

## Perception of EFL Learners' Use of Reading Strategies: A Case Study<sup>\*</sup>

### การรับรู้ของผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศที่มีต่อการใช้กลวิธีการอ่าน: กรณีศึกษา

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#### Abstract

This study aims to explore the awareness of the use of reading strategies by freshmen of Naresuan University, Thailand, and to compare whether there were differences in the reading strategies used by the participants from different study fields and genders. The samples were 547 students, and a questionnaire was utilised and analysed statistically. The results of the study showed that most of the students were aware of reading strategies with both genders employing a high level of use of reading strategies; however, there was a variation in the use of strategies among the fields of study. It is suggested that teachers consider ways to incorporate reading strategies into the lessons and raise awareness to the importance of reading strategies which are an integral part in the learning and reading comprehension of a foreign language.

**Keywords:** reading strategies, reading comprehension, EFL learners

<sup>\*</sup> To publish the research findings as a part of teaching General Education (G.E.) course.

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## บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อสำรวจการรับรู้ของนิสิตชั้นปีที่ 1 มหาวิทยาลัยเรศวร ประเทศไทยต่อการใช้กลวิธีการอ่าน และเพื่อเปรียบเทียบความแตกต่างในการใช้กลวิธีการอ่านของนิสิตที่อยู่กลุ่มคนที่แตกต่างกันและระหว่างเพศชายและเพศหญิง กลุ่มตัวอย่างในงานวิจัยนี้มีจำนวน 547 คน เครื่องมือวิจัยคือแบบสอบถามพร้อมการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลทางสถิติ ผลการวิจัยพบว่า นิสิตส่วนใหญ่รับรู้ถึงกลวิธีการอ่าน นิสิตทั้งเพศชายและเพศหญิงใช้กลวิธีการอ่านในระดับสูง นิสิตที่สังกัดกลุ่มคนที่แตกต่างกันใช้กลวิธีการอ่านที่แตกต่างกัน ผู้สอนควรพิจารณาวิธีการนำกลวิธีการอ่านเข้าไปเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของบทเรียนและสร้างความตระหนักรู้ในเรื่องความสำคัญของการใช้กลวิธีการอ่านซึ่งเป็นส่วนสำคัญของการเรียนและการอ่านภาษาต่างประเทศเพื่อความเข้าใจ

**คำสำคัญ :** กลวิธีการอ่าน การอ่านเพื่อความเข้าใจ ผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ

## Introduction

English is an important language for people in many parts of the world and the official language for a large number of countries as well as having a major role as the medium of communication in the world's economic, politics, social and educational forums. For Thailand, being part of the ASEAN community, English has become the ASEAN lingua franca and the working language for communicating within the community. Therefore, the importance of English is emphasised in Thai education (Cubalit, 2016). However, it seems that the level of English proficiency of Thai year 12 students is surprisingly low, confirmed by the unsatisfactory results of the English subject included in the Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET). This test is administered annually by the National Institute of Educational Testing Service to all year 12 students who need their scores of English as well as other subjects as required by each curriculum for admission to study at a university. The average scores for English subjects over the past four years have been, 2013 (25.35/100), 2014 (23.44/100), 2015 (24.98/100), and 2016 (27.76/100) (National Institute of Educational Testing Service, 2018). It is evidently clear that the majority of Thai high school students are not proficient in English. At university level, students are required to access resources both offline and online for their assignment and future professional development with many academic papers, journals and online textbooks written in English. The majority of university students, particularly those enrolled in Medicine, Engineering, Dentistry, Medical Science, Law, Social Sciences, and Humanities, need to read authentic academic texts in English related to their field of studies. Also, there is a requirement for every student to enroll in a number of English courses while studying, and be able to communicate and use English effectively to enhance their work and life skills and increasing

the opportunity to study, work and survive in the global economy and the international sector.

Reading is regarded as the most vital skill among the four skills in communication for EFL students at any level of language competency (Yazar, 2013). However, many undergraduate students in Thailand have poor reading and comprehension skills with academic texts in English (Munsakorn, 2012). As reading is not a natural process compared with other skills (Grabe, 2009), it is necessary to assist the students with the appropriate use of reading strategies to enhance text comprehension. Recently, a number of researchers have explored reading strategy use among genders (e.g. Phakiti, 2003a; Kolić-Vehovec, Bajšanski & Zubković, 2010; Saengpakdeejit, 2014). These looked at variance in reading strategies between genders allowing teachers to better understand how their learners comprehend what they read and what they do if confused while reading academic texts. It can imply that teachers require the skills to implement reading strategy instruction to assist students in understanding and applying appropriate reading strategies to become comprehensive readers.

This study was undertaken in a comprehensive Thai public university requiring all freshmen to use the same lesson plan and English textbook containing activities for learning the four English skills. This has allowed the researcher to investigate the use of reading strategies from a vast number of EFL learners who are studying in different fields. The present study may give a direction for teachers to assist their students to become strategic readers. In addition, it offered the opportunity to explore if there were the difference between EFL males and females students, especially those recently graduated from high schools in utilising different strategies with more or less frequent use of reading strategies.

### **Research Methodology**

It consists of details of the population and samples, instrument, data collection procedures and data analysis respectively.

### **Population and Samples**

The population of this study was all 4,746 freshmen enrolled in the compulsory Fundamental English Course of the academic year 2017. The estimated sample size to ensure a 95% confidence level with a tolerances rate of  $\pm 5\%$  based on Taro Yamane's table using a stratified random sampling technique was 369. However, for this particular study the total number of the samples was 547 consisting of 3 clusters: Health Science (183 students,

33.45%), Science Technology (146 students, 26.7%), and Social Science (218 students, 39.85%). The gender ratio was 201 male students (36.75%) and 346 female students (63.25%).

### Instrument

The questionnaire used in this study was designed by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002). It was translated into Thai to ensure students fully understand the question and choose the best answers closest to their own opinion. The questionnaire contained two parts:

Part I: It asks about the personal information: their gender and fields of study.

Part II: It asks about the students' reading strategies. There are 30 items the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) developed by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002, p. 10). Each number means the following:

5 = "I always or almost always do this"

4 = "I usually do this"

3 = "I sometimes do this" (about 50% of the time)

2 = "I do this only occasionally"

1 = "I never or almost never do this"

Thirty items of the SORS can be classified into 3 categories as follows:

1. Global Reading Strategies (GLOB) are techniques that the reader carefully plan, check and assess before and during reading. There are 13 items; 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 12, 15, 17, 20, 21, 23, 24 and 27.

2. Problem Solving Strategies (PROB) are techniques that the reader employ if having comprehension problem during reading; for example, improving their reading speed, rereading to increase the understanding, guessing meaning from context clues. There are 8 items; 7, 9, 11, 14, 16, 19, 25 and 28

3. Support Strategies (SUP) are techniques that the reader can utilise to assist or develop their reading comprehension, for instance, note-taking, reading aloud, highlighting information, paraphrasing. There are 9 items; 2, 5, 10, 13, 18, 22 26, 29 and 30

The present study was undertaken to give a clearer picture of understanding of the newly arrived freshmen's reading strategy and whether this varied according to gender and field of study. The following research questions guided the study:

4. What English reading strategies are most used by first year students at Naresuan University?

5. Do the male and female students have different levels of reading strategy awareness?
6. Do the students entering different fields of study have different levels of reading strategy awareness?

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Four steps were taken as follows: firstly, the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) was translated into Thai for easier understanding. Secondly, the SORS's were distributed to the samples enrolled in the Fundamental English Course of the academic year 2017 one week before the midterm exam. Thirdly, the objectives of the study were carefully explained together with the request for the research consent forms to be completed. Finally, the 20 minute- questionnaire was undertaken and collected from the participants for analysis of the data.

### **Data Analysis**

The collected data were analysed by utilising SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used as follows: percentages were used to present the background information of the students, the means and the standard deviations were employed to analyse the level of reading strategy and the frequencies of reading strategy awareness were interpreted.

T-test analysis was used to compare the data between two groups classified by gender and the three groups classified by fields of study: health sciences, science and technology, and the social science clusters. Each pair of results was compared by the LSD method for statistically significant difference. In order to understand the level of reading strategies usage, the means scores were calculated and interpreted as High (3.5 or higher), Moderate (2.5-3.4), and Low (2.4 or lower) (Mokhtari and Sheorey, 2002, p.4).

### **Results and Discussion**

Question 1: What English reading strategies are most used by first year students at Naresuan University?

Table 1: The Overall Reading Strategies Employed by the Participants

English Reading Strategies	Mean	S.D	Level
<i>Global Reading Strategies</i>	3.66	0.89	<i>High</i>
1. I have a purpose in mind when I read.	3.50	0.77	High
3. I think about what I know to help me understand what I read.	3.61	0.83	High
4. I take an overall view of the text to see what it is about before reading it.	3.95	0.82	High
6. I think about whether the content of the text fits my reading purpose.	3.76	0.82	High
8. I review the text first by noting its characteristics like length and organisation.	3.81	1.01	High
12. When reading, I decide what to read closely and what to ignore.	3.60	0.97	High
15. I use tables, figures, and pictures in text to increase my understanding.	3.61	0.92	High
17. I use context clues to help me better understand what I am reading.	3.55	1.01	High
20. I use typographical features like bold face and italics to identify key information.	3.66	0.90	High
21. I critically analyse and evaluate the information presented in the text.	3.59	0.83	High
23. I check my understanding when I come across new information.	3.82	0.91	High
24. I try to guess what the content of the text is about when I read.	3.25	0.88	Moderate
27. I check to see if my guesses about the text are right or wrong.	3.90	0.88	High
<i>Support Strategies</i>	3.52	0.93	<i>High</i>

2. I take notes while reading to help me understand what I read.	3.09	0.93	Moderate
5. When text becomes difficult, I read aloud to help me understand what I read.	3.37	1.02	Moderate
10. I underline or circle information in the text to help me remember it.	3.32	0.92	Moderate
13. I use reference materials (e.g., a dictionary) to help me understand what I read.	3.93	0.97	High
18. I paraphrase (restate ideas in my own words) to better understand what I read.	3.56	0.89	High
22. I go back and forth in the text to find relationship among ideas in it.	3.84	0.90	High
26. I ask myself questions I like to have answered in the text.	2.95	1.00	Moderate
29. When reading, I translate from English into my native language.	3.97	0.84	High
30. When reading, I think about information in both English and my mother tongue.	3.65	0.90	High
<i>Problem Solving Strategies</i>	3.61	0.91	High
7. I read slowly and carefully to make sure I understand what I am reading.	3.64	0.91	High
9. I try to get back on track when I lose concentration.	3.23	0.94	Moderate
11. I adjust my reading speed according to what I am reading.	3.60	1.07	High
14. When text becomes difficult, I pay closer attention to what I am reading.	3.63	0.85	High
16. I stop from time to time and think about what I am reading.	3.63	0.95	High

19. I try to picture or visualize information to help remember what I read.	3.97	0.84	High
25. When text becomes difficult, I re-read it to increase my understanding.	3.60	0.84	High
28. When I read, I guess the meaning of unknown words or phrases.	3.69	0.90	High
Total	<b>3.61</b>	<b>0.91</b>	High

Table 1 indicated that the average of using English Reading Strategies was at a high level ( $\bar{X}=3.61$ , S.D.=0.91). According to the mean score among three strategy categories, Global Reading Strategies were the highest used strategy ( $\bar{X}=3.66$ , S.D.=0.89). The second highest use was the Problem Solving Strategies ( $\bar{X}=3.61$ , S.D.=0.91) and the lowest use is the Support Reading Strategies ( $\bar{X}=3.52$ , S.D.=0.93). It was found that the item 4 “I take an overall view of the text to see what it is about before reading it.” had the highest mean score ( $\bar{X}=3.95$ , S.D.=0.82) and at high level. The lowest means score was found in the item 20 “I use typographical features like bold face and italics to identify key information.” ( $\bar{X}=2.95$ , S.D.=1.00) which was used at a moderate level.

Looking at the mean scores of Global Reading Strategies, it was found that the students used 13 strategies at a high level with mean scores in relation to items of 4, 27, 23, 8, 6, 20, 3, 15, 12, 21, 17, 12 and 24 respectively and only 1 strategy was used as a moderate level. The result showed that the highest mean score of techniques use was the item 4 “I take an overall view of the text to see what it is about before reading it.” ( $\bar{X}=3.95$ , S.D.=0.82) while the least commonly used strategy was item 24 “I try to guess what the content of the text is about when I read.” ( $\bar{X}=3.25$ , S.D.=0.88)

On the subject of Support Strategies, it was noticeable that there were 9 items of strategies with the highest scores as follows: 29, 13, 22, 30, 18, 5, 10, 2, and 26 respectively. The highest mean score of techniques was the item 29 “When reading, I translate from English into my native language.” ( $\bar{X}=3.97$ , S.D.=0.84) while the least strategy use was the item 26 “I ask myself questions I like to have answered in the text.” with the moderate use level ( $\bar{X}=2.95$ , S.D.=1.00)

In term of the Problem Solving Strategies, the items were arranged as 19, 28, 7, 14, 16 25, 11 and 9. The highest mean score of techniques was the item 19 “I try to picture or visualize information to help remember what I read.” ( $\bar{X}=3.97$ , S.D.=0.84) while the least strategy use was the item 9 “I try to get back on track when I lose concentration.” with the moderate use level ( $\bar{X}=3.23$ , S.D=0.94).

The results indicated that the students used the reading strategies frequently and were aware of the strategies. These results were consistent with Yüksel and Yüksel’s (2012) study that Turkish EFL university students used the same strategies and were aware of using the reading strategies while reading academic material. This current study showed that the Thai EFL students mostly used Global Reading Strategies, followed by Problem-Solving and Support Strategies while the Turkish EFL students used Problem-Solving Strategies as the most frequent strategy use, followed by Global Reading and Support Strategies, with the Supporting Strategies used the least in both studies.

It is clearly shown that since Thai EFL students used Global Reading Strategies at the highest level, it seems they used the strategies to help comprehend the text by guessing from contexts, observing titles, tables, graphs or font type and size. This Global Reading Strategies can be generally or intentionally utilised. It could be argued that Thai EFL students in this study did not fully investigate and interpret the text to get the main information whereas the Turkish EFL students seemed to use the strategies that assisted in tackling the text when having difficulty in reading by the use of the Problem-Solving Strategies (Yüksel and Yüksel, 2012). It is surprising to see that both groups of EFL students preferred Support Strategies the least.

Question 2: Do male and female students have different levels of reading strategy awareness?

Table 2: The Comparison on Reading Strategies According to Genders

English Reading Strategies	Male		Female		T-value
	Mean	Level	Mean	Level	
Global Reading Strategies	3.61	High	3.69	High	2.389*
Support Strategies	3.46	Moderate	3.55	High	2.502*
Problem Solving Strategies	3.56	High	3.64	High	2.163*
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.54</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>3.63</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>4.128**</b>

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

From Table 2, the findings showed that the average mean score of female was higher than male ( $\bar{X}= 3.63$  and  $\bar{X}= 3.54$  respectively) with both falling in the high usage level of reading strategies. The strategies most used by male and female were the Global Reading Strategies and the Problem Solving Strategies respectively at the high level. The Support Strategies used by female was rated at a high level compared to moderate usage by male. A comparison of the results of average means of the overall reading strategies used by both genders show significant difference. A number of the results of this study are consistent with Saengpakdeejit's (2014), who found there was a significant difference in the use of reading strategies between female and male Thai third-year undergraduate students in relation to the two strategies (Problem Solving and Support Strategies), while the Global Strategies had no significant difference according to gender. The current study is in contrast to other findings which showed there was no significant gender variance among EFL/ESL international university students on their overall reading strategy use (see Poole, 2005; Kamran, 2013), it is also not in line with Munsakorn's findings (2012) which indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between genders among the freshmen undergraduate Thai students. However, this study's finding could not generalise that one gender used any one particular strategy more frequently than the other, although the results indicated that females in general are more active strategy user than male and exhibited higher use of strategies than male. Oxford (1993) suggested that due to the high strategy use by female learners, they tend to be more successful in L2 learning, not because of gender differences. This finding warrants further in-depth investigation to establish how different culture, environment, prior education, background knowledge, and gender influences the ability level and the influence on reading strategies.

Question 3: Do students entering different fields of study have different levels of reading strategy awareness?

**Table 3: The Reading Strategy Comparison between the Health Science and Science Technology**

English Reading Strategies	Health Science		Science Technology		T-value
	Mean	Level	Mean	Level	
Global Reading Strategies	3.94	High	3.45	Moderate	6.706
Support Strategies	3.70	High	3.39	Moderate	1.847*
Problem Solving Strategies	3.84	High	3.44	Moderate	4.050**
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.83</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>3.43</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>6.255</b>

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

Table 3 showed that there were no significant differences in terms of overall strategy between these two fields of study. However, the Health Science group attained a higher mean score in each of the strategies: Global Reading Strategies ( $\bar{X}=3.94$  and  $\bar{X}=3.45$  respectively), Problem Solving Strategies ( $\bar{X}=3.84$  and  $\bar{X}=3.44$  respectively), and Support Strategies ( $\bar{X}= 3.70$  and  $\bar{X}=3.39$  respectively). As far as the reading strategies are concerned, the Health Science students reported a higher use of the three main reading strategies which implied that they were aware of and utilised the strategy to enhance their understanding in reading academic text or encountering reading problems. However, the Science Technology students reported moderate use of the three main reading strategies which could imply they were less likely to fully employ reading strategies. They may not understand the importance of using these reading skills or have not been taught to use and apply these strategies whereas the Health Science group appeared to use them more often.

**Table 4: The Reading Strategy Comparison between the Science Technology and Social Science**

English Reading Strategies	Science Technology		Social Science		T-value
	Mean	Level	Mean	Level	
Global Reading Strategies	3.45	Moderate	3.57	High	1.413
Support Strategies	3.39	Moderate	3.45	Moderate	0.386
Problem Solving strategies	3.44	Moderate	3.53	High	0.757
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.43</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>3.53</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>1.396</b>

Table 4 showed that there were no significantly differences in terms of overall strategy between these two different fields of study. However, Social Science attained a higher mean score in each of the strategies: Global Reading Strategies ( $\bar{X}=3.57$  and  $\bar{X}= 3.45$  respectively), Problem Solving Strategies ( $\bar{X}=3.53$  and  $\bar{X}=3.44$  respectively), and Support Strategies ( $\bar{X}=3.45$  and  $\bar{X}=3.39$  respectively). This study is in contrast to Munsakorn's study (2012) who reported there was significant difference in all reading strategies between the two groups of study (Science and Social Science). In this study, the researcher employed a similar research methodology to Munsakorn's study (2012) utilising a different questionnaire but contained similar reading strategies. In the Munsakorn's study (2012), the lecturers focused on teaching reading utilising a series of passages with both groups learning to use reading strategies effectively. Therefore, it can be assumed that both groups had a high level of understanding in the use of reading strategies. In this study, the same lesson plan and textbook were used for both groups with different teachers, with the Science Technology students reported moderate use of strategies whereas the Social Science students high level usage.

Table 5: The Reading Strategy Comparison between Health Science and Social Science

English Reading Strategies	Health Science		Social Science		T-value
	Mean	Level	Mean	Level	
Global Reading Strategies	3.94	High	3.57	High	7.67
Support Strategies	3.70	High	3.45	Moderate	1.386
Problem Solving strategies	3.84	High	3.53	High	2.911**
Total	3.83	High	3.53	High	4.462**

\*\*  $p < .01$

Table 5 showed that there were significantly differences in terms of overall strategy between these two different fields of study. The Health Science attained a higher mean score in each of the strategies: Global Reading Strategies ( $\bar{X}=3.94$  and  $\bar{X}=3.57$  respectively), Problem Solving Strategies ( $\bar{X}=3.84$  and  $\bar{X}=3.53$  respectively), and Support Strategies ( $\bar{X}=3.70$  and  $\bar{X}=3.45$  respectively).

The above results imply that when the Health Science and the Social Science faced reading problems, it seemed they used a variety of three main strategies to handle the reading obstacles. The Social Science students were aware of Support Strategies at a moderate level of usage whereas the Health Science group indicated high usage. To be proficient readers or

skilled language users, students need to use a variety of strategies and these should be taught explicitly and implicitly (Mokhtari and Sheorey, 2002).

### Conclusion

This present study investigated the English reading strategies used by first year students at Naresuan University and found that in general they employed English Reading Strategies at a high level. In addition, it indicated a significant gender variance on overall reading strategy use. Compared among fields of study, Health Science students had a high level usage of overall reading strategies while the Science Technology students employed a moderate level. There were no significantly differences between the Science Technology and the Social Science students in the use of all strategies. However, the Social Science students used the strategies at a higher level than the moderate use of the Science Technology group. Finally, in terms of overall reading strategy use there was a significantly difference between the Health Science and the Social Science students although both groups applied the strategies at a high level throughout the reading process. The implications of this study can assist EFL teachers to better understand how male and female students and students from different clusters interact and perform when reading L2 academic texts. It is clear and important for teachers to guide, motivate, and increase students' awareness in reading English by introducing reading strategies that they currently ignore or do not understand. As pointed out by Phakiti (2003), the awareness of reading strategies can develop students to become proficient readers by understanding the metacognitive reading strategies, that is to think what they are thinking, be able to plan, organise and monitor their own learning. Yaemtui (2015) emphasised that if good readers are consciously aware of and able to choose and apply their strategy efficiently, they can take charge of their own learning and as to promote the development of their reading comprehension.

This study has shown the use of reading strategies in each category which were different from other past research' findings both in Thailand and other countries. This could imply that students' use of reading strategies are varied due to many factors; for example, educational policy, teaching and learning approaches, prior education experience, social and cultural influences which can possibly play a role in students' performance and their success. However, teachers need to identify and train the students the use of strategies that work for them during reading processes and advise the appropriate strategies for them. In other words, teachers not only provide opportunities but also help students to be aware of the reading

strategies available for reading academic materials (Gönen, 2015). How successful students perform is the product of teachers guiding them in and outside the classroom (Lemjinda & Nata, 2018). It is necessary for teachers to help shape the students' knowledge in the use of reading strategies and to develop their ability to self-monitor their understanding, adapt their reading strategies, reflect their knowledge during academic reading and increase their ability to learn independently.

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