

## **A Focus Group Study on Korean College Students' Awareness and Applications of Reading Strategies\***

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**Suh, Young-Mee. (2013). A focus group study on Korean college students' awareness and applications of reading strategies. *Modern English Education*, 14(2), 145-163.**

This study explores four Korean college students' ways of understanding English texts and discusses their awareness and use of reading strategies. Using a case study approach, I looked at how four college students approached the reading of an expository passage in English by themselves silently and described how they arrived at their understanding of the text. In a focus group interview, they discussed each other's reading strategies and current English reading practices in formal educational setting. The data analysis revealed that the two female students who were more confident in English were more aware of their reading strategy use and also applied more types of metacognitive strategies such as determining what to read and noting textual characteristics than did the male students. Additionally, the students self-reported that they became more aware of useful reading strategies by participating in the study. The students seemed to rely primarily on test-taking strategies when dealing with English texts at the college level and identified these skills as their primary reading strategies. Despite this, students showed a marked interest in learning how to apply different types of reading strategies to various types of text. Pedagogical implications regarding the findings are also addressed.

[reading strategy use and awareness/focus group interview/

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\* This paper is based on chapter 8 of the author's doctoral dissertation completed in February, 2011. I would like to express deep gratitude to Dr. Martha Nyikos at Indiana University for her insightful comments on this paper.

## I. INTRODUCTION

English educators in Korea usually place high priority on the mastery of English reading skills. This is closely related to the types of tasks on the English portion of the university entrance examination in Korea. As of 2012, thirty-three questions out of fifty questions (about 65%) on the national examination consisted of reading comprehension. It is even more important to become a proficient reader in higher education. It is mandatory for most undergraduate students in Korea to take several English courses for at least one or two semesters as a graduation requirement of their college. These courses also focus on reading. With the strong emphasis on learning English reading, attention to studies on reading strategies of undergraduate students in Korea has recently increased (E. Chun, 2006; K. R. Lee, 2008; K. R. Lee & Oxford, 2008; U. Maeng, 2006). These previous studies mainly focused on analyzing undergraduate students' reading strategy use patterns quantitatively. Interestingly, there has been little effort to conduct qualitative studies on Korean undergraduate students' awareness and use of reading strategies in English texts.

Based on this knowledge gap, the purpose of this study is to explore how four Korean college students in the year 2010, who learned English as a foreign language and as non-majors, became aware of and implemented reading strategies when reading English academic texts. Specifically, the college students were asked to do a reading task with a text in order to explore their strategic approaches to understanding the text. In a subsequent focus group interview, they were asked to reflect on each other's reading strategy usage and discuss how they applied what they had learned in their previous academic readings to their current practices of reading in English. To summarize, this study explores to answer to the following research questions by analyzing the qualitative data from a focus group interview and an academic reading task.

- 1) How did the participants understand the given text in English?
- 2) What did participants think about each other's reading strategy use?
- 3) How did participants apply what they had learned in their formal education to their current English reading practices?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study utilized different reading strategy types as developed by Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) to describe each participant's ways of using reading strategies while reading a text in English. In previous reading strategy studies, researchers utilized different strategy types when categorizing reading strategies. Many identify two broad strategy

types, those used to construct the meaning of a text as a framework for understanding, and those used to monitor understanding and take alternative action when necessary. For example, Block (1986) and later Carrell (1989) categorized strategies they found into general or global strategies and local strategies. While local strategies constitute a category of decoding strategies, global strategies are related to a top-down approach which includes comprehending the gist of a reading, utilizing background knowledge, and being aware of text organization.

Other scholars classified reading strategies using different terms. Anderson (1991) grouped the strategies into five categories: supervising strategies, support strategies, paraphrasing strategies, strategies for establishing coherence in the text, and test-taking strategies. On the other hand, Jimenez, Garcia and Pearson (1996) classified reading strategies into text-initiated, interactive, and reader-initiated strategies.

Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) grouped their strategies according to psycholinguistic principles to include metacognitive, cognitive, and/or support strategies. According to Sheorey and Mokhtari, metacognitive strategies are defined as “those intentional, carefully planned techniques by which learners monitor or manage their reading” (p. 436). Such strategies include having a purpose for reading in mind, previewing the text as to its length and organization, or using typographical aids such as tables or figures. Global strategies cited by Block (1986) are similar to metacognitive strategies. Such strategies as having a purpose in mind, previewing the text as to its length and organization, or using typographical aids, tables, chart comparing, and figures belong to metacognitive strategies.

Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) considered cognitive strategies as “the actions and procedures readers use while working directly with the text” (p. 436). According to them, these are localized, focused techniques used when problems develop in understanding textual information. These include adjusting one’s speed of reading when the material becomes difficult or easy, guessing the meaning of unknown words, and re-reading the text for improved comprehension. On the other hand, they defined support strategies non-cognitively as “basically supportive actions learners take that are intended to aid the reader in comprehending the text” (p. 436). Examples include using a dictionary, taking notes, underlining or highlighting the text to better comprehend.

Based on the classification of reading strategies, in the last 20 years, quite a few studies have been published on L2 reading strategies (Allen, 2003; Anderson, 1991; H. J. Bang & Zhao, 2007; Block, 1986, 1992; Carrell, 1984, 1989; Carrell, Pharis & Liberto, 1989; Jimenez, Garcia & Pearson, 1996; Oxford, 1990; Padron & Waxman, 1988; Pang, 2008; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001; Singhal, 2001; Vann & Abraham, 1990). Carrell (1989) investigated the metacognitive awareness of second language readers regarding their L1 and L2 reading strategies to study the relationship between students’ metacognitive awareness and their L1 and L2 reading comprehension. Forty-five Spanish L1 group and

seventy-five English L1 group read texts in L1 and L2 and answered ten multiple-choice questions about each text that they read. They also answered to the metacognitive questionnaire about reading in L1 and L2. The data analyzed in simple regressions, and the results were categorized in confidence, repair, effective, and difficulty. On the whole, the study revealed that ESL students whose proficiency levels are more advanced perceive more global or top-down reading strategies than ones whose proficiency levels are lower. Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) examined and compared metacognitive awareness of the reading strategies used by 152 English L2 college students to those of 150 English L1 college students. They responded a survey of reading strategies, and one of the results of the survey was that high reading proficiency students in both groups showed higher use of cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies than lower reading proficiency students in the groups.

Compared to research on L2 reading strategy use in ESL contexts, however, there have been relatively few studies on L2 reading strategy use by students in EFL context (He, 2008; Maghsudi & Talebi, 2009; Saricoban, 2002). In terms of awareness and application of reading strategy use in EFL context, Maghsudi and Talebi (2009) conducted a study on reading strategy use and awareness between mono and bilingual students among younger, pre-university students in India. They conducted the study in an ex-post facto design and found that bilingual students had significantly higher scores than monolinguals. In addition, it was revealed that students with higher proficiency had significantly higher scores than those with lower proficiency in strategy use. He (2008) and Saricoban (2002) explore the possible influence and effect of L1 on L2 strategies, sometimes arguing that it is a matter of simple transfer, rather than the need to develop new reading strategies for another (often non-cognate) language. In general, the previous studies on L2 reading strategies in EFL contexts are quite diverse, varying by type of reading texts, tasks, participants, and educational levels studied.

In terms of reading strategy research in Korea, researchers have tried to examine the relationship between reading strategy instruction and comprehension in addition to reading strategy frequency and pattern (E. Chun, 2006; H. O. Kim, 2006; S. W. Lee, 2008; K. R. Lee & Oxford, 2008; U. Maeng, 2006; K. H. Rha & S. Lee, 2005; M. J. Song, 1998, 1999). Previous studies have measured reading ability improvement in a group of students who were trained to use reading strategies for a period of time. Prior research also focused on numerical data analysis in hopes of finding a quantitative basis for the effects of reading strategy use. The data were collected and analyzed using regression, factor analysis, or descriptive statistics. These studies utilized quantitative information as a means of comparing successful learners and unsuccessful learners. In short, the researchers paid attention on determining strategy use frequency, the relationship between the frequencies

of strategy use and reading comprehension test scores in addition to the relationship between learners' strategy use and their proficiency level.

As briefly reviewed, most of the previous studies regarding reading strategies in Korea focused on teacher-oriented strategy training and numerical analysis of current strategy use, yet there are few studies exploring how students perceive their own use of reading strategies. While the quantitative data is undeniably important, such information has little explanatory significations and does little to elucidate the nature of learners' experience in which self-awareness and related attitudes form a big part.

On the other hand, in previous literature, there are few studies on reading task and reading practices utilizing focus group method. Cho, Xu and Rohdes (2010) used focus group interview with young English language learners and interviews with teachers about motivation to read and engagement in reading activities. In a similar vein, I build a case for using the innovative approach of a focus group as the unique aspect of this study. This study also mainly focuses on use strategies, rather than learning strategies. Jiang and Cohen (2012) is a strategy research in the learning of Chinese as a second and as a foreign language in which the authors make a distinction of learning versus use strategies, and in terms of the distinction, this study mainly discusses use strategies.

### III. METHODS

#### 1. Participants

To recruit participants for this study, two teachers of different universities were contacted who were previous colleagues to ask them to recommend potential participants who seemed to be verbally capable of and willing to do the reading task and follow-up interview. One teacher of a mid high ranked university in Seoul volunteered and some of her students then became the participants in this study. The university offers English conversation class, reading and writing class and TOEIC class. All students of the university should take these three classes to graduate. Initially, nine undergraduates volunteered and four of undergraduate students (two males and two females) decided to take part in the study. The others gave up to volunteering further after being oriented about what to do if they were participated in the study. The female students—Yoomi and Minji—were sophomores at the time of this study, and they had each studied English for ten years. The male students, Jongsik (a senior) and Kihun (a junior) had studied English for thirteen and ten years respectively.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All names used in this study are pseudonyms.

All four students were taking the intermediate level TOEIC class at the university at the time of this study. Their English proficiency levels were between intermediate and high intermediate based on the scores obtained on the National Entrance Exam, the previous grades in their English class at the university, and the TOEIC scores. More specifically, Minji achieved a first grade mark on the English SAT test for university entrance and the others achieved second grade marks on the test. Their grades in their previous English classes ranged from B- to B+. They achieved TOEIC scores ranged from 500 to 800 out of 990 at the end of this study. In the interview, the students were asked to rate their proficiency as English readers. Their self-ratings ranged between “good” to “fair.” On the whole, the female students had a more positive self-image as English readers and higher English proficiency than did the male students at the time of this study. One thing that should be mentioned is that while the students were not matched on grade level, proficiency, past years of learning English factors, this does not affect validity of this study since the nature of the project is to explore more deeply how mid-achieving students tend to approach comprehension tasks. In other words, the aim of the study was to gather general understanding of actual reading strategy use without strategy instruction.

## 2. Data Collection and Analysis

For this focus group interview study, the students met two times in a quiet place on campus. Each session lasted no more than 90 minutes. In the first session, they read an expository English passage silently. They were allowed to use a sheet of paper, a pencil, a highlighter, and their cell phone dictionaries. After reading the passage, the participants discussed the strategies they personally found helpful for understanding the text. The goal of the first focus group reading task was to have the participants verbally self-report how they approached the text and comment on each other’s ways of reading.

More specifically, the passage used for the focus group interview was one that was taken from an EFL reading course book, *Mosaic I: Reading* by Wegmann and Knezevic (2002). It is widely used in colleges in Korea although the students were not using the text at the time of this study. The students’ reading levels ranged from intermediate to high intermediate, and the textbook was geared towards students at those reading levels. The book consists of 12 chapters with about 30 descriptive or expository readings. Various topics covered in the text including health, leisure, technology, money matters, culture, crime, and punishment. These reading topics were introduced to the participants, who expressed a preference for a reading on culture. The focal text on culture was then selected from Chapter 9, titled Ethnocentrism. It consisted of 7 paragraphs and contained about 1,100 words. The passage defined ethnocentrism and provided examples of it across several aspects of culture. With the text in hand, the students read the passage silently, and

upon finishing, they discussed the ways in which they applied reading strategies in order to more completely understand the text.

The second session consisted of the focus group interview. The students were encouraged to discuss generally how they applied what they learned in their previous academic endeavors to their current English reading practices. The 90 minute interview was semi-structured, proceeding question by question with probing questions asking for examples wherever possible. They were also asked several open-ended questions which gave the participants a chance to share their experiences learning to read in English and to further explain more fully their use of reading strategies. The followings are the interview questions given to the students over the two sessions:

- 1) How did you try to understand the given text?
- 2) What did you do when it was difficult or hard to understand parts of the text?
- 3) What do you think about the other participants' way of approaching the English passage?
- 4) Whose way of reading impressed you most? Why?
- 5) What were your reading habits and English reading experiences in secondary school? How have they changed?

In addition, other questions about the text they read for the reading task were asked. The questions were mostly about text difficulty, topic familiarity, reading purpose, and background knowledge of the text. On the whole, the participants were very talkative and volunteered examples of their strategies, difficulties, and reading practices. The focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the data was analyzed utilizing content analysis. More specifically, I read the transcriptions several times to obtain a general sense of the data. Then the transcriptions were coded and divided into categories (i.e., awareness of reading strategies and use of reading strategies). The data was further analyzed to identify emerging themes concerning the participants' awareness and application of reading strategies. Open-ended items were also identified by individual content analysis to determine the categories and to identify emerging themes. Finally, the emerging themes were: 1) using their own reading strategies to understand the expository text; 2) the role of background knowledge and metacognitive strategy use; 3) Minji as a model of reading text in English; and 4) few changes of their reading strategy use at college.

#### IV. FINDINGS

##### 1. Using Their Own Reading Strategies to Understand the Expository Text

The interview analysis revealed that all participants were familiar with reading the given type of expository text from their secondary school English classes, though the length of these reading tasks was much longer. It was also revealed that they all had a clear reading purpose in mind while reading the text. In other words, they focused on trying to find out the general idea of the passage as well as the meaning of the key word of the passage, ethnocentrism. They were not familiar with the reading topic. However, Yoomi had some background knowledge of the topic from her previous reading, and that helped her comprehend the text more easily than the others. With the general information of the text reading, the following are the key characteristics of how each participant tried to make meaning of the text.

While both Jongsik and Kihun reported that the selected text was difficult for them to understand, their methods of dealing with the given text differed. Jongsik paid close attention to the first paragraph reading it three times to get a clear sense of the passage. He did not look up the meaning of “ethnocentrism” in the dictionary, choosing instead to guess the meaning from the latter part of the first paragraph where the word was first introduced. From the second paragraph onward, he read only the parts he understood skipping the parts that were too difficult for him. He neglected to reread the parts that he had skipped reasoning that they were too numerous to tackle given that he had seldom read English passages of this length. Although he claimed to have understood a few sentences in the body paragraphs, he was not able to understand that the examples were given with the express purpose of illustrating the theme of ethnocentrism. It was not until he reached the last two paragraphs, which dealt with food preferences, that he understood the main idea of the text and was able to make connections between the examples and the topic.

Jongsik: I have never read anything this long, so I was quite taken aback. It was continuously describing something that I didn't know. I think that there was nothing much to talk about but there were many examples, so I couldn't concentrate much. Yes. Just read and moved on. In the last two paragraphs, there was a mention of some food, right? I didn't understand anything in the beginning, but I was comfortable with these paragraphs. It is hard to interpret them but just by the feel I knew what it meant.

In short, Jongsik thought it was important to understand the first paragraph and read it several times. He knew to spend time on the initial paragraph in order to unlock the general meaning and understanding the approach to the material. In the middle paragraphs that

contained examples, his strategy was to skip the parts which he did not understand but instead, circled some words which he thought were important. He tried to summarize what he read by reading the last two paragraphs about food preferences which he felt were easier to understand. Especially, in the last paragraph, he had examples to comprehend such as drinking milk, eating dog meat, horse meat, or cow meat in different cultures.

Kihun's approach to the text was quite different from that of Jongsik. Rather than reading the title, he started by looking up some key words and expressions such as "culture shock" and "ethnocentrism" with the goal of getting a general idea of the text first. By doing this, he gathered that the article had to do with cultural differences. He read the first two paragraphs carefully, line by line, but failing to understand the content, he discontinued this method. The third and fourth paragraphs, which contained examples, did not help him understand the article. He believed that he did not understand the examples due to the fact that he had little background knowledge of the origins of the terms (that is, Eskimo, Inuit, and barbarian) found in the paragraphs. However, he was able to put together the main idea of the text upon reading the last three paragraphs. Unlike the third and fourth paragraphs, he was able to use prior knowledge of the topics covered in this part of the text. By drawing on his prior knowledge of subject areas such as food preferences, he was able to make connections between the examples and the theme of the passage.

Kihun: While reading the first paragraph, I felt that this was not easy (to understand), so I just kept on reading. However, at last, I knew what the passage was about. There were some things that I knew. In the Chinese culture, people eat dog meat while people living in the American culture do not and Indians do not eat beef. By reading such examples, I understood what it was about. I realized that the whole message, which I did not understand previously, was that when one culture is different from the other culture, people would judge the others' cultures based on their own cultures.

Of all the students in the group, it was Yoomi who was able to understand the text with the greatest ease and was therefore the most confident. Her background knowledge of each example contributed to her increased overall understanding of the text despite the presence of several parts that she found confusing. Her understanding of the text was the highest among her peers; furthermore, unlike the other students, she was able to explain the significance of the examples as they related to the topic at hand.

While reading the first paragraph, she looked up "ethnocentrism" in the dictionary confirming the definition provided in the text. Though she continued to circle unfamiliar words throughout the rest of the text, she chose not to look them up as they did not hinder her from understanding the overall message. In addition to circling the unknown words, she drew slashes after sentences she understood. One interesting characteristic of her

reading of the text was that she kept visualizing what she read and making predictions about what she was going to read. She used prediction and visualization strategies the most while reading the last two paragraphs about food preferences.

Yoomi: Since the overall story was familiar to me, I understood all the examples as well. Moreover, I already knew that the theme was ‘ethnocentrism.’ When I saw the food preferences examples, I remembered an old TV show that showed people eating bugs. So, I guessed that there would be ‘stories about different ethnic groups and dog meat.’ I read as I guessed what might come next. Reading on like this, I understood the whole passage. I don’t usually summarize, but I wrote down the key words such as ethnocentrism, language, Inuit, barbarian, Cherokee myth, and food preferences about eating dog meat, horse meat, and beef.

Finally, Minji’s method of reading was in some degree different from the others in terms of using metacognitive strategies. First, just as with Jongsik and Kihun, she thought that the text was a little bit difficult to comprehend. Therefore, she checked the length of the text and numbered each paragraph. Second, she read the first sentence in each paragraph carefully and paid attention to the sentences before and after sentences which contained conjunctions such as “however.” In terms of vocabulary, Minji seldom checked unfamiliar words in the dictionary; rather, she used the text as a resource to confirm her guesses about their meaning. For instance, she guessed the meaning of the word “ethnocentrism” by reading the definition in the first paragraph and confirmed the meaning by reading the second paragraph. She also guessed the meaning of the sentence “dog meat is a delicacy” by reading the sentence “most Americans feel sick” after the conjunction, “but.” In addition, she often underlined and circled parts of the text while reading the passage.

Another interesting characteristic of Minji’s reading strategy was that she read the first paragraph carefully and simply skimmed the other paragraphs which contained examples. She did not translate the paragraphs with examples choosing to simply check the general meaning of each paragraph. She was metacognitively aware that the focus of the reading is ethnocentrism and that other information included in the text is secondary to this theme. Minji continuously evaluated the relative importance of each part of the text. By choosing what to read and what to skip or ignore, she was able to focus her attention on the main idea of the passage rather than the more detailed examples.

Minji: Starting with the title, I thought it was going to be difficult since there were words that I did not understand. So, I numbered the paragraphs to look at the structure for better understanding. In that manner, I thought that I would distinguish the important and not-so-important parts. Since I thought the first paragraph was

important, I translated all of the first and second paragraphs. From the third paragraph, there were examples, which were giving more details rather than explaining about ethnocentrism. I did not focus on the examples, having marked mostly in paragraphs 1 and 2. Based on the information, I read the rest and summarized the whole text, mostly focusing on paragraphs 1 and 2. This was my way of doing it.

## 2. The Role of Background Knowledge and Metacognitive Strategy Use

The descriptive characteristics of each student's way of reading the passage suggested answers to the first research question, "how did the participants understand the given text in English?" Each student tried to understand the given text using their own reading strategies as described in detail above, but there were several common strategies and differences. On the whole, all the students employed such reading strategies as looking up unfamiliar words in the dictionary, previewing the text, and using their prior knowledge.

At the same time, students varied a great deal in their use of reading strategies to understand the text. The first illustration of this difference is the way in which the students interpreted the title of the article. The word "ethnocentrism", which was new to all the participants, was defined in the first paragraph. Revealingly, Kihun and Yoomi looked up the new word in the dictionary as soon as they encountered it, while Jongsik and Minji understood the meaning from the context.

The second example of the participants' different implementation of reading strategies can be seen in the way they dealt with the structure of the text overall. Out of all the participants, only Minji skimmed the whole text before starting to read in detail. The use of skimming further varied the way the students approached the first paragraph. Kihun and Yoomi skimmed the first paragraph, checking the meaning of key words such as "culture shock" and "ethnocentrism", whereas Jongsik and Minji read the first paragraph line by line and word by word.

Perhaps the most striking difference between the students' use of reading strategies was the role that background knowledge played in their ability to comprehend the text. Due to her prior knowledge of the subject area, Yoomi felt that the text was easy to understand. This is because she was able to make connections between the examples and the overall message of the text. She could make predictions about the content of the text as she went along and did not need to read every line carefully.

The opposite was true of Jongsik and Kihun who reported little background knowledge of the subject matter. Jongsik and Kihun skipped quite a few sentences due to a lack of comprehension of their content. They found that the examples of the topic in the body paragraphs especially hindered their understanding of the text. Minji also reported little

prior knowledge of the reading topic, but in contrast to the male students, she used her metacognitive strategies to grasp the main idea of the passage.

In the focus group interview, the participants repeatedly expressed a strong sense that participating in this study helped them promote their awareness of their reading strategy application. Jongsik and Kihun reported that they raised not only their awareness of their own implementation of certain types of reading strategies but also other types of reading strategies they seldom used by participating in the discussion. Yoomi also became more aware of and more confident in her use of reading strategies after participating in the study. She described her feelings regarding her increased awareness of how she employed her reading strategies as “I was using them (strategies) to read without realizing it. With this realization, I felt this great confidence. It felt like I was also an English expert (laughter).” Minji seemed to be the most aware of her reading strategy use. She also had the most positive attitude toward her reading approach. She was aware of the ways she read passages in English and of her use of metacognitive reading strategies in the reading task.

### 3. Minji's Reading Method as a Model of Reading Text in English

Regarding the second research question, “what did the students think about each other’s reading strategy use?” Minji’s reading strategy use seemed to appeal to Jongsik, Kihun, and Yoomi as a model of how to read English text. The three students felt that Minji’s way of reading in English was very different from their own in that it seemed to follow the conventions of the way reading was taught in school. Yoomi’s summary of the differences between Minji’s methods and the others was as follows:

Yoomi: Minji seems to be very different. She would check more carefully and highlight the structures or the conjunctions of the text. I tend to read on, skipping the parts that I do not understand, and depend a lot on my background knowledge. However, Minji felt more like the standard of reading, which my high school teacher once taught me (laugh). Yes, and I think the other two people have similar reading methods to me. If I can understand by reading without making many markings, then I just keep on reading as the way I understand it. Yes, I think it is like that.

The common response from the three students was that they were impressed by Minji’s habits of marking and previewing the text, considering conjunctions, attending to important information and skipping the less important parts. Interestingly, all of students agreed that skipping is an effective strategy, but Minji's rationale behind using this strategy was different from the other students. Minji skipped parts that did not contain important information, whereas the others skipped parts they failed to comprehend. To put it

differently, Minji activated her metacognition in helping her select the passages that would be important for understanding the overall message of the text. She often skipped the detailed portions of the text in favor of gathering the main idea or purpose of the text. On the whole, the students seemed interested to find out that skipping can be applied in various ways. Such awareness of the different use of a reading strategy seemed to broaden the students' perceptions of reading strategies use as a whole.

#### 4. Few Changes of Their Reading Strategy Use at College

The final discussion topic, "how did they apply what they had learned in their formal education to their current English reading practices?" revealed that the students tended to continue to use general reading strategies in college that they had learned in secondary school while preparing for the SAT.

In terms of reading strategy development, all the students reflected that their reading strategies had not developed much since they entered college. They continued using the test-taking strategies that they had learned in their high school days while preparing for the SAT exam. In other words, their strategies centered on test preparation, rather than on comprehension for their own learning purposes. They perceived that they were continuing to develop those strategies with the idea of applying them to the TOEIC tests at college. The following remarks reveal that their English reading practices centered on reading passages in preparation for standardized tests such as the university entrance exam in secondary school and the TOEIC exam in college.

Minji: What I learned back in middle and high school was to mechanically identify the meanings while reading. Regardless of the types of the texts, I just mechanically solve the problems and fit the meanings into the formulas. That's what I usually do. So in order to improve myself, there are times that I do need to read the passages, like this essay (referring to the passage on ethnocentrism), that requires more thinking, but then I can't learn how to read and identify meanings from these.

Kihun: During my middle and high schools, university is all I thought of. All I did was to focus on the entrance exam, mock tests and sample questions from previous tests. That's all I focused on. Once in the university, I had to focus on the TOEIC. Since TOEIC is similar to the entrance exam, it is just the same thing I was doing. When I get to read these (referring to the passage on ethnocentrism) essays, very soon, I get headaches, and I feel pressured.

Jongsik: My experiences are also along the same lines. Ultimately, when speaking or studying English, all I did was focus on the entrance exam, and I haven't really worked on the TOEIC at all. Other than that, the classes that I am taking now are about everything. Under such conditions, I rarely read any English essays or passages like this. So, whenever I read a long passage like this, I just feel frustrated.

Another interesting finding is that among the four participants, only Yoomi had previously read short stories in English in her secondary school days. She believed that her experiences allowed her to develop reading strategies such as visualizing what she read. The habit of activating her visual schema for further analysis in reading English storybooks continued when she read essays in English at college. She was also aware that she used different reading strategies for the TOEIC than for essay type readings. For instance, as described below, she cognitively self-monitored her use of marking and was aware of visualizing information as she read.

Yoomi: Whenever I see myself solving the problems similar to the entrance exam (passages from TOEIC exam), I really make too many markings. I mark all the conjunctions. I need to move on fast and I just keep on underlining. However, unlike passages for entrance exams, essays like this (referring to the essay on ethnocentrism), I think I visualize a picture as I read. After I finish reading a passage and have a fantastic picture in my head, that means I understood it well. Yeah, that's the way I do it.

Interestingly enough, the students were not satisfied with what they were studying in terms of English reading comprehension at the time of this study. The students wished to learn strategies beyond test-taking skills. Though they had reported being afraid of approaching passages that did not resemble TOEIC style readings, they showed a marked interest in learning skills that would allow them to successfully deal with a variety of English reading materials. A key problem was that they were not sure of where and how they could learn and develop strategies that would allow them to do so.

## **V. DISCUSSION**

This study explored Korean college students' awareness and applications of reading strategies while reading texts in English. The analysis of participants' behavior on the reading task and the discussion that followed revealed not only similarities and differences

in their use of reading strategies, but also the varying levels of awareness that the participants exhibited regarding their utilization of these reading strategies.

The analysis of reading strategy use implied an interesting connection between self-image as English reader and strategy use. This is illustrated by the fact that Minji and Yoomi, participants who had higher self-reported English proficiency, exhibited a greater awareness and use of reading strategies than their male co-participants. The female students were better able to verbalize the ways in which they read the passages than the male participants. In this vein, Minji's heavy use of metacognitive reading strategies during the reading task set her apart from the other participants. The fact that the female students themselves rated their English proficiency levels as 'good' seems to support K. R. Lee and Oxford (2008)'s claim that "the more highly they rated their English proficiency, the more they used strategies and the more they were aware of them" (p. 25). In addition, the fact that the female students were likely to be more confident as English readers also supports K. R. Lee and Oxford (2008)'s finding, "EFL learners' strategy use was closely tied to strategy awareness and English-learning self-image" (p. 27).

Another discussion topic concerning the participants' awareness of their reading strategy application was related to the importance of prior knowledge in comprehending English text. As claimed in Carrell (1987), Carrell and Eisterhold (1983), and Droop and Verhoeven (1998), that comprehending a text involves an interaction between the reader's background knowledge and the text itself, the participants seemed to perceive that the amount of prior knowledge they had about the text content contributed to how well they understood the texts. Most participants noted the importance of using background knowledge in reading texts in English. For instance, Jongsik reflected that having background knowledge of the topic was critical to understanding the passages. He found that he understood passages about topics on which he had some background knowledge and that the opposite was true for passages that dealt with unfamiliar topics. He felt that it was very difficult and burdensome to read passages on which he had little background knowledge despite being able to translate them into Korean. The other participants also found reading in English burdensome if they had little prior knowledge of the subject covered in the text.

Finally, the students reported that they had been largely unaware of using reading strategies while reading in English before participating in this study. However, they became more aware of their reading strategy use after having completed the study. As in Feyton, Flaitz and LaRocca (1999), this study implied that raising the students' awareness of their reading strategy use may improve their confidence in reading English texts and encourage them to develop more reading strategies.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this descriptive focus group study was to explore the ways in which four Korean college students used reading strategies when reading academic English texts and discuss their awareness of their reading strategy use. The results of this qualitative study will hopefully contribute to filling the knowledge gap in the field of reading strategy use and awareness of college students in an EFL context. This study may also contribute learner-centered view of this topic. In addition, the findings and discussion of this study lead to a series of action based recommendations for English teachers in the classroom. First, it is necessary for teachers to help students become English readers with confidence. Second, students need to be exposed to a variety of reading materials in order to acquire some background knowledge of various topics, which will eventually increase their reading proficiency. Third, it is advisable for teachers to work on improving their students' awareness of reading strategy use. It is of the utmost importance that students gain an understanding of what reading strategies are and how they can utilize them to better comprehend English texts. To achieve this, it is necessary for teachers to introduce and explore a variety of reading strategies and instruct students on effective ways of applying reading strategies. In this sense, reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) which focuses on summarizing, questioning, clarifying, predicting and relating to background knowledge may offer a useful template for introducing reading strategies in the classroom. In addition, as many previous studies (Carrell et al., 1989; Lawrence, 2007) have claimed, Minji and Yoomi's cases provide rationale to integrate metacognitive reading strategy instruction in the classroom to enhance students' metacognition about reading. Also, using reading strategy checklist as in Y. M. Suh (2011) can be a useful way of promoting students' metacognitive awareness.

In the future, more training studies on the most effective instructional means for teaching reading strategies are needed in EFL post-secondary English reading class. Moreover, future research needs to explore how to apply different types of reading strategies to various text types as the students in this study indicated a desire to learn. Finally, some limitations of the study include the small number of participants and the fact that it relied heavily on the use of interview data and a reading task. Despite these limitations, it provides valuable insight into EFL students' awareness and applications of reading strategies. This study suggested that by training students to recognize and implement better reading strategies, teachers will be able to support students in developing a skill set that goes beyond the exam room and even beyond the classroom. By promoting self-monitoring and fostering an intrinsic awareness of their reading practices, students will gain the confidence needed to tackle even the most difficult of texts.

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**Examples in: English**

**Applicable Language: English**

**Applicable Levels: Tertiary**

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Received 14 March 2013

Revised 29 April 2013

Accepted 18 May 2013