L2 Reading: Strategies and Gender Preferences in the Foreign Language Classroom

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L2 reading comprehension and the development of strategies that further students' foreign language development are critical for learners and teachers. Drawing from current research on reading strategies and gender, this article discusses existing and emerging trends on the use of specific reading strategies as they pertain to gender preferences, and proposes pedagogical recommendations that address the needs of each gender while keeping the classroom balanced and free of gender biases.

Keywords: *teaching L2 reading comprehension, reading strategies, gender preferences, cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies.*

Lectura en L2: Estrategias y preferencias de género en la clase de lengua extranjera

La comprensión lectora en una L2 y el desarrollo de estrategias que fomenten el progreso en la adquisición de la lengua extranjera de los estudiantes son fundamentales para los aprendices y los profesores. A partir de las recientes investigaciones sobre estrategias de lectura y género, este artículo analiza las tendencias existentes y emergentes sobre el uso de estrategias específicas de lectura en relación con las preferencias de género, y se proponen recomendaciones pedagógicas que abordan las necesidades de cada género manteniendo el salón de clase equilibrado y libre de sesgos de género.

Palabras clave: *enseñanza de la comprensión lectora en una L2, estrategias de lectura, preferencias de género, estrategias cognitivas y metacognitivas.*

1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is one of the most essential skills in higher education. Additionally, the overwhelming majority of societies are multilingual; therefore; their citizens are expected to read fluently in more than one language. An increasing number of people need to be able to read in an L2 at a high level of proficiency to achieve personal, professional and occupational goals. This means that learners need to have access to a variety of texts from the beginning of their foreign/second language education. However, reading proficiency in an L2 is a complex process that involves multiple variables, and, compared with L1 reading, does not receive as much attention or time as needed. Actually in the United States, L1 reading is the main goal of Kindergarten to six grade and multiple resources are given by the educational system to teach L1 reading. Contrary to this scenario, L2 reading continues to be a silent activity completed outside of the foreign language classroom without any strategic training. Moreover, L2 readers are rarely given the same amount of time and resources to become skilled readers in a second/foreign language, despite similarly demanding expectations for success.

Research has shown to date that L2 reading proficiency is strongly connected to the strategies that L2 readers use when they interpret L2 texts (Makhtari & Reichard, 2008; Oxford, 2011) and involves the coordination of lower and higher level of processing (Grabe, 2009). Furthermore, skilled L2 readers utilize wider varieties of strategies than those who have difficulties reading in an L2. Learners' individual differences also play a role in the quest for L2 reading proficiency, particularly gender. In light of this context, and drawing from current research, this article will discuss existing and emerging trends on the use of specific reading strategies as they pertain to gender preferences, and propose pedagogical recommendations that address the needs of each gender while keeping the classroom balanced and free of gender biases.

2. Emerging Trends on the Use of Reading Strategies and Gender Preferences

Research on strategy use is a key point in the context of L2 reading comprehension, as most experts argue that skilled readers are those who creatively use a wide array of strategies to access and process L2 texts (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002). Skillful L2 reading is particularly important in higher education where professors expect a more independent and critical reading. Furthermore, strategic awareness and monitoring of the reading comprehension process are critically important to become a skillful L2 reader (Koda, 2005; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001).

However, the study of reading strategies is not an easy endeavor; the first obstacle is the definition of the concept strategy. Abbott (2006:636) explains the challenges associated with the definition of this notion: "The very concept of strategy is difficult to define, observe, measure, describe and classify." Nevertheless, she offers a definition of strategy as "the mental processes or behaviors that language learners employ in L2 acquisition, L2 use, or L2 testing simulation" (Abbott, 2006:637). In the realm of reading comprehension, she describes strategies as "mental operations or comprehension processes that readers select and apply in order to make sense of what they

read" (Abbott, 2006:637). Taylor, Stevens & Asher (2006:214) also states that "strategies are defined as techniques explicitly taught to L2 learners with the goal to enhance L2 reading comprehension." Strategies, generally, are considered to be conscious acts, and thus, open to self-analysis (Abbott, 2006). There are different types of strategies, those that are directly applied to an L2 text (cognitive strategies) and those that are indirectly applied to the language learning process (metacognitive strategies). Cognitive strategies help learners to reconstruct meaning from an L2 text, whereas metacognitive strategies regulate or monitor cognitive strategies (Grabe, 2009; Koda, 2005).

Research in field of L2 reading comprehension (Cohen, 2007; Grabe, 2004; Paris 2002; Zhang, 2003) has revealed that strategies have the potential to be used effectively or ineffectively in different contexts; they are not inherently good or bad. Additionally, strategies can be maximized for optimal effects in solving comprehension problems (Hudson, 2007; Zhang, 2008). Some strategies are mainly text-bound, where learners are trying to make sense of what they are reading. They are local and language-based, focusing primarily on text details that are related to lower level cues in a passage, for instance: breaking words into smaller particles (prefixes or suffixes), applying knowledge of syntactic structures, scanning for details within the L2 text, looking for important vocabulary or key phrases. While the reader is processing all this information, they use more global strategies to determine how this data is related to the L2 text as a whole. In order to do this, the learner uses background knowledge, tries to make predictions, and scans the whole L2 text for more clues. Global strategies are metacognitive in nature, and play a significant role in language learning and in L2 reading comprehension (Anderson, 2005). Furthermore, global and knowledge-based reading strategies are generally associated with higher level cues in the L2 text which the reader is trying to process. For instance: identifying the main idea, integrating disseminated information, making an inference, predicting meaning, among others.

Research on reading comprehension and language learning strategy use, in general show that skilled readers are likely to use more strategies than less skillful readers (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001). For example, Zhang (2001) found that low-level L2 readers used fewer strategies than their more proficient counterparts. Skillful readers in this study frequently used skimming strategies; they made predictions, and monitored comprehension, which are more global and knowledge-based reading strategies. A number of studies using strategy inventories with ESL students have also showed significant strategy use differences between more skilled and less skillful readers, where the former appear to be more active strategy users than the later (see Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001; Sheorey & Baboczky, 2008; Sheorey, Kamimura & Freiermuth, 2008).

Several studies using strategy inventories have also found significant strategy use differences between more proficient and less proficient readers. Specifically, the Survey of Reading Strategies or SORS, developed by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002), has been used in a number of empirical studies showing that those who were more skillful readers used more strategies than their counterparts.

Now, in terms of gender and strategy use, a number of studies in this area show that women tend to be superior strategy users than men. However, results in this area of research are far from conclusive. For example, Sheorey & Mokhtari (2001) used the SORS with 152 ESL students and found gender differences that favored female students. Poole (2005) conducted another study using SORS with 328 Chinese ESL students, and his results showed that women used significantly more strategies than men. Sheorey (2006) conducted another SORS-based study with 599 ESL Indian students; his results revealed that females used significantly more strategies than males. Sheorey and Baboczy (2008) used the same instrument with Hungarian ESL students, and obtained similar results where women outperformed men on strategy use. Finally, Poole (2009) conducted another study where he used the SORS with 352 Colombian ESL students. The results showed that females' overall strategy use was significantly higher than their males' counterpart.

Although these studies point to a trend where females outperform males in using reading comprehension strategies, most research have been conducted in the area of ESL. More investigations that focus on gender differences and strategies use in other languages than English are needed to determine if indeed there is a gap between males and females in strategy use. This type of research is crucial for foreign language teachers and programs directors in helping determine whether or not they are appropriately addressing their students' literacy needs, and addressing any possible gender bias.

3. L2 Reading Comprehension Strategies and Gender: What Strategies do Female and Male Students Use?

Drawing from the research presented in the previous section, this segment of the article discusses the strategy used by skillful readers as they access L2 passages.

A considerable number of studies in the realm of L2 reading comprehension (Fraser, 2004; Nassaji, 2003) have pointed that less skillful L2 readers are slower in word recognition and generally weak at rapid and automatic syntactic processing. On the other hand, skillful readers usually have at least a basic knowledge of the target language and reasonable size of vocabulary which according to empirical research in the field (Alderson, 2000; Grabe & Stoller, 2002) should range from 10,000 to 100,000 words. Furthermore, there are multiple empirical studies that demonstrate a strong correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading ability (Droop & Verhoeven, 2003; Qian, 2002; Grabe, 2004). Therefore, vocabulary building activities in the foreign language classroom are crucial in fostering proficient L2 readers.

In terms of strategy use and gender, there are just a handful of studies on this topic and results are not conclusive. Most of them have been conducted among ESL students and they have used the Survey of Reading Strategies or SORS (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002) as their main tool for capturing the nature and frequency of strategies that English language learners use. The SORS contains three types of strategies: global (13 items), problem-solving (8 items), and support (9 items).

Global strategies are those which learners use to monitor their progress, and

to monitor the use of other strategies, to plan for reading a particular text, and to set reading objectives depending on the type of passage at hand. Problem solving strategies involve measures learners undertake to comprehend a specific text while they are engaged with it, such as getting back on track when they lose concentration, reading carefully, and visualizing information in the text they are processing. Finally, support strategies are those tools students utilize when text comprehension eludes them, even after global and problem-solving strategies have been used. Such strategies include using a bilingual dictionary, asking oneself questions, and translating from English into the learner's native language.

The instrument was validated by Mokhtari & Sheorey (2002), and there are some studies that have used this tool to explore how ESL students interact with different types of texts, what strategies they use, and what types and frequency of strategies female and male students use when reading an L2 passage.

There are few studies that explore gender differences in terms of strategy use. However, since all these studies used the SORS, their results are comparable and some conclusions can be drawn based on its results. Sheorey & Mokhtari (2001) explore whether there are differences between ESL and U.S. students in their reading comprehension strategy use while reading academic materials. Their results show no statistically significant differences in regards to individual strategies or strategy categories between male and female ESL students, except in one support reading strategy which favors female ESL students. However, U. S. female students had higher

mean scores (indicative of their more frequent reported use of strategies) for 21 of the 30 strategy statements. The overall female mean for all the strategy categories was higher than that for males; although only the mean for support reading strategy category was statistically significant. These results indicate that, at least in this study, female U. S. students used more frequently strategies such as taking notes while reading, underlining information in the text, paraphrasing for better understanding, going back and forth in the text, and asking oneself questions about the passage.

In Sheorey & Mokhtari's (2001) study, female ESL students reported using 16 of the 30 strategies more frequently than male ESL students. However, these differences were statistically significant for only one of the 30 strategies. Similarly, U. S. females reported higher mean scores than U. S. males for 21 of the 30 reading strategy statements. Additionally, the means observed for the three strategy categories (global, problem-solving and supporting) were higher for U. S. female participants, with statistically significant differences in the support strategy category.

Contrary to these results, in Poole's (2005) study there was no difference between female and male ESL students. Both males and females revealed identical means. Although no significant differences were found, males had slightly higher overall scores on global and problem-solving strategies, while females used more support strategies.

In the study conducted by Sheorey and Baboczy (2008), the researchers found that female students reported using most of the strategies (13 of 30) more frequently than their male counterparts. Furthermore,

the means for each of the three strategy categories were significantly higher for female students than for male students.

Finally, Poole (2009) conducted a similar study with 352 Colombian ESL students. The results of this study revealed that female students used more strategies and more frequently than male students; particularly, problem-solving and support strategies. Overall, females scored significantly higher than males.

These results are consistent with a number of studies on L2 language learning strategies, which have found that women use strategies in general more frequently than males (Oxford, 1993; Green & Oxford, 1995; Mokhtari and Sheorey, 2008). This seems to suggest that females, regardless of their L1 proficiency level, and L2 learning setting, tend to use more strategies than males. These findings combined suggest that there may be a gender gap in L2 reading proficiency that needs to be empirically investigated and addressed in the foreign language classroom. Although more investigations of this nature are needed in the field, and more studies conducted in other languages than English, still the evidence shows a trend where women used more creative strategies to access, process and decode an academic text. In the next section, pedagogical recommendations are discussed to address the needs of each gender while keeping the classroom balanced and free of gender biases.

4. Classroom Dynamics to Enhance Reading Comprehension and Avoid Gender Bias

Drawing from the previous section, it is clear that effective readers are strategic.

Therefore, instructors and program directors should devote considerable time giving students explicit instruction in reading comprehension and model strategic L2 reading to foster skillful L2 readers. This should be done over an extensive period of time, and implemented consistently throughout the duration of a course. Moreover, modeling how to actively use reading strategies is essential for students to apply this behavior consciously and, later on, be able to find what strategies work best for them, and for what particular reading purpose. Scaffolding and monitoring students' interactions with a variety of passages help learners' practice and better understand themselves as L2 learners and; it also support them in becoming autonomous readers. Strategic training may also help avoid any gender gap between female and male students, encouraging both genders to actively engage in reading comprehension, and being aware of a wide range of strategies that can be used to decode a text, and go beyond the level of facts and details in the reading.

There is an extensive body of research that supports explicit reading comprehension instruction and strategic training (Block & Pressley, 2002; Sheorey, & Babocky, 2008), showing students improvement in overall comprehension of L2 texts. Moreover, these empirical studies reveal that students who receive strategic training significantly improve their reading comprehension ability (Martínez, 2008).

Instructors should start planning activities or facilitate strategies before the actual reading begins. Many teachers underestimate the importance of pre-reading activities. However, these type of tasks prepare students for what they are about to

read, and engage learners in actively start thinking about the text at hand, so they can connect with the reading material. There are a variety of pre-reading activities, for instance, making predictions, giving an overview of the text and asking students to write what they think they know about the reading. Students may share predictions with a partner or a group, and then, after reading the text, check who made the best prediction. Students could look for general information about the author of the text, when it was written, and where; to make predictions based on this information and the title of the reading. All these tasks actively engage readers, they give learners' purpose, and they require multiple cognitive processes that will help them construct meaning as they read.

The main objective of pre-reading activities is to assess and activate students' background knowledge, so they can relate to the text. Secondly, teachers should introduce contextual elements of the text, such as information about the author and text type, so students can predict the content of the reading. Thirdly, it is important to provide any cultural information related to the text that will help students comprehend it better. Finally, instructors should highlight the new vocabulary and possible grammatical constructions present in the text; this will facilitate the reading process and facilitate comprehension as well.

After pre-reading tasks, teachers should carefully plan activities that help learners while they are reading the text. It is important to pay close attention to how students read, and how they react to the reading. In this manner, teachers can determine if students understand the text, and they can design adequate post-reading

activities that help expand understanding. Purposeful reading strategies improve learners' control of the text, and help them better decode the L2 text. Examples of "during reading activities" are, annotating the text individually or in pairs or groups, reading outload, formulating questions about the text, answering questions about the passage, identifying ideas, key concepts, or important details about the text, using basic questions (who, what, where, when, why, how) to analyze the text or portions of it, writing a summary and then working in pairs to re-elaborate their individual summaries adding more detail to it.

The main objective of the "during reading activities" is to decode the text, remember the content of it, and be able to put it into the learner's own words. Some of these activities could be conducted individually, and others in small groups or pairs, collaboration is beneficial as students learn to decode the reading and construct meaning collectively, helping each other. In this manner, students can determine what they understand, and what questions they need to formulate the teacher to further understand the reading.

Post-reading activities are crucial to retain information, and learners have a better chance to remember what they have read if they can apply it, or use the information instead of just moving on to the next reading assignment. Post-reading activities help students' double check their comprehension of the text, and deeper text analysis. Examples of after reading activities are, writing a review or newspaper article about the text, creating questions about the reading for classmates, creating a drawing as a summary of the text, and teaching each other certain details about the text or

sections of a passage, making inferences, distinguishing fact from opinion or identifying the tone of the text.

The main objective of post-reading activities is to give students the opportunity to check their understanding of the text, and to deepen their comprehension through discussion and interpretation. Teachers should plan activities that help students make connections and lead learners into a deeper analysis of the text meaning, going beyond the level of facts and details to explore the interrelations between them, the assumptions made by the author, and the implications of the ideas in the text.

Well-designed strategy lessons should support students as they move from the text level, to the inferential level where students try to find information implied in the text, or make connections with their personal background knowledge. Finally, readers should learn how to use metacognitive strategies and reflect on their own thinking and L2 learning process.

These are some concrete activities that address what research on L2 reading comprehension has demonstrated, but how can instructors and program directors address the gender effect that was discussed in the previous section?

Research on strategy use and gender preferences has revealed that female students use reading strategies more frequently and in more creative manners than male students. In addition, it seems that female students choose to use more supporting strategies than male students. These strategies help learners to make sense of what they are reading, and they help to fix any break down communication between the text and the reader. In order to avoid a gender effect in the foreign language classroom, all strategies should be presented to students, so they can choose those that work best for them. In addition, it is important to introduce supporting strategies to male students so they are aware of them and how to apply these while reading.

In addition to strategies to decode a specific text, instructors and program directors should use the SORS to promote discussion and reflection about the multiple strategies available to readers when they want to comprehend an L2 text. The information from this instrument can be helpful to students in making them aware of reading strategies while they are processing a text, improving their understanding about the overall reading process, and instilling confidence in their reading abilities. Then, teachers will know what other strategies need to be taught to students and what activities they need to implement in order to foster proficient readers. For example, if readers are underusing problem-solving strategies, it may be important to re-introduce them to the class, because re-reading or re-inspecting the text at hand are two important strategies that show control of the learners' reading comprehension process. Research (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2008) and also anecdotal evidence has shown that students avoid re-inspecting and re-reading a text because it takes time and effort.

Finally, depending on the results obtained in the SORS, teachers could devise instructional materials to support those strategies that appear weak, addressing particularly those that male and female students choose, so that they use them more often and are able to evaluate their progresses making the necessary adjustments.

This process of strategic training will develop proficient readers and avoid any gender effect in the foreign language classroom. Ultimately, using the SORS or any instruments like it will help teachers, researchers, and learners be more aware of how gender can affect development and achievement in L2 reading; and to accommodate individual students' needs, given that males and females should have an equal chance of L2 learning and developing proficiency in L2 reading.

5. Conclusions

It is clear that readers' awareness and use of reading strategies are critical to ensuring high levels of reading comprehension (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2008: 2) in both L1 and L2 reading. Skillful readers do not just "dive into the text" (Pressley, 2002) without a holistic reading plan, regulation or evaluation of the text. They rather use a wide range of reading strategies by keeping meaning of the passage in mind, while less successful readers focus more on local problems such as solving unknown words or encoding sentences.

Additionally, empirical research has shown that female students tend to be better users of reading strategies and language learning strategies in general. Furthermore, in most of the studies discussed in this article female students use a wide variety of reading strategies, and more frequently than male students. Particularly, differences were found with problem-solving and supporting strategies favoring female students. It is inferred that female students *may* be more thorough readers than male students, and they double check if they understand the text or re-read until they understand. Moreover, female students may not mind the time involved in using such time-consuming strategies.

These overall findings have important implications for instructors and students alike. Instructors and program directors should design strong reading strategies training workshops to support L2 readers, fostering skillful readers while taking into account individual differences. Strategy training should continue during the semester, so students are made aware of the strategies that they use more frequently. They can self-evaluate and determine whether they are underusing a particular group of strategies that will help them become more fluent readers. This process not only raises awareness of strategy use among students, but also, fosters autonomous L2 reader and L2 learners.

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