The Reading Strategies Used by Male and Female Colombian University Students

Estrategias de lectura usadas por hombres y mujeres en universidades colombianas

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The present paper aimed to discover whether females and males significantly varied in their utilization of reading strategies. The participants were 352 (male=117; female=235) low to intermediate Colombian university students who completed the Survey of Reading Strategies or SORS (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002). The results showed that males' overall strategy use was moderate, as was their use of nearly half of their individual strategies. Females' overall strategy use was high, as was their use of half of their strategies. Females' overall strategy use was significantly higher than males', as was their strategy use on two of the three SORS subscales and on eight strategies. The study provides ideas for teaching strategies and suggests areas for future research.

Key words: Reading, gender, reading strategies, reading surveys

El objetivo de este trabajo fue descubrir si había diferencias significantes entre el uso de estrategias de lectura entre mujeres y hombres. Los participantes fueron 352 estudiantes (117 hombres y 235 mujeres) de nivel bajo a intermedio, quienes completaron la encuesta de estrategias de lectura (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002). Los resultados mostraron que el uso de las estrategias en los hombres fue moderado como también lo fue su uso de casi la mitad de las estrategias individuales. El uso de las estrategias de las mujeres fue significativamente alta en comparación con los hombres, al igual que lo fue el uso de sus estrategias individuales. Las mujeres usaron dos de las tres estrategias de subescala de la encuesta y ocho estrategias. El estudio proporciona ideas para la enseñanza de estrategias y sugiere áreas para investigaciones futuras.

Palabras clave: Lectura, género, estrategias de lectura, encuestas de lectura

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Research has shown that the use of reading strategies is significantly tied to second language (L2) reading proficiency. Furthermore, females have been shown to be more active strategy users than males, suggesting that there is a gender gap in L2 reading achievement that needs to be narrowed. However, it is not known whether or not this difference in strategy use exists among Colombian EFL students at the university level. Thus, the present paper had two objectives: (1) to explore the kinds of academic reading strategies used by Colombian University EFL learners; and (2) to discover whether or not females and males in this group significantly varied in their utilization of reading strategies. The participants in the study were 352 (male=117; female=235) low to intermediate students at two Colombian universities who filled out the Survey of Reading Strategies or SORS (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002) in their respective English classes. The results showed that males' overall strategy use was moderate, as was their use of nearly half of their individual strategies. Females' overall strategy use was high, as was their use of half of individual strategies. Females' overall strategy use was significantly higher than males', as was their strategy use on two of the three SORS subscales and on eight individual strategies. The results suggest that Colombian university teachers should incorporate the SORS into their classes in order to see if such findings represent a widespread phenomenon. If so, techniques for narrowing the gender gap are provided. Areas for future research are also discussed.

Review of Literature

Reading Strategies: Definition and Importance

One of the key findings in the last several decades of reading research centers on the importance of reading strategies, or the "[…] specific heuristics, methods, or procedures which readers more or less apply intentionally to adequately process and understand the information presented in a text" (Aarnoutse & Schellings, 2003, p. 391). Such a skill set is especially critical in post-secondary institutions (college, universities, technical institutes) where professors expect far more independent and critical reading than in secondary schools (Simpson & Nist, 2000). Not surprisingly, Mokhtari & Sheorey (2002) claim that skilled second language readers are skilled strategy users in that they incorporate numerous strategies in creative ways. Less skilled second language readers do not reflect such flexibility, and, in fact, only rely on a few strategies which they use with little awareness of when and how to use them.

Reading Strategies at the Post-Secondary Level: Selected Studies

A number of studies show the connection between increased reading strategy use and skilled reading among second language learners at the post-secondary level. Kamhi-Stein (1998), for instance, studied the reading strategy use of three struggling Spanish-English bilingual freshman at a California state university. Her goal was to find out what strategies they used often and rarely. Participants engaged in think-aloud protocols using science journals, filled out a questionnaire about their reading habits in both Spanish and English, completed a writing exercise in which they noted their strategy use in both languages,

and did an outline during a timed reading exercise. A key finding of the study showed that they rarely used important strategies such as text integration, planning, strategy evaluation, and strategy selection.

Another study that found that low-level second language readers used few strategies was done by Zhang (2001) with ten Chinese L1 students from two academic proficiency levels. The students participated in interviews in which they were asked about knowledge of themselves as readers, their knowledge of reading tasks, and of strategic reading. The results indicated that low level readers were not as knowledgeable of themselves as readers, reading tasks, and strategic reading as their more proficient counterparts. In fact, more proficient readers reported frequently engaging in skimming, predicting text meaning, and comprehension monitoring. Low-level readers, in contrast, used more bottom-up strategies such as using the dictionary, and analyzing sentence-level grammar, which are time-consuming strategies that frequently do not contribute to understanding the overall meaning of a text.

Yang (2002) also studied highly and minimally proficient Chinese EFL learners. Six highly proficient and six minimally proficient learners engaged in think-aloud protocols from English language textbooks, in addition to receiving strategy instruction. The results indicated that highly proficient readers were efficient at monitoring their comprehension and did not become overwhelmed by sentence-level grammar and lexical items; minimally proficient readers, on the other hand, were poor comprehension monitors and frequently became bogged down by grammar and vocabulary.

A number of studies using strategy inventories have also found significant strategy use differences between more proficient and less proficient readers. Specifically, the *Survey of Reading Strategies* or SORS (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002) has been used in a number of studies where those who were more adept readers used more strategies than their struggling counterparts. According to Mokhtari & Sheorey (2002), the SORS is a 30-item self-report tool designed to capture the nature and frequency of strategies that English language learners use. Specifically, it contains three types of strategies: global (13 items), problem-solving (8 items), and support (9 items). Global strategies are those which learners use to monitor their progress, plan for reading, and set reading objectives. Problem-solving strategies involve measures learners undertake to comprehend text while engaged with it, such as getting back on track after losing concentration, reading carefully, and visualizing information read. Finally, support strategies are those tools students utilize when text comprehension eludes them, even after global and problem-solving strategies have been used. Such strategies include using a bilingual dictionary, asking oneself questions, and translating from English into one's native language. Mokhtari & Sheorey (2002) note that the SORS is scored on a five-point Likert scale in which scores of 2.4 or below show low strategy use, 2.5 to 3.4 signifies moderate strategy use, and 3.5 or above demonstrates high strategy use.

The first study that revealed significant differences between highly skilled and less skilled second language learners was carried out by Sheorey & Mokhtari (2001) with 152 English as a second language (ESL) students at a US-based university. Among other things, participants were asked to rate their proficiency on a scale of one to six, from which they were divided into high and low groups. The results showed that the group with a higher self-rated proficiency more frequently used all but three strategies. In addition, on two of the three subscales and

overall, the high-proficiency group used more strategies than the low one.

Another SORS-based study was carried out by Sheorey & Baboczky (2008) in which they studied the strategy use of 545 Hungarian college students. Once again, students were asked to self-rate their reading abilities in English on a scale from one to six. The results indicated that those who rated themselves as strong readers had a higher mean on eight individual strategies and on the global strategies subscale.

Finally, Sheorey, Kamimura & Freiermuth (2008) studied the reading strategies of 237 Japanese students studying technical English in a Japanese University. Students were asked to rate their reading ability on a scale from one to six, from which they were divided into high and low groups. The results showed significant differences between the high and low groups on nine individual strategies. In addition, on 80% of the strategies, the high group used more strategies than the low group.

Reading Strategies and Gender

It is evident that better readers tend to be more active strategy users, and it is also evident that most studies show females to be superior strategy users. One study that shows a slight advantage for females was carried out by Sheorey & Mokhtari (2001) with 152 (60 females, 92 males) ESL students studying at a North American university. The participants filled out the SORS (see above for a description of the SORS), the results of which indicated no overall gender differences or on any of the three subscales. In fact, there was only one individual strategy in which there was a gender difference, with females scoring higher.

The studies discussed below have also shown significant advantages for females. Another SORS-based study was carried out by Poole (2005)

with 111 male and 217 female mainland Chinese students. Females reported using significantly more strategies than males overall and on all of the three SORS subscales. In addition, females used 18 of the 30 strategies significantly more than males.

Sheorey (2006) again used the SORS in order to study the strategies of 323 female and 276 male Indian university students. The results showed that females used significantly more strategies overall and on two of the three SORS subscales.

Finally, Sheorey & Baboczky (2008) studied the strategy use of 134 male and 411 female Hungarian college students. The results of the SORS indicated that females scored higher than males on 13 of 30 individual strategies, overall, and on all three SORS subscales.

In sum, the studies mentioned above reveal two important facts. First, L2 reading proficiency is generally tied to strategy use. Second, females tend to be more active strategy users than males. These findings combined suggest that there is a gender gap in L2 reading proficiency that needs to be filled in many settings where English is taught and learned. Unfortunately, although much is known about gender differences between males and females from various cultures and L1 groups, little is known about the differences in reading strategy use between male and female English language learners in Colombian universities. This is an important area to study, for advanced educational opportunities and employment with domestic and international companies in Colombia frequently require a high level of reading proficiency in English. In addition, such data are important for English teachers and programs directors in helping determine whether or not they are appropriately addressing their students' literacy needs. If significant gender differences are found and not addressed,

males could be left with fewer educational and professional opportunities than females. In any case, the findings should motivate teachers to reflect on how their programs can better provide equitable instruction to all groups, whether they be gender-based, socioeconomic, or ethnic. Thus, this study represents a first step in discovering if there is a significant gap between males and females in EFL reading proficiency. The specific questions used to guide the study were:

1) What strategies do males and females use most commonly?

2) Are there significant differences in males' and females' reading strategy use?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 352 low to intermediate level (male=117; female=235) Colombian students from two private, non-sectarian institutions in Bogotá. The author contacted the directors of the English programs at the universities to solicit their involvement in the study. Individual English teachers, in turn, administered the survey in their classes. The author had no contact with any of the students. Participants were in the first, second, third, or fourth year of their education, and were majoring in a wide range of subjects such as business, biology, psychology, medicine, theater, and dance. Participants were selected because they represented a wide variety of academic interests and socioeconomic backgrounds, thus enabling generalizable results. The average age of participants was 23. Males reported reading academic materials in English for 4.09 hours per week, while females reported doing so for an average of

4.33 hours per week. Males reported reading for fun in English for an average of 3.41 hours a week, while females reported doing so for 2.88 hours per week. On a six-point scale, males rated themselves an average of 2.88, while females gave themselves 2.72.

Instrument

The instrument used for this study was the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002), which was previously discussed. To reiterate, the SORS consists of 30 items using three individual subscales: global (13 items), problem-solving (8 items), and support strategies (9 items). Teachers administered the survey by asking the students in their classes to voluntarily participate. Before beginning the study, students were required to read and sign an informed consent document stating that they agreed to participate, were under no obligation to do so, and could withdraw at any time. The participants filled out the SORS and a short demographic survey in their classes. This process required approximately 15 minutes. Roughly two-thirds of students completed the survey in English and one-third in Spanish. The Spanish translation was done by a native-speaker of Colombian Spanish who holds a master's degree in Spanish and academic training in English to Spanish translation. To check for reliability, the Cronbach's Alpha was utilized and showed the instrument to be reliable overall (.89), and on the global (.77), problem-solving (.71), and support (.69) subscales. The data were further analyzed to find out each group's mean, and one-way ANOVAs were used to see if there were significant differences between males and females.

Results

Strategies Most Commonly Used By Males and Females

As Table 1 indicates, males used 14 strategies with high frequency and 16 strategies with moderate frequency. Of the top ten strategies, five were problem-solving, while three were global, and two were support strategies. The most commonly used strategy was "I try to get back on track when I lose concentration," which is a problem-solving strategy. The least commonly used strategy for males was "When text becomes difficult, I read aloud to help me understand what I read," which is a support strategy. Overall, males had an average strategy use of 3.39, 3.32 for global strategies, 3.56 for problem solving strategies, and 3.34 for support strategies.

Table 1. Males' use of strategies.

Strategies used with high frequency: 14		Mean
PROB 9	I try to get back on track when I lose concentration.	4.01
PROB 25	When text becomes difficult, I re-read it to increase my understanding.	3.84
PROB 14	When text becomes difficult, I pay closer attention to what I am reading.	3.81
GLOB 3	I think about what I know to help me understand what I read.	3.79
PROB 7	I read slowly and carefully to make sure I understand what I am reading.	3.76
SUP 29	When reading, I translate from English into my native language.	3.68
GLOB 1	I have a purpose in mind when I read.	3.68
SUP 13	I use reference materials (e.g., a dictionary) to help me understand what I read.	3.64
GLOB 4	I take an overall view of the text to see what it is about before reading it.	3.59
PROB 16	I stop from time to time and think about what I am reading.	3.56
SUP 10	I underline or circle information in the text to help me remember it.	3.55
GLOB 23	I check my understanding when I come across new information.	3.54
SUP 18	I paraphrase to better understand what I read.	3.54
SUP 30	When reading, I think about information in both English and my mother tongue.	3.50
Strategies used with medium frequency: 16		**Mean**
PROB 11	I adjust my reading speed according to what I am reading.	3.40
GLOB 15	I use tables, figures, and pictures in text to increase my understanding.	3.33
GLOB 24	I try to guess what the content of the text is about when I read.	3.32
SUP 22	I go back and forth in the text to find relationships among ideas in it.	3.30
GLOB 8	I review the text first by noting its characteristics like length and organization.	3.29
GLOB 12	When reading, I decide what to read closely and what to ignore.	3.29
GLOB 17	I use context clues to help me better understand what I am reading.	3.21
SUP 2	I take notes while reading to help me understand what I read.	3.15
GLOB 27	I check to see if my guesses about the text are right or wrong.	3.11
PROB 28	When I read, I guess the meaning of unknown words or phrases.	3.10
GLOB 6	I think about whether the content of the text fits my reading purpose.	3.07
GLOB 21	I critically analyze and evaluate the information presented in the text	3.02

PROB 19	I try to picture or visualize information to help remember what I read.	2.99
GLOB 20	I use typographical features like bold face and italics to identify key information.	2.86
SUP 26	I ask myself questions I like to have answered in the text.	2.83
SUP 5	When text becomes difficult, I read aloud to help me understand what I read.	2.83

As Table 2 indicates, females used 15 strategies with high frequency and 15 strategies with moderate frequency. Of the top ten strategies, three were global, four were problem-solving, and three were support strategies. The most commonly used strategy was the same one that it was for men: "I try to get back on track when I lose concentration", which is a problem-solving strategy. The least commonly used strategy was "I ask myself questions I like to have answered in the text", which is a support strategy. Overall, females had an average strategy use of 3.58, 3.45 for global strategies, 3.72 for problem-solving strategies, and 3.64 for support strategies.

Notably, of the top ten strategies used by both males and females, nine were the same, although not in the same order. The exceptions were "I stop from time to time to think about what I am reading", for males and "I underline or circle the information in the text to help me remember it", for females.

Table 2. Females' use of strategies.

Strategies used with high frequency: 15		Mean
PROB 9	I try to get back when I lose concentration.	4.15
SUP 13	I use reference materials (e.g., a dictionary) to help me understand what I read.	4.10
PROB 14	When text becomes difficult, I pay closer attention to what I am reading.	4.06
SUP 10	I underline or circle information in the text to help me remember it.	4.05
PROB 7	I read slowly and carefully to make sure I understand what I am reading.	4.06
PROB 25	When text becomes difficult, I re-read it to increase my understanding.	4.02
SUP 29	When reading, I translate from English into my native language.	3.96
GLOB 3	I think about what I know to help me understand what I read.	3.93
GLOB 4	I take an overall view of the text to see what it is about before reading it.	3.80
GLOB 1	I have a purpose in mind when I read.	3.77
GLOB 23	I check my understanding when I come across new information.	3.74
SUP 18	I paraphrase to better understand what I read.	3.67
PROB 16	I stop from time to time and think about what I am reading.	3.61
SUP 2	I take notes while reading to help me understand what I read.	3.54
SUP 30	When reading, I think about information in both English and my mother.	3.51
Strategies used with medium frequency: 15		Mean
SUP 5	When text becomes difficult, I read aloud to help me understand what I read.	3.49
SUP 22	I go back and forth in the text to find relationships among ideas in it.	3.48
PROB 11	I adjust my reading speed according to what I am reading.	3.44

GLOB 17	I use context clues to help me better understand what I am reading.	3.41
GLOB 24	I try to guess what the content of the text is about when I read.	3.35
GLOB 15	I use tables, figures, and pictures in text to increase my understanding.	3.32
GLOB 8	I review the text first by noting its characteristics like length and organization.	3.30
GLOB 27	I check to see if my guesses about the text are right or wrong.	3.30
PROB 19	I try to picture or visualize information to help remember what I read.	3.27
GLOB 20	I use typographical features like bold face and italics to identify key information.	3.26
GLOB 12	When reading, I decide what to read closely and what to ignore.	3.24
GLOB 6	I think about whether the content of the text fits my reading purpose.	3.20
PROB 28	When I read, I guess the meaning of unknown words or phrases.	3.19
GLOB 21	I critically analyze and evaluate the information presented in the text.	3.18
SUP 26	I ask myself questions I like to have answered in the text.	2.93

Significant Differences between Males and Females

Table 3 shows that there were significant differences overall, on two of the three SORS subscales (problem-solving and support stra-tegies), and on eight individual strategies. Interes-tingly, on all of these items, females scored higher than males.

Table 3. Significant differences between males and females.

Overall Mean
Males=3.39
Females=3.58
[F (1, 350)=9.90, p=.002]
Females=higher

Overall Problem-solving
Males=3.56
Females=3.72
[F (1, 350)=5.91, p=.016]
Females=higher

Overall Support
Males=3.34
Females=3.64
[F (1, 350)=18.66, p=.000]
Females=higher

SUP2: I take notes while reading to help me understand what I read.
Males=3.15
Females=3.54
[F (1, 350)]=9.12, p=.003]
Females=higher

SUP5: When text becomes difficult, I read aloud to help me understand what I read.
Males=2.83
Females=3.49
[F (1, 350)=19.42, p=.000]
Females=higher

PROB 7: I read slowly and carefully to make sure I understand what I am reading.
Males=3.76
Females=4.04
[F (1, 350)=6.75, p=.010]
Females=higher

SUP10: I underline or circle information in the text to help me remember it.
Males=3.55
Females=4.05
[F (1, 350)=15.85, p=.000]
Females=higher

SUP 13: I use reference materials (e.g., a dictionary) to help me understand what I read.
Males=3.64
Females=4.10
[F (1, 350)=12.82, p=.000]
Females=higher

PROB 14: When text becomes difficult, I pay closer attention to what I am reading.
Males=3.81
Females 4.06
[F (1, 350)=4.96, p=.027]
Females=higher

GLOB 20: I use typographical features like bold face and italics to identify key information.
Males=2.86
Females=3.26
[F (1, 350)=7.81, p=.005]
Females=higher

SUP 29: When reading, I translate from English into my native language
Males=3.68
Females=3.96
[F (1. 350)=4.54, p=.034]
Females=higher

Discussion

Learners' Use of Strategies

This study shows that both male and female Colombian English language learners are, in general, active reading strategy users. In fact, both populations reported using half or close to half of their strategies with high use, and neither reported using any strategy with low use. Such results show that these learners are probably receiving strategy instruction in English, transfer their strategic knowledge from Spanish, or both. Regardless of the causes, the fact that they are using them with such frequency can only be taken as a sign of reading growth.

We can speculate on the relatively high use of some strategies. For example: Both males and females used "I try to get back when I lose concentration", as their number one strategy possibly because as relatively low-level learners, it is easy for them to be distracted by the physical and semantic features of the text. In addition, both males and females used "I use reference materials (e.g., a dictionary) to help me understand what I read" with very high frequency. This could be because learners are still relatively low-level and aren't able to infer the meaning of words from context and can't distinguish between important and unimportant vocabulary words.

We can also speculate on the relatively low use of some strategies. For example: "When text becomes difficult, I read aloud to help me understand what I read", was the least used strategy for males. This could have been, as many males from China, Japan, South Korea, and various Latin American countries in college ESL

courses in the United States have anecdotally reported to me, because they feel awkward when reading aloud and have few quiet places in which to do so. In addition, these individuals feel that if they don't understand the text, then reading it aloud will do them little good. For females, "I ask myself questions I like to have answered in the text", was the least used strategy. This could have been due to the type of reading that they do. So, certain types of texts are not very interactive, and are very teacher-centered, thus not allowing the students much room to speculate on the content.

However, in order to find out why learners are using certain types of strategies with high frequency and others with moderate frequency, more qualitatively-based studies would have to be done. Specifically, researchers could have the participants fill out the SORS, tally up the scores, and then interview them about why they used certain strategies with high frequency and others with low to moderate frequency. Another approach, which is also pedagogically beneficial, could be one that I use in my advanced ESL class at Western Kentucky University in the United States. First, I have the students fill out the SORS, and then I have them explain why they use each strategy with the frequency indicated. Then, they list the top five most important strategies and the bottom five least important strategies to them. Afterwards, they pair up and compare their list to their partners' and discuss the results. A classroom discussion then ensues about each strategy in which I ask students to explain their rationale for using individual strategies and to model them. If students cannot properly model certain strategies and explain when to use them, I model and explain them. This discussion helps students become aware of strategies that they may not have been aware of or that they may not have known how to implement. Likewise, it helps me understand what strategies students don't understand so that I can periodically re-teach them through direct modeling and explanation. Such periodic review is also important because students need to know that certain strategies are used differently depending on their purpose. Mokhtari & Reichard (2008) found this to be the case in their study of 65 (34 males, 31 females) native-speaking American high school students. Using a survey instrument related to the SORS, they found that the participants often used significantly different amounts of strategies depending on whether they were reading for study or entertainment. For example: They more frequently had a purpose for reading, used typographical aids, and took notes when reading for study than when reading for entertainment. These results lead the authors to suggest that academic reading is more mentally challenging and thus requires the use of more strategies. Even though this study was done with native speakers of English, its findings are likely to be similar for EFL students.

Males and Females' Use of Strategies

It is very interesting to note that the majority of their top strategies were the same; in other words, nine of the top 10 strategies were the same for females and males, although not in the same exact order. This indicates that males and females are using remarkably similar types of strategies.

However, they are using many of them with significantly different frequencies. Overall, on problem-solving, and support strategies, females scored significantly higher than males. In addition, on eight individual strategies, females scored higher than males. This difference in strategy use could be due to proficiency. It could be that females had studied English for longer amounts of time than males, although this study did not control for this factor. Future studies should carefully

look at how years of study and proficiency level affect perceived strategy use. Whatever the reason for these differences, it is interesting to note that the results of this study are in line with many of the above reviewed ones (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001; Poole, 2005; Sheorey, 2006; and Sheorey & Baboczky, 2008) in which females reported using more strategies than males. This seems to suggest that females, regardless of their L1 proficiency level, and L2 learning setting, tend to use more strategies than males.

The main question is whether or not these differences should warrant concerns about wide gaps in achievement between Colombian males and females, the answer to which is no. First of all, both males and females used all strategies with either moderate or high frequency, and they used almost identical numbers of both. Second, of the top ten strategies used by males and females, nine were the same. Third, of the individual strategies in which there were significant differences, five had both males and females using strategies with high frequency, two had both males and females using strategies with moderate frequency, while one had males using strategies with moderate frequency and females with high frequency. In short, even when differences were significant, they did not appear to signal that males were poor strategies users. However, any gender gaps that could lead to differences in reading achievement should be addressed. Therefore, as suggested above, individual instructors should have their students complete the SORS and provide direct strategy instruction if gender differences are discovered.

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