



## A Study of Chinese Non-English Major Students' English Reading Strategies

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### Abstract

The study aims to investigate Chinese non-English major students' use of English reading strategies with the help of questionnaires. The results show that these students don't do well in using English reading strategies, especially metacognitive strategies and social strategies. Most students need to improve themselves in applying reading strategies in English learning. In English reading teaching, teachers should integrate the training of reading strategies into the classroom English teaching.

**Key words:** Chinese Non-English major students; English reading strategies; Questionnaires; Training

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### INTRODUCTION

The study of learning strategies in Western countries began in 1970s, and many achievements have been got. In China, the researches in the field of learning strategies started in 1980s. Since 1990s, the emphasis of foreign language teaching research has been transferred from how to teach a foreign language to how to study it and people have realized the importance of learning strategies in foreign language learning. It is widely accepted that training of learning strategies is significant in college English classroom teaching.

Reading is an important cognitive activity in human life and it is a useful way of obtaining knowledge and understanding the world for most people. Reading strategies are important parts of learning strategies and they have attracted more and more researchers' attention. In recent years, some Chinese researchers have conducted some empirical studies about the reading strategies adopted by Chinese non-English major students. However, people haven't got the comprehensive recognition of the reading strategies that these college students like to use and other reading strategies that they don't like to use in English reading process. So more researches should be conducted in this field.

Based on the previous researches, this study attempts to find out the main reading strategies that Chinese non-English major students like to use, trying to explore their reading habits and their main weak points in reading English. It is hoped that this study may help people know more about the reading strategies used by Chinese non-English major students in English learning and it may help these college students improve their English reading ability.

### 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Rubin conducted a research about the strategies employed by successful second language learners in 1971, and issued her research results in 1975. Later, many famous researchers paid much attention to learning strategies and some of them defined the term of learning strategies. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) define the language learning strategies as the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn or retain new information. Oxford (1990) points out that Language learning strategies are behaviors or actions that learners use to make their language learning more successful and enjoyable.

Also, there are some different definitions of reading strategies given by some researchers. Cohen (1990) defines reading strategies as those mental processes that readers consciously choose to use in accomplishing reading tasks. Wallace (1992) thinks that reading strategies are some ways of reading which are employed by people flexibly and selectively and they may vary depending on the types of the texts and contexts and people's purpose of reading.

Since 1980s, some researchers put their research emphasis on the differences between the successful learners and unsuccessful learners in second language reading with the help of questionnaires. Hosenfeld (1984) reports that successful readers employ more strategies than unsuccessful readers and they can apply some metacognitive strategies such as self-evaluation in reading, while unsuccessful readers tend to read word-by-word and they have a poor self-concept as readers. Their researches indicate that the successful readers have mastered many reading strategies and they can apply them to solve some difficulties in their second language reading.

In China, many scholars have studied English reading strategies used by learners at different stages. Liu (2002) finds six categories of reading strategies of Chinese college students: prediction, word-attack skill, skimming, scanning, structure analysis and inference. She also finds that there are various differences between the successful and unsuccessful English readers. Successful readers always pay more attention to comprehension of the whole text while unsuccessful readers often focus their attention on small units. Compared with unsuccessful readers, successful readers not only use more strategies, but also use strategies more flexibly and appropriately. In an investigation of reading strategies, Jiang and Gao Song (2009) also find that successful Chinese EFL learners may apply many strategies like inference and looking for topic sentences in their English reading. Many researches show that reading strategies are useful to the students' reading comprehension and teachers should train students to employ some useful reading strategies such as skimming, scanning and guessing the meanings of some words from the contexts.

## 2. RESEARCH REPORT

In this part, the researcher analyzes Chinese non-English major students' use of English reading strategies with the help of questionnaires.

### 2.1 Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the main reading strategies that Chinese non-English major students like to use and find out the reasons why they don't like to use some other strategies. The findings of this study can help these learners to improve their English reading ability.

### 2.2 Subjects

The subjects in the study are all sophomores majoring in Math, Material Science and Engineering in the University of Jinan in China. They are 210 students including 108 boys and 102 girls. They range in age from 18 to 22, with an average age of 20. Many of them have learned English for about 10 years and they learn English as a foreign language in traditional classroom setting.

### 2.3 Instrument

Questionnaires are used to investigate the subjects' use of English reading strategies. The questionnaire items are compiled by the researcher based on the classification of reading strategies given by O'Malley and Chamot (1990). The questionnaire consists of 14 statements which include some metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and social/ affective strategies.

For the subjects to get their scores in the 14 items about English reading strategies, each item is on a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" (point 5) to "strongly disagree" (point 1), the middle point being neutral (point 3). The higher a subject scores, the better able he/she is to use the English reading strategies.

### 2.4 Data Collection

On March 20 of 2014, 210 questionnaires were distributed to the subjects. They were asked to finish the questionnaires within 10 minutes. After they finished, all the questionnaires were collected and 208 copies were found to be valid. 2 copies were found to be invalid because the subjects' scores in these two copies were not clear.

### 2.5 Results and Discussion

This part deals with Chinese non-English major students' general use of reading strategies. The researcher analyzes that by the means of the subjects' scores.

**Table 1**  
**Means of the Subjects' Scores**

Items	Numbers of the subjects	Means of the subjects' scores
Item 1	208	2.82
Item 2	208	2.56
Item 3	208	2.36
Item 4	208	3.48
Item 5	208	3.37
Item 6	208	3.59
Item 7	208	3.24
Item 8	208	2.78
Item 9	208	2.95
Item 10	208	2.83
Item 11	208	2.90
Item 12	208	2.63
Item 13	208	2.45
Item 14	208	3.18

In Table 1, the first 3 items are metacognitive strategies, the last 3 items are social and affective strategies and the rest items are cognitive strategies.

It can be easily found that the subjects don't often use metacognitive strategies. The involved items are items 1-3. The items are "I look for opportunities to read English, trying to learn the culture of English-speaking countries." (Item 1,  $M=2.82$ ), "I pay attention to the time while reading English and I can finish the reading work on time." (Item 2,  $M=2.56$ ) and "After reading a text, I evaluate my comprehension of the reading material." (Item 3,  $M=2.36$ ). It shows that most college students haven't fostered the good habit of self-management and self-evaluation in English reading. Proper use of metacognitive strategies may greatly improve the students' proficiency in English reading, but application of these strategies requires the students' more efforts in cognition and more self-control in practice, so students need to spend more time and energy in training of using metacognitive strategies.

In this table, we may find that some cognitive strategies are very popular with these subjects. The items are "I often skim for the gist of an English passage." (Item 4,  $M=3.48$ ), "I summarize the main idea after finishing reading an article." (Item 5,  $M=3.37$ ), "I guess the meaning of a new word according to the context and the word formation." (Item 6,  $M=3.59$ ) and "I translate the difficult English sentences into Chinese when reading English." (Item 7,  $M=3.24$ ). What is shown is that most students can use the English reading strategies like skimming, summarizing, guessing and translating. These strategies are very familiar to most students because they often apply them in language learning. In fact, application of these cognitive strategies has become many students' habitual way of solving problems in English reading, for these strategies are applied more often than other strategies and many students are familiar with them.

However, some other cognitive strategies are not used widely by the subjects. This conclusion can be drawn from the items below: "I take notes of the key words or sentences when reading a text." (Item 8,  $M=2.78$ ), "I read the difficult or important sentences again and again when reading an English article." (Item 9,  $M=2.95$ ), "I analyze the sentence structures when meeting difficult or long sentences." (Item 10,  $M=2.83$ ) and "I try to infer the information that is not mentioned according to the known information or the common sense." (Item 11,  $M=2.90$ ). The subjects' means of scores in these items are all below 3.0. It seems that many students haven't cultivated the good habit of taking notes, repeating reading important sentences, analyzing structures and inferring.

The subjects' use of social and affective strategies is not satisfactory, which can be found from the last 3

items. Item 12 is "I communicate with my peers about my experiences in reading English." ( $M=2.63$ ). Item 13 is "I ask help from good readers or teachers when I have difficulties in the reading process." ( $M=2.45$ ). Item 14 is "I encourage myself when I feel anxious about reading English." ( $M=3.18$ ). Although many students know the importance of reducing anxiety and regaining their confidence by encouraging themselves, they still can't do well in communicating with and asking help from other students or their teachers.

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### 3. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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From the above analysis of Chinese non-English major students' general use of reading strategies, it can be said that most students need to cultivate their sense of applying reading strategies in English learning. Teachers should help them by integrating the reading strategy training into classroom English teaching. They should tell the students the significance of using reading strategies in English learning and explain how to use these good strategies.

In the reading strategy training, teachers should make the students know when they should use reading strategies and which strategies may be used in a certain context. Then, the teachers may let the students do some reading practice which needs application of some strategies. Finally, the students should be given some chances to compare their reading outcomes that they get before and after using the reading strategies. Through a lot of practice, the students can gradually know more about the reading strategies and learn to use them better.

College teachers should try their best to stimulate their students' interest in reading English and then choose the reading materials according to their needs. The reading materials should be neither too easy nor too hard. The teachers should encourage the students to read widely after class, from which they may gradually foster the habit of using reading strategies.

In English reading classes, the teachers may divide the whole class into several groups and make sure that there are both good readers and poor readers in each group, then the poor readers can learn from the good readers in applying reading strategies when they share their experiences or ideas. In this way the poor readers' interest in English reading may be stimulated, which can make them become confident in English learning.

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### CONCLUSION

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This study shows that Chinese non-English major students don't do well in using English reading strategies, especially metacognitive and social strategies. Many students don't know how to use reading strategies,

which greatly influence their reading efficiency. Most students need to improve themselves in applying reading strategies in English learning. Therefore, in English reading teaching, teachers should pay much attention to the reading strategy training. This research of reading strategies may be helpful in two aspects. On one hand, the students can improve their English reading ability by learning to use some strategies. On the other hand, the teachers may change their teaching ideas and methods, integrating the training of reading strategies into the classroom English teaching.

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