing. Two participants employed the inference strategy, and only one participant employed imagery, note-taking, and elaboration strategy. On the other hand, high achievers applied slightly higher as five cognitive strategies were used by participants 5 and 8, while cognitive strategies employed by participant 4. The cognitive strategies that were constantly used by all high achievers were resourcing, repetition, summarizing, and inferencing strategy. Only one participant employed imagery and note-taking strategy, and two participants employed elaboration strategy. It was also good that one participant managed to employ a deduction strategy.

Furthermore, the differences in cognitive strategies employed by high and low achievers were as follows. All the high achievers respectively employed deduction, summarizing, and getting the ideas of cognitive strategies in three class meetings of the critical reading class. The three overt strategies were used, including resourcing, note-taking, and summarizing, and six covert strategies were applied, they are, repetition, deduction, imagery, getting the idea quickly, elaboration, and inferencing. On the other hand, all the low achievers employed grouping, note-taking, and inference for their ten cognitive strategies. Three overt strategies were used, resourcing, note-taking, and summarizing, and only 4 out of 6 covert strategies were employed for repetition, imagery, elaboration, and inferencing. Interestingly, one low achiever employed seven cognitive strategies where this participant (P3) used imagery, for example, because she was already used to drawing and loving pictures. When she saw the pictures, she would always be interested and curious about the picture.

In addition, during the observation, the researcher had watched and took note of the way the participants implemented each cognitive strategy in helping them work on the reading texts. Firstly, they used a resourcing strategy where all the low achievers tend only to consult the bilingual dictionary and even copied the whole text directly to Google Translate because they really cannot understand and get the points of the text. Unlike them, the high achievers tended to look for the meaning of the word first in the monolingual dictionary. Indirectly, this method helped them add their vocabulary. After they understood the meaning of the word, they opened the bilingual dictionary to know the meaning of a specific word in the Indonesian Language to answer their curiosity. Secondly, they also applied a repetition strategy. Even if the low achievers have used a bilingual dictionary and translated the whole text using Google Translate; still the frequency of the low achievers reread the texts was far more than the high achievers. While the high achievers only needed 2 to 3 times to get a clear understanding of the text, the low achievers needed 4 to 7 times or even more. Thirdly, an elaboration strategy was also used. Although there was one low achiever who used this strategy, even if she had prior knowledge about the text, she did not utilize the prior knowledge to help her develop her understanding of the text. She explained, "I remembered when I was in high school I learned about this, but that only made me think. Oh, it turns out that in English there is also material about genetics, I did not use it to understand the reading text".

It is different from the high achievers who connected their prior knowledge to the new information they got in order to make them understand more about the contents of the text. Participant 6, a high achiever, argued, "I remembered the material when I was in my junior high school, and it helped me a lot when I answered the question in the assignment. Armed with the memories of my middle school years, I could guess the answers easily and also understand the whole text well" in the third interview."

Lastly, the fact that only high achievers used getting the idea quickly and deduction strategy and none of the low achiever used these strategies has been proved the findings of the expert saying that successful language learners usually employ more effective and various language learning strategies than less successful learners (Dreyer & Oxford, 1996; Grenfell & Harris, 1999; Harris, 2003; Wharton, 2000) is true.

Conclusion

The findings of this study provided a better understanding of language learning strategies used among high and low achievers of the second year students of the English Education Study program. High achiever students seemed to employ cognitive strategies far more effectively than the low achiever students to facilitate their own learning in working on several critical reading texts given by the lecturer.

In terms of the number or amount of cognitive, there is no significant difference at all. Firstly, the high achiever students have reportedly used 8, 5, and 6 cognitive strategies, respectively, out of 10 strategies mentioned by the writer on the theory. There were three overt and six covert cognitive strategies that are repeatedly being used by the high achievers. On the other hand, low achiever students have reportedly used 3, 4, and 7 out of 10 cognitive strategies. In resourcing, none of them has ever consulted a monolingual dictionary; instead, they consulted only a bilingual dictionary.

Based on the research findings, the following are some suggestions to those deemed to have a link to language learning in general and the use of learning strategies in learning. Firstly, language learners are expected to be aware of what learning strategies they choose to use. Choosing the right learning strategy suitable for the learners will help the learners be able to do what is requested or demanded by a text and let the learners be able to develop and increase their comprehension. Secondly, lecturers and/or teachers are expected to expose kinds of language learning strategies to the learners as early as possible. Thus, the learners will get a clear understanding of the language learning strategies and how to employ the strategies effectively in order to get the maximum result and develop learner's comprehension optimally. Lecturers and/or teachers are also demanded to give various kinds of tasks with different types and varying levels of difficulty in order to trigger the learners to employ the language learning strategies they have known. Lastly, future researchers are expected to dig more about the relation between the number of language learning strategies and how the learners employed them with the learners' personality. Researchers may also try to find the relation between a number of language learning strategies and how they employed the language learning strategies in relation to the learners' comprehension.

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