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Gender Differences in Reading Strategy Use Among ESL College Students

The use of a complex battery of reading strategies has been found to be obligatory for those English as a Second Language (ESL) students desirous of a high level of English language literacy and success in US academic institutions. Even though we know of the importance of reading strategies, little research exists on whether or not ESL males and females have similar or different strategic reading habits. This study endeavored to fill this void by comparing the academic reading strategies of 248 (138 = male; 110 = female) advanced college ESL students. The results of a quantitative survey showed very few strategic differences, with both genders using strategies with medium or high frequency. These findings suggest that advanced ESL readers' strategies are primarily influenced by factors other than gender.

The importance of using learning strategies, or the "moment-by-moment techniques that we employ to solve 'problems' posed by second language input and output" (Brown, 2000, p. 122), in order to become a successful English language learner cannot be overstated. Since the good language learner studies thirty years ago (Naiman, Frohlich, & Todesco, 1975; Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975), researchers have been aware that those who achieve a high level of second language proficiency are, by necessity, active strategy users.

The importance of using reading strategies is especially critical for English language learners, since high levels of English language literacy—which are essential for even minimal academic achievement at any level (elementary, secondary, university, and tertiary)—have been found to correlate with frequent and complex strategy use (Anderson, 1999; Jimenez, Garcia, & Pearson, 1996; Schoonen, Hulstijn, & Bossers, 1998; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001).

While we know of the importance of second language reading strategies, there is still a gap in our knowledge about the differences between males' and females' use of them, especially at the university level. More specifically, questions still exist pertaining to whether or not males and females significantly differ in terms of the types of reading strategies they use and the frequency with which they use them. As Chavez (2001) suggested, studying such questions is important because if gender disparities are found, they may lead teachers and researchers to seek ways to minimize them, thus affording both genders maximum opportunities to achieve high levels of L2 literacy.

In terms of general language learning strategies, some studies show minimal differences between males and females (Shmais, 2003; Szoke & Sheorey, 2002) or even higher strategy use for males (Baily, 1996). Most current literature in this area, however, shows that females tend to be more active strategy users than their male counterparts (Oxford, 1993). The merits of this and other generalizations regarding gender and second language learning remain hotly debated and should be approached with caution (Ehrlich, 1997; Kobayashi, 2002; Patterson, 1995), especially in light of the widely held myth, even among teachers and researchers, that females are innately more skilled language learners, which Oxford, Ehrman, and Nyikos (1988) identify as "the language learning folklore that women learn languages 'better' than men" (p. 321). However, little research has specifically aimed at investigating gender differences in the use of second language reading strategies. The current study seeks to shed more light on this area by investigating if and how second language reading strategy use at the university level differs according to gender.

Review of Literature

Gender, Second Language Learning Strategies, and College Students

Several studies show that females are more active strategy users than males, most of which were carried out using Oxford's *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* or *SILL*. According to Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995), the SILL is a 50-item survey designed to reveal the self-reported language learning strategies that second and foreign language learners utilize. Specifically, it consists of questions concerning six strategy types: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. The SILL has been found to be statistically reliable and has therefore been utilized in numerous studies (See Oxford, 1990, and Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995, for a thorough description of the SILL).

One of the most frequently cited studies of gender and strategy use

using the SILL was conduced by Green and Oxford (1995) who studied 374 prebasic, basic, and intermediate college students in Puerto Rico. Approximately 178 students were female and 196 were male. Using Oxford's SILL and a standardized entrance exam, the researchers found that men and women differed on nearly one-third of the strategies on the SILL (15 of 50), which included memory, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. On all strategies except for three, such differences were constant across proficiency levels, with women using higher levels of them.

Goh and Foong (1997) also used the SILL, but this time the focus of study was Chinese learners of English. Participants consisted of 175 students (female = 50; male = 125) studying at the beginning, intermediate, and high levels at a Singaporean university. Significant differences were found between males and females in the categories of compensation and affective strategies, yet not in the other four categories. However, regardless of whether or not significant differences were found in each category, females used more strategies in all of them.

South African students' utilization of strategies was examined by Dreyer and Oxford in a 1996 SILL-based study. The participants consisted of 305 freshman (females = 179; males = 126) studying English at Potchefstrom University in South Africa, all of whom were native speakers of Afrikaans. Overall, women used a significantly higher number of strategies than did men. In terms of strategy categories, women exhibited a higher use of social strategies and metacognitive strategies.

Finally, in perhaps the largest study to date using the SILL, Oxford and Nyikos (1989) studied the strategies of native English-speaking foreign language students at a large American university. Two-thirds of the students were first-year language students with no foreign language background. All students were studying European languages. Instead of reporting overall results, categorical results, and individual results, Oxford and Nyikos conceived of the SILL's items as fitting into one of five factors: (1) formal-rule practice strategies; (2) functional practice strategies; (3) independent strategies; (4) general study strategies; and (5) conversational input elicitation strategies. The results indicated that females used significantly more strategies than males on factors one, four, and five; males did not exhibit a higher degree of strategy use on any of the factors.

On the other hand, while the bulk of studies dealing with second language learning strategies at the university level show females to use more of them, other SILL studies have found very few differences between males and females. Szoke and Sheorey (2002), for example, carried out a comparative study of Hungarian and Russian learners of

English. Ninety-nine Hungarians participated in the study, of whom 67 were male and 32 were female. Of the Russian students who participated, 50 were male and 45 were female. The learners in both groups were university students studying English at the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels. For Hungarian learners, females and males were found not to differ significantly overall, nor were there differences in the six SILL categories. In fact, only on six individual strategies—or 12% of the total number—were significant differences found, with females using more strategies than men. For the Russian students, there were no significant overall differences found, nor were there significant differences in any of the six SILL categories. Likewise, there was only one individual strategy in which males and females did differ.

Likewise, Shmais (2003) studied the strategies used by 99 (male = 19; female = 80) Palestinian college students majoring in English. Although the number of male participants was small, there were no significant overall differences between them, nor were there significant differences between them on any of the SILL subscales.

Still, other studies of gender and learning strategies have shown that males outperform females. In a non-SILL study, Baily (1996) sought to discover gender differences in the use of compensation strategies by native speakers of English studying conversational French at the university level. The participants consist of 15 females and six males. Their strategy use was measured using Systeme-D, a computer program that is able to follow students' use of compensatory strategies such as looking up words in the dictionary, using a thesaurus, and checking one's grammar. Baily tracked students' use of such functions while they composed four essays over the course of one academic semester. The results showed that men used more strategies than women on all four compositions.

Gender, Reading Strategies, and Learners of English

Unlike the research on general language learning strategies, the literature on gender and reading strategies does not show greater strategy utilization for either males or females, although there have been relatively few studies on the subject. One of the few studies that specifically looks at male/female differences in reading strategies is that of Phakiti (2003), who examined how 384 male ($N = 173$) and female ($N = 211$) Thai college students utilized cognitive and metacognitive strategies while taking a final exam at a large Thai university. Using questionnaires that asked students to recall the strategies that they used, the author found that while there were no significant differences between males and females in terms of the cognitive strategies they used, men used significantly

more metacognitive strategies than their female counterparts, even across different proficiency levels.

Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) also studied the metacognitive and cognitive, in addition to the support, strategies of second language readers. The participants consisted of 152 ESL students (92 males, 60 females) studying at the freshman level at a large Midwestern US university. Given that students were required to submit a Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score of at least 500, they were considered to be relatively advanced. The participants completed a 28-item quantitative survey that examined the cognitive, metacognitive, and support strategies they used while reading in English. The results showed there to be no significant overall differences between males and females, and only one individual strategy in which there were significant differences, in which females used more strategies than males.

Finally, in a small-scale study carried out by Young and Oxford (1993), they also found negligible differences between males and females. The participants were 26 female and 23 male native speakers of English who were studying Spanish. Specifically, Young and Oxford were interested in the strategies they used while reading passages in both English and Spanish. Among other things, oral recall protocols did not reveal significant differences between males' and females' use of individual strategies, either in English or in Spanish.

While the data gleaned from Phakiti (2003), Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001), and Young and Oxford (1993) shed light on gender differences and strategy use, more research needs to be done in order to draw general conclusions about gender and reading strategy use; in other words, whether or not males and female second language learners utilize different reading strategies, or as the previous research suggests, are relatively similar in their reading strategy use. The following study represents an attempt to help fill that gap by comparing the reading strategies of advanced male and female ESL learners at the college level. The following question was used to guide the study: "Do advanced male and female ESL learners at the college level report using different academic reading strategies?"

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 248 ESL students. One hundred and ten self-identified as female, while 138 self-identified as male. They were taken from six universities and one community college, all of which were in the United States Midwest and South. The participants fell into two categories: (1) advanced learners studying English the semester

previous to full-time undergraduate or graduate study in their respective universities; (2) students in their first semester of full-time academic undergraduate or graduate study taking writing courses specifically designed for ESL learners. Although students reported studying English between one and ten years, all can be described as advanced due to their placement in their respective programs. Participants represented nine language groups: East Asian (52%), Western European (25.2%), South Asian (10.4%), Middle Eastern (6.4%), Eastern European (2.4%), other (1.6%), Western African (1.2%), and ASL (.8%). The average age for students was 23.2 years.

Instrument

The mechanism to carry out this study was a quantitative survey called the *Survey of Reading Strategies*, or the *SORS*. The designers of the SORS, Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002), asserted that its goal was to record adolescent and adult ESL students' self-perceived academic reading strategies. Three kinds of strategies are contained in the SORS: global reading strategies (13 items), problem-solving strategies (8 items), and support strategies (9 items). Global reading strategies are those which students use to plan, monitor, and direct their reading. Instances of such strategies include checking to see if one's guesses are correct, explicitly deciding what material to pay close attention to and what to ignore, and entering a reading task with a certain purpose or goal. Problem-solving strategies are procedures that learners use while reading a text in order to clear up misunderstanding or difficulties in text comprehension. Visualizing information to help one remember it, and guessing the meaning of unknown words are illustrations of such strategies. Finally, support strategies are auxiliary materials and resources aimed at increasing text comprehension, such as note taking and highlighting important information.

While the SORS has been used in several articles (Anderson, 2003; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001), it has not been tested for reliability. However, its forerunner, the Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory (MARSI), was found to be statistically reliable (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002, 2004; Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002). Although the MARSI was designed for native speakers, it is very similar to the SORS, except that the latter contains simplified vocabulary for ESL readers and includes two items that are distinctive to ESL learners: "thinking in the native and target language while reading... [and] translating from one language to another" (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002, p. 4). Mokhtari and Sheorey report that the scores on the SORS are tabulated on a five-point Likert scale in which results of 3.5 or above signify high frequency use,

2.5 to 3.4 represent moderate strategy use, and 2.4 or below characterize low strategy use.

Data Collection and Analysis

Students were given the surveys during their English courses. Fewer than two dozen surveys from the original data set were incorrectly done and thus were not included in the data analysis. Such analysis took place through the use of descriptive statistics and *t*-tests to see whether or not there were differences between male and female ESL readers. *T*-tests were used because they were not only able to identify overall average strategy use, but also averages for gender groups, strategy types (global, problem-solving, and support), and individual participants. Moreover, the use of the *t*-test provided information on the whether or not gender differences were significant.

Results

The research question pertained to the differences between male and female ESL students' reading strategies: *Do ESL males and females report using different academic reading strategies?* The results revealed that males and females did not significantly differ in their overall strategy use ($p > .05$). Both males ($M = 3.42$) and females ($M = 3.42$) exhibited identical means, which correspond to medium strategy use. Table 1 shows that males and females only differed on two individual strategies, one global ("noting text characteristics"), one support ("paying close attention to reading"). On the former, females exhibited higher strategy use, while males did on the latter. Incidentally, males reported higher strategy use on 18 of the 30 (60%) individual strategies, or slightly more than half of the strategies.

Notably, none of the strategies was used with low frequency for either males or females. Males used 40% of strategies with high frequency and 60% of them with medium frequency. Females used 33.3% of strategies with high frequency and 66.6% of them with medium frequency. Table 2 shows that the top and bottom five strategies for both genders. For the top strategies, four of the five were the same for both genders. Notably, the third and fifth most popular strategies were the same for each of them. For the least used strategies, three of the five were the same, although none had the same rank.

Finally, there were no significant gender differences in any of the three SORS subscales. Table 1 shows that neither males nor females used any of the strategy subscale categories with low frequency. Both genders used problem-solving strategies with high frequency, while global and support strategies were used with medium frequency. Even

Table 1
Differences in Reported Strategy Use Between ESL Males and Females

Name	Strategy	Male ($n = 138$)		Female ($n = 110$)		*t*	*p*-value
		M	S.D.	*M*	S.D.		
GLOBAL (GLOB)		3.35	0.52	3.32	0.56	0.40	0.69
SUPPORT (SUP)		3.24	0.59	3.32	0.51	-1.01	0.31
PROBLEM-SOLVING (PROB)		3.80	0.54	3.73	0.54	0.99	0.32
GLOB	1. Purpose when reading	3.56	0.88	3.41	3.41	1.27	0.21
SUP	2. Taking notes while reading	2.70	1.16	2.94		1.12	-1.65
GLOB	3. Using prior knowledge	3.66	0.98	3.50	0.91	1.32	0.19
GLOB	4. Previewing text before reading	3.18	1.12	3.35	1.09	-1.22	0.22
SUP	5. Reading aloud when text becomes difficult	2.75	1.31	2.91	1.28	-0.94	0.35
GLOB	6. Checking how text content fits purpose	3.21	1.06	3.06	0.99	1.12	0.27
PROB	7. Reading slowly and carefully	3.92	1.00	3.70	1.02	1.71	0.09
GLOB	**8. Noting text characteristics**	**2.86**	**1.12**	**3.18**	**1.10**	**-2.30**	**0.02***
PROB	9. Try to stay focused on reading	4.02	0.92	3.96	0.87	0.51	0.61
SUP	10. Underlining or circling information in text	3.83	1.16	3.97	1.00	-1.05	0.29
PROB	11. Adjusting reading rate	3.91	0.97	3.73	0.98	1.44	0.15
GLOB	12. Determining what to read	3.41	1.11	3.34	1.00	0.56	0.57
SUP	13. Using reference materials	3.72	1.35	3.56	1.17	0.95	0.35
PROB	**14. Paying close attention to reading**	**4.17**	**0.95**	**3.93**	**0.82**	**2.10**	**0.04***
GLOB	15. Using text features (e.g. tables)	3.38	1.23	3.52	1.12	-0.94	0.35

Table 1 continued

Name	Strategy	Male ($n = 138$)		Female ($n = 110$)		*t*	*p*-value
		M	S.D.	*M*	S.D.		
PROB	16. Pausing and thinking about reading	3.28	1.09	3.22	1.03	0.42	0.67
GLOB	17. Using context clues	3.53	0.97	3.38	0.93	1.21	0.23
SUP	18. Paraphrasing for better understanding	3.07	1.18	3.27	1.11	-1.41	0.16
PROB	19. Visualizing information read	3.36	1.16	3.55	1.05	-1.29	0.10
PROB	20. Using typographical aids (e.g. italics)	3.15	1.20	3.28	1.09	-0.88	0.38
GLOB	21. Evaluating what is read	3.21	1.02	3.05	0.88	1.34	0.18
SUP	22. Going back and forth in text	3.39	1.03	3.35	1.00	0.35	0.72
GLOB	23. Check understanding of new information	3.45	0.94	3.41	0.92	0.37	0.72
GLOB	24. Predicting or guessing text meaning	3.57	1.05	3.46	1.03	0.77	0.45
PROB	25. Re-reading for better understanding	4.08	1.00	4.06	0.97	0.13	0.90
SUP	26. Asking oneself questions	2.99	1.06	2.91	0.95	0.64	0.52
GLOB	27. Confirming predictions	3.33	1.10	3.19	0.99	1.01	0.32
PROB	28. Guessing meaning of unknown words	3.64	1.02	3.68	1.02	-0.28	0.78
SUP	29. Translating to native tongue	3.10	1.30	3.25	1.29	-0.87	0.39
SUP	30. Thinking in native tongue and English	3.20	1.24	3.37	1.10	-1.18	0.24

*Significant differences found

though no significant differences were found, males had slightly higher overall scores on global and problem-solving strategies, while females used more support strategies.

Table 2
Top Five and Bottom Five Reading Strategies Utilized by ESL Males and Females

Male ($n = 138$)		Female ($n = 110$)	
Name	Strategy	Name	Strategy
1. PROB14	Paying close attention to reading	1. PROB25	Re-reading for better understanding
2. PROB25	Re-reading for better understanding	2. SUP10	Underlining or circling information in text
3. PROB9	Try to stay focused on reading	3. PROB9	Try to stay focused on reading
4. PROB7	Reading slowly and carefully	4. PROB14	Paying close attention to reading
5. PROB11	Adjusting reading rate	5. PROB11	Adjusting reading rate
26. SUP2	Taking notes while reading	26. SUP5	Reading aloud when text becomes difficult
27. SUP5	Reading aloud when text becomes difficult	27. SUP26	Asking oneself questions
28. GLOB8	Noting text characteristics	28. SUP2	Taking notes while reading
29. SUP26	Asking oneself questions	29. GLOB21	Evaluating what is read
30. SUP18	Paraphrasing for better understanding	30. GLOB6	Checking how text content fits purpose

Conclusion

This study produced many interesting results, the first among them is the striking similarities of strategy use among males and females. As previously reported, males and females not only used the same number of overall strategies ($M = 3.42$), but also did not differ significantly on any of the three SORS subscales. Moreover, they only differed on two of the 30 individual strategies. Although little research has previously been done on this topic, the results found here are consistent with Sheorey and Mokhtari's (2001) findings, which showed that male and female college

ESL learners showed no overall significant differences and only differed on one individual strategy. More interesting is that their 2001 study was an earlier, albeit very similar, version of the SORS, which adds support to the notion that advanced male and female college ESL students are more similar than different.

As Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) claim, such results are at odds with previous strategy research, which generally has found that females use more strategies than males. However, as previously reported, the connection between advanced reading proficiency and active strategy use has been thoroughly documented for college second language readers (Anderson, 1991; Block, 1992; Cabral & Tavares, 2002; Carrell, Pharis, & Liberto, 1989; Upton, 1997; Yang, 2002; Zhang, 2001), and thus whatever gender differences that exist at lower proficiency levels could be largely neutralized for advanced students. In fact, Oxford (1993) suggests that females tend to be higher L2 achievers because of their higher level of strategy use and not because of any innate gender differences. This suggestion is supported by Sheorey and Mokhtari's (2001) research, which found that those students who rated themselves as having high L2 reading proficiency used significantly more strategies than those who gave themselves a lower self-rating, regardless of gender. Thus, it is possible that with second language reading strategy use, gender differences are more related to task demands and contextual motivation than biology, as others have suggested is the case with other issues surrounding language use and gender (Ehrlich, 1997). In other words, both male and female students who want to achieve higher L2 reading proficiency use the same strategies in order to reach this goal. Future studies should investigate whether or not second language readers of other proficiencies also exhibit similar strategic tendencies, or if gender differences become more pronounced at the beginning and intermediate levels. Likewise, more research needs to account for why gender differences appear in general language learning strategy use, but not in reading strategy use.

In terms of specific strategies, it is not apparent why females more frequently "note text characteristics" and why males engage more in "paying close attention to reading." However, Oxford (1993) has reported that females are more likely to employ general study strategies, of which noting text characteristics could be one used in both the first and second language. Nonetheless, current second language research literature does not support the notion that males are generally more attentive to reading tasks than females. Future research should investigate possible reasons for such strategic differences, although it should be noted that both used the former (note text characteristics) with medium frequency and the

latter (paying close attention to reading) with high frequency.

Pedagogically, the results of this study seem to suggest that because of such similar levels of strategy use, males and females are receiving at least relatively comparable amounts of instruction. However, future studies may reveal significant gender gaps at lower proficiency levels, and thus require more programmatic and classroom intervention in order to lessen the achievement gaps. Alternatively, they could expose if and how innate gender differences function at beginning and intermediate reading levels. In the meantime, classroom teachers should be mindful of strategic differences among males and females at beginning and intermediate levels in order to know if and how they differ. If significant differences are found, teachers must investigate ways to diminish them. Brantmeier (2001), for example, has suggested that passage content is related to reading success; in other words, males do better on more science-oriented passages, while females achieve higher reading scores on humanities-related topics. Such findings presumably are related to the self-perceived interests of both genders and probably involve using different strategies. Therefore, when assessing learners' reading strategies, teachers should avoid using passages that could be biased towards one gender and against the other one.

Finally, it must be noted that results based on self-report questionnaires like the SORS have limitations. Specifically, Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002) asserted that the SORS, like other self-report surveys, do not report what learners do, but rather, what they claim to do, and thus "one cannot tell with absolute certainty from the instrument alone whether students actually engage in the strategies they report using" (p. 8). In order to get a fuller picture of students' strategy use, they encourage the simultaneous use of interviews and observation.

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