

Investigating Kurdish Students' Reading Strategies

Ivan Hasan Murad

Department of English language, University of Zakho, Kurdistan Region, Iraq

Abstract This study is conducted to investigate the reading strategies used by students at University of Zakho/English department. This paper has been conducted through designing a questionnaire out of 13 questions which was sent out to 100 participants from a total number of 240 students from different levels at English department. Along with that, semi-structured interviews were utilised with students and teachers to produce valid and reliable results. It is revealed that there are many strategies of reading that students use while they read. These are concentrate on the text only, summarizing the text by using the students' own words and thoughts, skim the text and also using scanning technique, previewing the text, writing some questions about the passage, and taking notes and drawing graphs. Also, the findings indicate that the majority of students in English department follow the strategies of reading and depend on them in their daily reading activities.

Keywords Reading, Reading strategies, Cognitive strategies, Skimming, Scanning, Compensation strategies and memory strategies

1. Introduction

It has been argued that Kurdish students do not employ reading strategies while they read different texts and their academic subjects. This research is conducted because having read about this topic, it has been found that there is a huge gap in literature regarding this topic in Kurdistan region of Iraq. None of previous studies have been done to investigate the Kurdish students' reading strategies. Therefore, this study will focus on investigating Kurdish students' reading strategies. The current paper falls into six sections. The first section is the literature review which will be devoted to discuss the strategies of reading and research relating to reading strategies. The second section introduces the research questions proposed in this study. The third section is dedicated to discuss the methodology followed in this study. Results of the study are discussed in section four. Section five is devoted to the discussion of the results. The following section introduces the main conclusions reached in this study.

2. Literature Review

Teachers are very aggravated by the fact that students do not automatically transfer the strategies they use when reading in their native language to reading in a language they are learning. Instead, they seem to think reading means starting at the beginning and going word by word, stopping

to look up every unknown vocabulary item, until they reach the end (Alyousif, 2005). However, one of the most crucial functions of the teacher, then, is to help students move past this idea and try to follow the strategies as they best guide their reading. Moreover, according to USO-JUAN (2009), teachers should show students how to apply these reading strategies to deal with a variety of situations, types of input, and reading purposes. They help students develop a set of reading strategies and match appropriate strategies to each reading situation.

However, comprehensive learning might not take place if students do not follow the reading strategies they have been taught. Harmer (2007) states that even though students are taught about the reading strategies, it is not guaranteed that they follow them reason being could be the time limit they are given to accomplish a reading task.

Research reading is an important way of obtaining information in our present-day. Research revealed that readers instinctively employ reading strategies when they read (Alhaqbani and Riazi, 2012). Literature also suggests that the use of appropriate reading strategies may improve students' reading comprehension skills (Grabe, 2004). Using reading strategies can be of great help to non-native readers because it may serve as an effective guideline for overcoming language deficiency and obtaining better reading achievement. However, if such strategies are not properly applied they might hinder students' understanding and overall comprehension skills. Nonetheless, empirical studies have been conducted into the effectiveness of strategy instruction on reading. Wright and Brown (2006) examined the effect of explicit strategy instruction on reading comprehension of students of Spanish as a foreign language. Although their results indicated that the students'

* Corresponding author:

kashakhy@gmail.com (Ivan Hasan Murad)

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awareness of some strategies and their ability to reflect upon their reading increased, some other strategies were very hard to acquire and properly apply. King (2008) states that reading strategies is what differentiates between good and bad learners of a second language. Brown (2001) agrees with King and further states that reading comprehension is when a student builds on some appropriate and effective reading strategies. He (ibid, 306) puts forward ten reading strategies, as follows:

1. *Identify the purpose in reading.*
2. *Use graphic rules and patterns to aid in bottom-up reading.*
3. *Use different silent reading techniques for relatively rapid reading.*
4. *Skim the text for main ideas.*
5. *Scan the text for specific information.*
6. *Use semantic mapping or clustering.*
7. *Guess when you aren't certain.*
8. *Analyze vocabulary.*
9. *Distinguish between literal and implied meanings.*
10. *Capitalize on discourse markers to process relationships.*

Reading is not a passive process; it is an interactive process where the reader extracts information embedded in the text. It is not a linguistic exercise but a real communication activity and a knowledge- developing process (Alyousef, 2005). Ajideh (2003) states that readers have the ability to make effective use of background knowledge. They also use structure of the text, make inference, have awareness of the strategies they employ and in general they are better at monitoring and adjusting the strategies they use. Thus, better readers are more strategic. The most recommended and crucial reading strategies are as follows:

1. Cognitive strategies

Reading comprehension is a cognitive process. A variety of cognitive strategies could be used to enhance reading comprehension. Some examples of cognitive strategies are; prediction based on previous knowledge, using statements to check students' comprehension, scrutinizing the organization of a text by searching for specific patterns, and also self-questioning (Gibson, 2009).

It could be argued that the use of prior knowledge is the frequently used topic relating to cognitive strategies. The majority of the reading researchers agree that reading is an interactive process between the reader and a reading text. Thus, it is purported that successful activation and use of prior knowledge is of immense importance in this interactive process (Scriveners, 2000). He also believes that the more background knowledge a reader brings to a text, the easier it is to comprehend the text.

2. Compensation strategies

One problem encountered by many readers is unfamiliar vocabulary and unknown concepts. This is where the reader

needs to use compensation strategies to compensate for the unlearned skills. Scrivener (2000) states that when we do not understand words or small sections, we usually just keep reading and only return back to the place we had problem understanding when there has been a major break down in our understanding. This is because our compensation skills help us understand the overall message by employing our critical understanding skills. It was discovered that readers automatically employ such strategies like; accepting ambiguity, and establishing intra sentential and inter sentential ties (Karami, 2008). A more common expression suggested by many researchers is the usage of context clues for the same purpose. Kiani (2011) states that context clues have an influential effect on students' reading skills and comprehension of words and sentences. The ability of using words in different contexts play an important role in the comprehension of new concepts, ideas and principles.

3. Memory strategies

The field of memory strategy in reading comprehension is another crucial topic in reading research. The category of memory strategies has a number of methods which have been recognized and effectively employed. These are: creating mental/visual images, grouping, story mapping, and organizing information in meaningful patterns. Paivio (1986) stated that verbal code and visual imagery are two related cognitive codes.

4. Testing strategies

Researchers have suggested a number of test-taking strategies. This is in line with the extensive utilization of multiple-choice items in regular tests. Pearson and Johnson (1978) acknowledged three types of question forms and the corresponding locations for their answers which were textually explicit questions, textually implicit questions, and scriptally implicit questions with which students need to use background knowledge. Recognizing question type is said to be the first pace in employing suitable skills in dealing with test items. These strategies are also very useful in developing vocabulary, reading comprehension, and language arts mechanics.

3. Research Questions

Reading skill is one of the essential subjects students at the University of Zakho are required to study and develop their reading skills for further purposes such as conducting research papers and writing reports which require a lot of reading and employing different reading strategies. This study is conducted to investigate their reading strategies. The following specific research questions were examined:

1. What type of reading strategies do students of English Department at the University of Zakho follow?
2. What steps should be taken to make students aware of the most effective reading strategies?

4. Methodology

4.1. Subjects

This study is conducted with 100 EFL students (boys and girls) selected among 240 students who are doing a degree in English language teaching at the University of Zakho. They are 19-21 years old and are upper intermediate students. They have newly been taught reading as a separate subject at the university and are unaware of the reading strategies and reading skills in general. It could be argued that the sampling type of this research is a cluster sampling as students are already set to their sections. Robson (2002) argues in a cluster sampling type, the researcher can choose a school, a class or any group of people to carry out his research on.

4.2. Methods and Procedure of Data Collection

In this research study, triangulation methodological strategy is employed to ensure that the data collected is accurate and reliable through utilizing qualitative and quantitative tools in gathering data for the study. Cohen et al (2007), define triangulation as the utilizing of more than one method of data collection to search into some aspects of human behaviour. It is also argued that using several methods in researching into a particular problem impressively intensifies the chances of accurateness of the data and results of any research (The Open University, 2001). Thus, the methods that are utilized in this study are questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews. A questionnaire was designed to investigate the students' reading strategies. It consisted of 13 questions. It was sent out to the students who were asked to fill it in and return it back as soon as possible. After the data was collected from the questionnaire, a semi-structured interview schedule was designed to further validate the results and make them more reliable. According to Koshy (2005), using questionnaire at the start of a study provides the researcher with basic information about the subject and the participants. Robson (2002) and Punch (2009) argue that semi-structured interview consists of prearranged questions which the interviewer can change the order of according to his/her understanding of what seems to be appropriate.

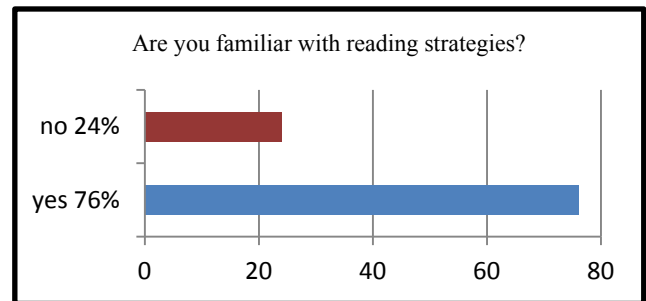
The data collected via employing different data collection methods for this research study is analyzed in different ways. The frequency and percentage rates was used to analyse the data gained from the questionnaire. As for the interview data, the thematic approach was followed to analyze the data and also direct quotations from the interviews is used to corroborate the findings of the study.

5. Results

Throughout the investigation that has been made in the University of Zakho/ department of English language, it has become clear that the majority of the students from different levels are familiar with the reading strategies.

As it is shown in graph (1) 76% of the students stated that

they are familiar with the reading strategies. Students who are familiar with all types of the reading strategies are different from those who are unfamiliar with them or have limited knowledge about them in the way that they can organize their thoughts depending on these techniques while they read, as it was discovered when interviewing most of them.



Graph 1

Interviewed students were asked if they are familiar with reading strategies and if they know the types of reading strategies. Most of them stated that they are familiar with the reading strategies. When this was further investigated, the majority of them could only name few reading strategies.

The majority of the students were familiar with all types of reading strategies and they use them in their daily activities. However, for those who answered "No", when some of them were interviewed, it appeared that they only knew about skimming and scanning. This was further discussed with some of the professors and it was obvious that (4) out of (6) teachers focused only on these two strategies.

One of the interview questions for the teachers was "what do you think is the best way to teach students to become aware of the most effective reading strategies? When interviewed, one of the teachers responded:

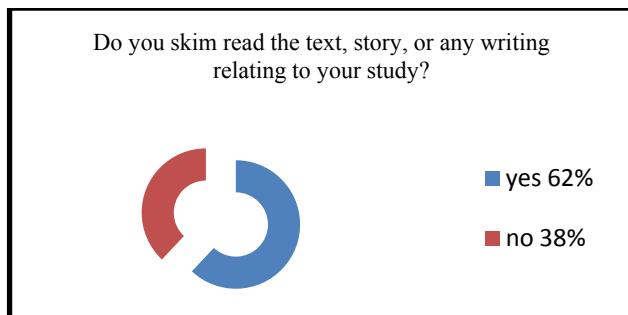
"I think the best way to make students aware of the reading strategies is to teach them the strategies theoretically like skimming and scanning".

Another interviewed teacher responded to the same question:

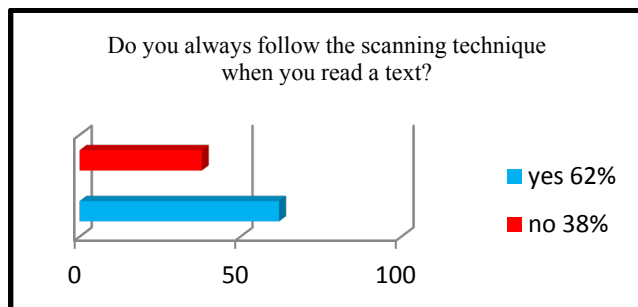
"well, in my opinion the best way to teach students to become aware of the most effective reading strategies is through teaching them skimming and scanning and actually I do use these techniques with my students".

The rest of the interviewed teachers collectively stated that reading strategies and techniques should be taught separately and that teachers should not only focus on some specific reading strategies but should make students aware of all the strategies related to their studies.

These answers guide us to the question why did 62% of the students skim read the text, story, or any writing relating to their study and equally 62% of them said we always follow the scanning technique when we read a text. This could be because teachers at the universities in Kurdistan concentrate only on these two types of reading strategies. As it is shown in the below two graphs 2-3 respectively.



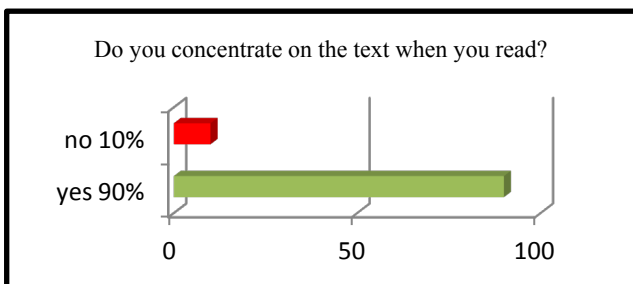
Graph 2



Graph 3

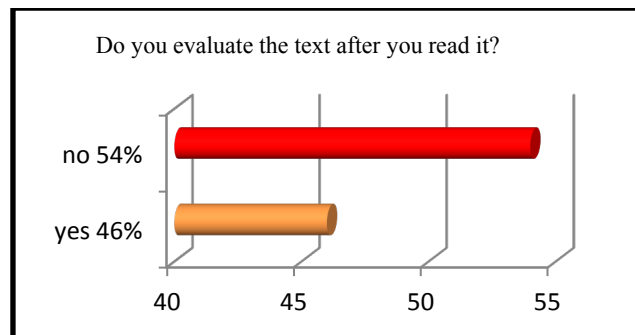
There is no doubt that concentration on the text while reading plays an important role in students' strategy of reading at college. 90% of the university students in Kurdistan concentrate on the text while they read it. Without concentration, students cannot make benefit from the text (Harmer, 2007). Reflecting on one of the interviewed students who stated that:

"Without concentration one cannot understand anything from the text while reading it". As it is shown in the following graph.



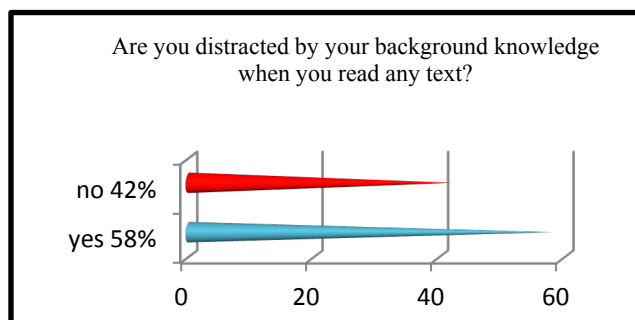
Graph 4

Approximately half of the students of the universities in Kurdistan evaluate the text, passage, or any piece of writing after they have read it (graph 5). This as most of them stated is regarded as a follow up activity they do to further understand the reading passage or text. When some teachers were asked about this technique, they gave two different but related reasons for conducting such a technique: the first reason was that it helps students to recognize and choose the best suited reading text for their purposes. The other reason was that such a strategy helps students critically understand the text



Graph 5

Only 58% are distracted by their background knowledge when they read a text. These students use their prior knowledge when they face new information from the text while reading it. As it is shown in the below graph.

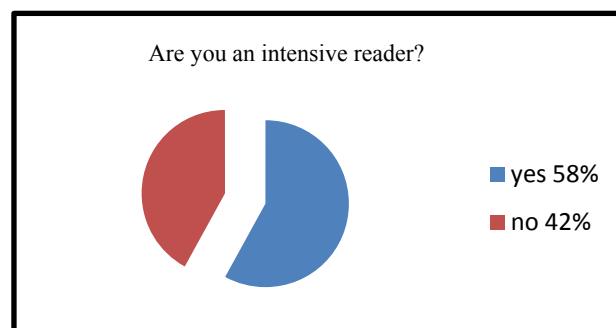


Graph 6

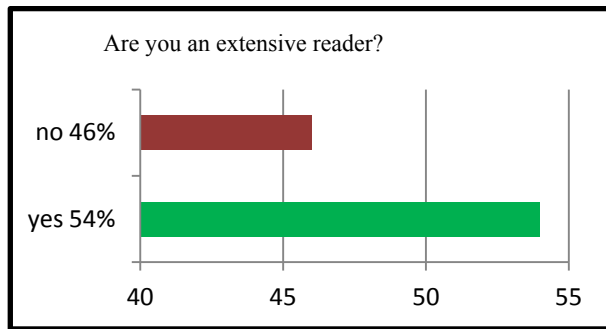
Ajideh (2003) states that readers in general will become better in their ability to make effective summaries by using their background knowledge.

It is worth mentioning that students of English departments in Kurdistan study different subjects such as methodology, linguistics, literature and so forth. Despite the fact that these subjects need intensive reading, results from the questionnaire show that only 58% of the students are intensive readers while 42% are extensive readers. As it is shown in the following two graphs. Graphs 7 and 8 respectively.

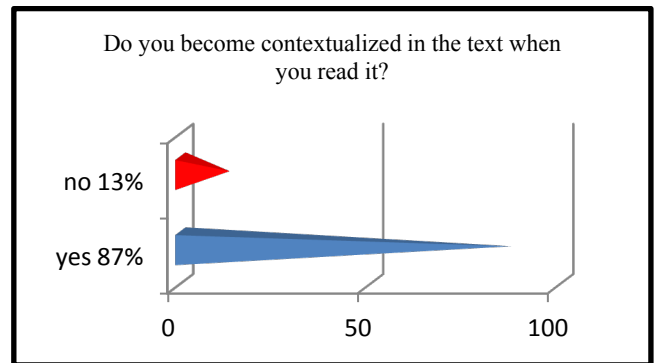
This as believed by some scholars works as a hindrance in the way of the students to develop their understanding and their overall potentials in acquiring the aspects of the language (Ur, 1996; Scrivener, 2011).



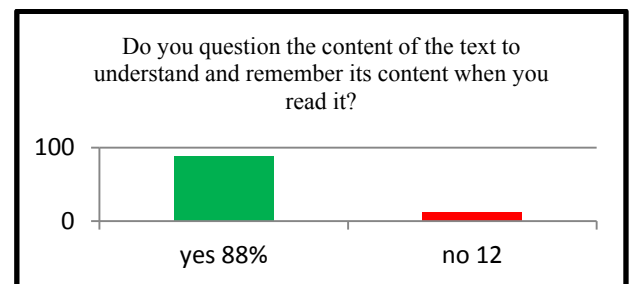
Graph 7



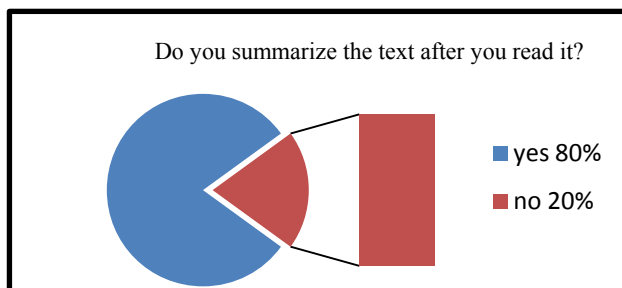
Graph 8



Graph 10



Graph 11



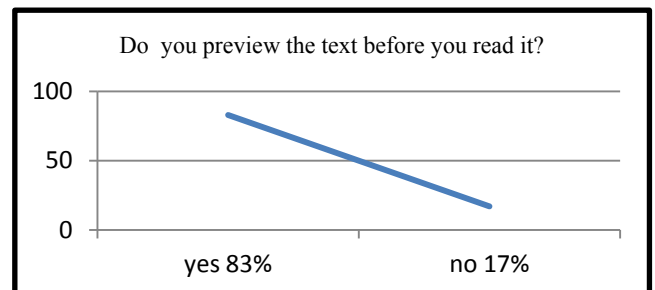
Graph 9

Reflecting on this, Esther and Ma Noelia (2009) state that one has to completely understand the story so as to be able to tell it in his/her own words. Summarizing strategy is one of the cognitive and memory strategies which improves students' understanding of the text (Jones, 2007). Moreover, these subjects will make them predict or guess the events or analyze them from their own point of view.

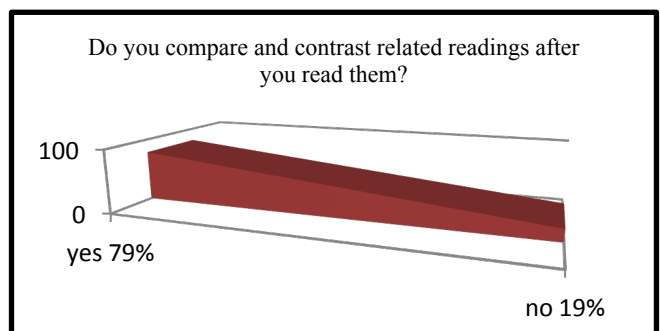
One of the interviewed teachers stated that:

"I use "contextualizing technique" because this technique enables students to understand literary texts closely and it helps them to understand the reason why writers focus on certain ideas in the text. Another effective technique is "questioning technique" this enable students to question the reason why writers do focus on certain archaic word, difficult expressions and certain style of writing".

We cannot ignore that these two techniques help students to argue and give their opinions about the reading text. The results about these two technique were the same as it is shown in the graphs (10) and (11). 87% and 88% of the student do use contextualizing and questioning techniques respectively.



Graph 12



Graph 13

According to the students' view who were asked: What steps should be taken to make students aware of the most

effective reading strategies? Almost all of them stated that first of all, tests should not be completely based on memorization, because memorizing too much information blocks students' minds. It is also because students will have a chance to apply whatever strategy they learn throughout the course. And the subjects should focus on students' thoughts to create their own point of view and not only stick to what is said in the materials provided. Also students should be taught how to develop their critical thinking skills in order to be able to develop their reading strategies.

Eventually, the best way to teach students to become aware of the most effective reading strategies is to teach them reading skills or strategies as a separate subject. This will enable teachers to connect teaching skills to the students' needs and interests. From this perspective, students' skills will be activated on a higher level and thus their reading skills will be strengthened. Reflecting on this, one of the interviewed teachers said:

"by doing so especially if we teach reading strategies as a separate subject, this will provide a meta-cognitive awareness of reading strategies for students who study English as a foreign language."

6. Discussion

Even though research states that second language learners apply reading strategies when they read, some Kurdish and EFL teachers believed that Kurdish students do not follow the reading strategies while they read their academic subjects. However, results show that the majority of Kurdish students employ different types of reading strategies when they read their academic subjects (graph 1). Research suggests that applying reading strategies provides students with the principles to develop their reading skills and improve their overall language deficiency (Harmer, 2007). Larsen (2000) states that students are required to utilize effective reading strategies to be able to understand the texts they read. This is because, according to King (2008) for students to properly apply these strategies, they will be better in reading from those who do not apply them appropriately as their comprehensive skills will be developed and accordingly they will learn better. As for the other research question, results reveal that almost all the interviewed teachers and students stated that it is better to teach the strategies of reading as an independent subject to the EFL learners to better raise their awareness about the reading strategies and the procedure of applying them in their academic study. Moreover, teachers should be warned not to focus on specific strategies and ignore about the rest when they teach reading skills. It is also argued that students' awareness of reading strategies are better developed when students are explicitly taught the strategies (Wright and Brown, 2006). However, some argue that even if students are taught these strategies, it is not necessarily that students can develop them all (Scrivener, 2011).

It is worth saying that because of the uniqueness of the

topic and the context this research is conducted in, it is difficult to find a same study conducted in the same context for the purpose of comparing results as there is not a previous study conducted to investigate Kurdish students' reading strategies.

7. Conclusions

It is concluded that there are many strategies of reading that Kurdish students at the University of Zakho use while they read. These strategies are: concentrating on the text, summarizing the text by using the student's own words and thoughts, skim the text and also using scanning technique (looking for general and specific ideas), previewing the text before reading it, writing some questions about the passage, and finally making notes and graphs.

Results also revealed that students in University of Zakho, English department follow these types of strategies in their study depending on the time given to the students to use these strategies in the class and outside the class as well. The steps that should be taken to make students aware of the most effective reading strategies are revealed to be; teaching students reading strategies as a separate subject throughout the academic year. Another conclusion is that teacher should come up with questions that require students to use the reading strategies when they answer.

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