



The Reading Strategies of Skilled Pakistani University Level Students

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ABSTRACT: Research related to reading English as a second language by Pakistani readers is strikingly absent in the studies on adult L2 readers. In order to understand the reading process, this study investigates the reading strategies that skilled Urdu speaking Pakistani university level students applied to read English texts. It also seeks to understand what helped students become a skilled second language reader in a Pakistani context, where there has been almost no explicit attention to L2 reading instruction and research. The research participants were four students studying in B.A Honors program in the department of mass communication in a university in Pakistan. They were identified as skilled readers on the basis of their score on IELTS Academic Reading Test. Data for the study was gathered by means of think aloud protocol and informal conversation. The findings revealed that the skilled Pakistani university students employed top-down reading strategies and bottom-up reading strategies to read a text; and that the skilled readers had been avid readers since early childhood due to their family influence who steered their interest in reading through discussions on books and reading processes. The implications of the study for teaching and researching are discussed.

Keywords: English as second language, reading strategies, skilled reader, top-down and bottom up

Introduction:

Pakistan is a multilingual and multicultural society with a population of 176 million (Government of Pakistan, 2011). The linguistic map of Pakistan defies simple description as it has 72 living languages (Lewis, 2009). The national language of Pakistan is Urdu and it is used by people in both urban and rural context (Shamim, 2008). The official language of Pakistan is English (Mahboob, 2013).

In comparison to Urdu and other regional languages, English has the prestigious standing in Pakistan (Khurram, 2009; Manan, David, Dumanig & Channa, 2017) since it is considered a language of development, power and domination (see Jalal, 2004), as in other developing countries (Coleman, 2010). Teaching of English has therefore always remained on the agenda of the successive elected governments of Pakistan (Shamim, 2011). English is taught as a subject from grade 1 (Government of Pakistan, 2009) and as a

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compulsory subject to graduate students at the universities of Pakistan as a key part of the government's policy (Malik, 1996; Mansoor, 2005). English is also the medium of instruction at university level in Pakistan (Muhammad, 2013).

This emphasis on English has resulted in increased efforts to develop students' proficiency in it. One skill of primary importance in second language learning is reading. Reading effectively for students is particularly important because 'so much of information that students need is in the multiple texts they read' (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2008, p.1). However, becoming skilled reader of English can be challenging for Pakistani students since the majority of teachers of reading at primary and secondary level public sector schools provide students with negligible or no opportunity to do independent reading in English language classrooms (Muhammad, 2013). Even at the tertiary level, the preferred way of teaching reading for teachers of public sector universities in Pakistan is to explain the meaning of difficult words after reading the text aloud (ibid.). It is therefore imperative for Pakistani teachers to learn how effective readers read and what in our teaching practices/curriculum could be improved. Understanding skilled Pakistani students' reading processes and investigating the strategies they use while reading could help achieve this goal.

Literature Review

Recent decades have seen extensive research on reading (Baker & Beall, 2009). Researchers in second language (L2) contexts have conducted a great number of studies on reading process or reading strategies (Brantmeier, 2002; Zhang, 2008). In L2 reading research, Hosenfeld (1977) conducted the pioneering and thought-provoking qualitative study that using think aloud protocol investigated the reading strategies of successful and unsuccessful foreign language readers (French, German and Spanish) of grade ninth. She found that they used different reading strategies and divided the strategies used by learners into 'mean meaning line' and 'word-solving' strategies. A decade later, Block (1986) also using think aloud protocols, investigated and compared the comprehension strategies used by native and nonnative English readers studying in remedial reading courses at university level. She categorized the strategies into general strategies and local strategies. General strategies consisted of strategies that readers used to gather and monitor comprehension, whereas local strategies included those strategies that readers apply 'to understand specific linguistic units' (Block, 1986, p.473). Barnett (1988) examined reading strategies used by students learning French at university level. She was mainly concerned with how the real and perceived strategy use affects comprehension. She divided the reading strategies into two general categories, namely 'text-level' and 'word-level'. She defined text

level reading strategies as those that related to the whole or large parts of the reading passage. They included using prior knowledge, making predictions, skimming, and scanning, amongst others. Word level strategies involved strategies such as using context to determine word meaning and using word families to recognize meanings. Barnett's study found that there is a relationship between strategy use and reading comprehension level. Anderson (1991) undertook a study using think aloud protocol to examine individual differences in strategy use by adult second language learners on two types of reading tasks: standardized reading comprehension tests and academic texts. He also examined characteristics that distinguish good comprehenders from the poor comprehender. The subjects were 28 native Spanish-speaking adult students enrolled in university-level English as a second language courses. The study found that there is no simple correlation or one-to-one relationship between specific strategies and successful or unsuccessful reading comprehension. The findings of the study showed that same kinds of strategies were used by both high and low comprehending readers. Hence, there is no single set of processing strategies that significantly contribute to successful reading comprehension. However, it was found by Anderson that those readers who used number of different strategies for both the standardized reading comprehension test and the textbook reading scored higher on comprehension. Anderson (1991) concluded that successful second language reading involve not only knowing what strategy to use, but also how to use and orchestrate the use of a strategy with other strategies. Recently, Lee-Thompson (2008) investigated the reading strategies used by American university learners to read Chinese as a foreign language. On the basis of think aloud protocols, he categorised the reading strategies into bottom-up and top-down strategies.

These studies have offered rich insights regarding L2 students' reading strategies. In particular, they have shed light on the strategies used by L2 learners of Chinese, French, German, Spanish and English. However, examination of reading strategies applied by Urdu speaking skilled Pakistani readers of English while reading an academic text in English is a topic that remains to be explored in the literature. The current study was therefore designed to investigate the reading comprehension strategies of skilled Pakistani Urdu speaking university level readers of English in order to create an inventory of the reading strategies they use while reading an academic text. The study also seeks to understand what helped these particular readers become skilled second language readers in a Pakistani context where reading strategies are not taught at any level of education, in mother tongue or in the second language. This study therefore aims to answer the followings research questions:

- 1) What reading strategies do skilled Urdu speaking Pakistani university level readers of English apply to comprehend an academic text in English?
- 2) What helped these readers become a skilled second language reader of English?

Research Methodology

The participants of the study were four graduate level Pakistani Urdu speaking students who were studying in a public sector university in Pakistan. They were enrolled in a B.A Honors program in the department of mass communication. They had studied English for 12 years before getting admission in the university. All four participants were non-native speakers of English and had never studied in an English speaking country. The participants were chosen on the basis of their score on IELTS Academic Reading Test, the standardized reading test. This test required the participants to read three academic texts. The result of the test showed that all four participants achieved band 7.5 on the IELTS academic reading test which showed that the participants were skilled readers of English for their level. Four texts were selected from IELTS preparation material published by Cambridge University Press for the study. Each text had the lexical density of 63 according to the lexical density test. The texts with the lexical density of 63 were selected for the study since the pilot study showed that the 3rd reading passage of IELTS academic reading test having the lexical density of 63 was a little above the participants' level as compared to passages 1 and 2 which had lexical density of 60. Moreover, the participants had not studied these texts before the study. Out of four, one text titled 'The concept of role theory' was used in the main study to elicit the students' reading strategies by means of think aloud. This text was 953 words long. The other three texts were used to give practice to the participant on how to carry out think-aloud protocol in keeping with the literature (e.g. Garner, 1987; Block, 1992).

Think aloud protocols have been extensively used in strategy research projects (Cohen & Macaro, 2007) as they provide rich insight into students' reading comprehension processes (Afflerbach, 2000). Researchers usually select think aloud methods for assessing L2 reading processes and strategies in preference to other methods for a number of reasons. To begin with, they yield rich data about processes 'that are invisible to other methods' (Hayes & Flower, 1983, p. 218). Moreover, memory failure is not an issue in think aloud since 'the distance between process and report is one of seconds rather than of days or weeks' (Garner, 1987, p.73). However, using think aloud as a tool for data collection has certain limitations. For instance, think alouds may not provide information about those reading processes which are not easy to verbalize or are already automatic and hence not accessible any more to

consciousness to report (Block, 1986). Moreover, they may disrupt processing of the task (Baker & Cerro, 2000). Transcription of think alouds is also considered an arduous task (Kail & Bisanz, 1982). Despite its limitations, think alouds are considered valuable since they provide a window to the invisible cognitive processes. (Grentell and Harris, 1999). In the current study, the think aloud procedure was used to investigate the reading strategies employed by the participating students. In order to familiarize the students with the data collection procedure, training sessions for each student was conducted. The training session ranged from 50 to 70 minutes. During the training sessions, the participants practice thinking aloud on three sample reading passages. The participants were instructed to verbalize what they were thinking while reading without explaining or analyzing their thoughts. When participants seemed comfortable with the method, the formal data collection procedure started.

During the formal data collection, following Bereiter and Bird (1985), the participants were instructed to read the given texts and report all thoughts aloud at the moment they came to mind. Moreover, keeping in view the previous literature (e.g. Aghaie & Zhang, 2012), the participants were encouraged to self-select the instants at which they wanted to verbalize thoughts to minimize the intrusiveness of the researcher. However, a red dot was placed at the end of each paragraph to remind the participants to verbalize their thoughts.

Additionally, the participants were asked to carry out comprehension tasks on the text at the end of the think aloud. They were allowed to look at the passage while carrying out these tasks. The answers of the given tasks were checked to determine how much information was understood by the reader. The result of the comprehension tasks showed that the participant understood more than 90 percent of the text. After checking the comprehension tasks, an informal conversation was conducted with the participant to find out how they became good L2 readers of English. The think aloud protocols and conversation were audio taped with the consent of the participating students.

Audio recording of the think-aloud protocols and informal conversation with the participants were transcribed. To identify the reading strategies used by the participating students, the think aloud protocols were qualitatively analysed. This study adopts Pritchard (1990, p. 275) definition of a reading strategy as 'a deliberate action that readers take voluntarily to develop an understanding of what they read'. Reading strategies are generally considered to be effortful, conscious and goal-directed (Afflerbach, Pearson & Paris, 2008). However, they can differ in the attention they demand of readers. For instance, they can be near automatic and can 'operate at the edge

of consciousness' provided the text is easy or the reader has practiced them (Afflerbach & Cho, 2009, p.69). Alternatively, they can be 'resource consuming' and may demand the reader's full attention for successful implementation especially on the initial use of them by the reader (Afflerbach & Cho, 2009, p.70). In this study the classification schemes developed by Block (1986 and 1992), Barnett (1988), Carrell (1989), Young and Oxford (1997), Schueller (1999), and Brantmeier (2000) were also consulted to categorize the reading strategies. To ensure a reliable categorization of the reading strategies used by the participating students, two raters were used. The reliability between coders for reading strategies was 93%.

Data Analysis

Reading Strategy Categories – Research Question 1

Based on the think aloud protocols, the reading strategies used by the participating students of this study were classified into two categories (1) Bottom-up strategies and (2) Top-down strategies (see Table 1). Bottom up strategies are those related to information at the sentence level and focus on understanding meaning of a word and structure of a sentence (Aebersold & Field, 1997). In the literature on reading strategies, bottom-up strategies have been described using phrases such as word-based, word-level, or local (e.g., Barnett, 1988; Block, 1992; Carrell, 1989; Brantmeier, 2000). Seven bottom-up strategies were used by the participating students in this study. The description and examples of bottom-up strategies used by them are given in Table 2. Top-down reading strategies are those related to the entire reading passage or to a large part of the text (Barnett, 1988). They are used to gain a holistic understanding of the text and to monitor and/or evaluate reader's comprehension of the text (Lee-Thompson 2008). Researchers (e.g., Carrell, 1989; Barnett, 1988; Brantmeier, 2000) have used phrases such as global or text-level to describe some of these strategies. Table 3 provides the description and examples of the seven top-down strategies used by the participating students of this study.

Table 1

Reading Strategy Categories

A. Bottom-Up Strategies

1. Paying attention to keywords
2. Paying attention to thesis statement/main idea
3. Rereading
4. Using context

5. Guessing and skipping
6. Recognizing and commenting on text structure, text genre and writing style.
7. Vocalizing

B. Top-Down Strategies

8. Planning
9. Making connections
10. Using prior knowledge and personal experience
11. Hypothesizing
12. Visualization
13. Commenting on strategy use
14. Reacting to text (agreeing with text + making judgments about text)

The study reveals that the most frequently used bottom-up strategies by the university level students of Pakistan were 'Recognizing and commenting on text structure, text genre and writing style' and 'Using context'. The 'recognizing and commenting on text structure, text genre and writing style' strategy was employed 8 times by the first and fourth participants, 7 times by the second participant and 6 times by the third participant to comprehend the text. On the other hand, 'Using context' strategy was employed three times by the second and third participants, two times by the first and fourth participants to comprehend the text.

Table 2

Bottom-up Strategies: Description and Examples

1. Paying Attention to Keywords: The reader reads the paragraph or passage and pays attention to keywords to comprehend the text.

'The first paragraph gives us definitions as the text itself is italicized, I am paying attention to those words so that when I read ahead my mind immediately makes the connection to the first paragraph that these things have been defined. So focal person, focal role and role set have been italicized which means I must pay attention to these.'

'I paid attention to the italicized words since they'll be talking continuously about these, so I pay attention to these. I would have preferred that they were in bold; otherwise they are kind of lost in

the text.'

2. Paying Attention to Thesis Statement/Main idea: The reader distinguishes between thesis statement and supporting detail and reads the thesis statement to understand the text and to guess what is coming up next.

'Like it says here "Any individual in any situation occupies a role in relation to other people". Mostly I read the thesis sentences out loud so I am prepared to know what comes ahead.'

3. Rereading: The reader reads a text again when information seems difficult to comprehend or when he/she needs to reflect on the content.

'Ok I am rereading the last sentence; it's an observation so I am going to think about this... Ok, in rereading I understood it better.'

4. Using Context: The reader uses context to figure out the meaning of a word/phrase and to understand the difficult section of the text.

'Ok "occupationally defined and legally so" that means that certain names are given to certain roles that are fulfilled so I suppose that means father, mother and occupation means what vocation in life they have. By the word "occupationally" which means whatever career they are doing. 'And sometimes even legally so" so that could mean the army and all those roles that are given to you.'

'I think by pips they mean badges, yeah, I think that's what it means. (Reads out aloud)...The 'on the shoulder part'...these things are worn on the shoulder.'

'The author italicized few words in first paragraph must having being discussing the other one now.'

5. Guessing and Skipping: The reader indicates he/she is proceeding without knowing any or much of the meaning of a word.

'If I didn't know what pips on the shoulder are I just improvise that it must mean badges and then I continue.'

6. Recognizing and commenting on text structure, text genre and writing style: The reader recognizes the text genre, its structure and style and comments on it.

'So now we come to "Place is another role sign..." we started with uniform, then dress, now place, so there is a good progression of definitions here.'

'The last bit of the paragraph talks about job descriptions which clearly give you a list that this is what you have to do. And then they have given the contrast that most people would wish to define their roles themselves. Even this paragraph says that job descriptions are defined then there is a lot of reading between the lines that a person might have to do.'

'This is a scientific text...'

'What I am noticing is that this is a very formally written text so there will be no question of slang or euphemisms.'

Overall I like the writing, it is clear and it goes back to the title "The concept of Role Theory." Reading it I understood what they were trying to say by focal person, focal role and role set. I am connecting it to the title. I like that because even though there is jargon, it is not overwhelming. The

writing is clear.'

7. Vocalizing: The reader reads aloud when he/she encounters problems in the text.

The most frequently used top-down strategies by the university level students of Pakistan were: 'Using prior knowledge and personal experience', 'Commenting on Strategy Use' and 'Reacting to text.' Statistically speaking, 'Using prior knowledge and personal experience' was employed five times by the fourth participant and four times by the first, second and third participants. 'Commenting on Strategy Use' five times by the first participant, four times by the third and fourth participants and three times by the second participant. 'Reacting to text' three times by the first and third participants, two times by the second and fourth participants.

Since strategies no 1-7, 9-12 and 14 involve interaction with the text and employment of specific strategies to complete the reading task they can be called cognitive strategies. Cognitive strategies are defined as strategies which 'are more directly related to individual learning tasks and entail direct manipulation or transformation of the learning materials' (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Mazanares, Russo & Kupper, 1985, p.561). On the other hand, strategies 8 and 13 can be regarded as metacognitive strategies as according to O' Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Mazanares, Russo & Kupper (1985) 'metacognitive strategies involve thinking about the learning process, planning for learning, monitoring of comprehension or production while it is taking place, and self-evaluation of learning after the language activity is completed.'

Table 3

Top-Down Strategies: Description and Examples

8. Planning: The reader makes a plan for understanding the text or a part of the text.

'Ok, as the title says this is an academic text so I should prepare my mind to make connections.'

'Like it says here "Any individual in any situation occupies a role in relation to other people". Mostly I read the thesis sentences out loud so I am prepared to know what comes ahead.'

9. Making connections: The reader connects ideas with preceding ideas or prepares himself/herself to make connections with upcoming ideas.

'...this is an academic text so I should prepare my mind to make connections..'

'..my mind immediately pays attention to those words so that when I read ahead my mind immediately makes the connection to the first paragraph that these things have been defined.'

10. Using prior knowledge and personal experience: The reader uses his/her prior knowledge and personal experience to explain, understand, extend and clarify content.

'With role expectations I think of sociology, because I am taking sociology so I know ke in a society we are given certain roles and expectations that we have to fulfill. So I think that will help me understand this text.' That makes me think of our culture where daughters and mothers have strictly defined roles...especially women, it's not so hard for men.

'In this paragraph, social circumstances onwards reminds me how in school we are always required to wear uniforms and how we debated in school that dress is a very, it shows your status or class.'

'The next part is about ambiguity, it's necessary to define your role. Ok over here I recall my business studies teaching, how HR managers hire people.'

11. Hypothesizing: The hypothetical meaning is constructed and tested to fit the context. The reader then either accepts or rejects his/her hypothesis. Due to the constraints of think aloud procedure, the hypothesis was reported without evidence of testing or the researcher became aware that a hypothesis had been formed when the rejection was verbalized in a later portion of text.

'Since this is a scientific text there will be definitions and explained concepts with a theory of sorts'

'this was exactly as I thought'

12. Visualization: The reader visualizes the text to understand it better.

'When things like "Imagine this" or "Picture this" come I usually try to picture it because that will aide my understanding. It says here "Imagine yourself questioning a stranger on a dark street at midnight without wearing the role signs of a policeman!" So I picture that and say to myself that "Yes, that would be very strange!"'

13. Commenting on Strategy Use

The reader shows awareness of and comments on his/her application of strategies.

'When rereading, I mostly pay attention to the syntax of the sentence. Even though there are

no pauses I make them myself so I understand better.

I only reread the first line because I pay attention to the first line of every paragraph because each paragraph is connected.'

'When things like "Imagine this" or "Picture this" come I usually try to picture it because that will aide my understanding. It says here "Imagine yourself questioning a stranger on a dark street at midnight without wearing the role signs of a policeman!" So I picture that and say to myself that "Yes, that would be very strange!"

'People are required to do everything. I am bringing my business studies "stuff" to understand.'

'In such text (scientific text) I usually pay attention to figures...'

14. Reacting to text (agreeing with text + making judgments about text): The reader reacts to the text by agreeing with it or by making judgments about it.

'Ok I find myself agreeing to this 'Individuals often find it hard to escape from the role that cultural traditions have defined for them.'

'But I like that this text is non-sexist, if they are saying doctors and lawyers it could be anyone so I like this fact about it.'

'Job descriptions heighten the sense of role ambiguity.'" I would agree with this that now, nowadays the job market demands that you multitask, then there is no clear description that this is what you have to do.'

The study also reveals that in order to comprehend a single paragraph or thought-unit the participating students at several instances in the think aloud used both bottom-up and top-down strategies. Following is an example:

'The first paragraph gives us definitions as the text itself is italicized, I am paying attention to those words so that when I read ahead my mind immediately makes the connection to the first paragraph that these things have been defined. So focal person, focal role and role set have been italicized which means I must pay attention to these. I am thinking that since this is a scientific text there will be definitions and explained concepts with a theory of sorts, so I should prepare my mind likewise. In such text I usually pay attention to figures.'

This example shows that one of the research participant used strategy 1 (Bottom-up strategy: Paying Attention to Keywords), Strategy 8 (Top-down strategy: Planning) and Strategy 10 (Top-down strategy: Using prior knowledge and personal experience) to comprehend a piece of text.

Becoming a Skilled Reader of English – Research Question 2

During the informal conversation aimed at finding out how the participating students of this study became skilled L2 readers of English, it was learnt that their father or mother have always encouraged them to read as much as possible. They kept them surrounded with books, magazines and other reading materials since childhood. Therefore, from a very young age, the participants read a lot of books on different topics. In addition, the research participants reported that the school they had studied from had a good library. The schools of two participants also had programs that encouraged them to read. This suggests that the learners should be exposed to reading as much and as early as possible. At the same time, the reading strategies can be taught explicitly to the students which can help speed up the development of their reading skills and can save learners from long and arduous process of becoming a proficient reader. Many researchers regard explicit instruction as vital to fostering reading comprehension in students because students 'may have many misconceptions about the nature of reading and incomplete awareness of reading strategies, or of executive processes for monitoring and regulating comprehension' (Carrell, 1998, p. 9). Moreover, research indicates that merely reading more text does not enhance students' comprehension (Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Mistretta-Hampston & Echevarria, 1998). Rather, use of even one of the reading strategies improved comprehension (ibid.).

Findings

The 14 strategies gleaned from this study indicate that skilled Pakistani Urdu speaking university level readers of English use a range of strategies to comprehend a text. This finding echoes the literature that indicates that skilled L1 and L2 readers utilize a number of reading strategies to facilitate comprehension of a text (Baker & Brown, 1984; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2008).

The findings of the present study also corroborate the literature that indicates that skilled readers in both L1 and L2 are distinguished from unskilled readers on the basis of their familiarity with text structure and topic (Pang, 2008). Besides that, the findings support Brown, Pressley, Van Meter and Schuder (1996, p.19) contention that skilled readers are goal-oriented and 'combine their background knowledge with text cues to create meaning.'

The study also found that the bottom-up and top-down strategies, namely, paying attention to keywords; paying attention to thesis statement/main idea; rereading; using context; guessing and skipping; recognizing and commenting on text structure; text genre and writing style; vocalizing; planning; making connections; using prior knowledge and personal experience; hypothesizing; visualization; commenting on strategy use and reacting to text; utilized by the readers of this study are quite similar

to the reading strategies that are reported by researchers such as Hosenfeld, 1977; Block, 1986; Barnett, 1988; Carrell, 1989; Young & Oxford, 1997; Schueller 1999; Brantmeier 2002 and Lee-Thompson, 2008.

The study also revealed that to comprehend the reading text the participating students at several instances interactively used both bottom-up and top-down strategies. This finding is in line with the current approach in second language reading that have recognized that reading requires both top-down and bottom-up processing functioning interactively for an adequate understanding of second language reading and reading comprehension (e.g. Rumelhart, 1977; Stanovich, 1980; Sanford & Garrod, 1981; Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983; Carrell, 1988; Grabe, 1991). Put another way, reading theorists now recognize that 'both top-down and bottom-up processes are occurring either alternately or at the same time' (Singhal, 2005, p. 20).

Overall, the findings of the study support the existing literature in providing further evidence that using a wide range of reading strategies, both bottom-up and top-down, have a crucial effect on reading comprehension. Moreover, the findings lend credibility to the literature that highlight the important role extensive reading could play in help learners develop good reading strategies.

Conclusion

The present study investigated the reading strategies of skilled Urdu speaking Pakistani university level students, and explored what helped these students become a skilled second language reader of English. The strategies used by the students were classified into (1) bottom-up strategies and (2) top-down strategies. It was learnt that reading a wide array of books can help learners develop good reading strategies and that the support and encouragement of parents and teachers can help a student develop good reading skills. These findings suggest that teachers and parents should encourage children to read from an early age. The findings also suggest that some class time should also be devoted to reading for pleasure at all levels of learning English. At the same time, students should explicitly be taught reading strategies that skilled L2 readers of English use to become proficient readers especially if they are coming from such background in which parents are not too aware of the importance of reading. Furthermore, reading curricula and textbook writers should incorporate reading strategies at all levels of instructions to help students become proficient L2 readers of English.

This study supports and reinforces findings on the reading processes of second language readers. The outcomes of the study help in understanding the reading strategies used by skilled university level second language readers

of English and offer valuable insights for professional who are involved in teaching reading skills to university level students. The study might encourage other researchers to further investigate the reading processes of second language readers to improve the teaching reading practices and reading curricula.

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