Language Teaching and Educational Research

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Research Article

Avoiding the use of L1 in foreign language reading comprehension activities

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Abstract

This paper reports an action research study which aimed to avoid the use of mother tongue in reading comprehension activities. To this end, an action research study was designed and conducted with 30 elementary level students studying at the Preparatory school of Başkent University. The study was conducted in the first term of 2016-2017 academic year. The related literature was reviewed and cognitive reading strategies were taught. Data were collected from three different sources which were students' answers to reading comprehension activities, feedback cards completed by the students and reflection sheets of the teacher researcher. The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data revealed that when the students were aware of the cognitive reading strategies and used them, the use of L1 could be avoided.

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Yabancı dilde okuduğunu anlama etkinliklerinde anadil kullanımının önlenmesi

Öz

Bu çalışma, okuduğunu anlama etkinliklerinde anadil kullanımını önlemeyi amaçlayan bir eylem araştırması çalışmasıdır. Bu amaçla Başkent Üniversitesi İngilizce Hazırlık Okulu'nda öğrenim gören ve temel İngilizce seviyesine sahip 30 öğrenci ile 2016-2017 öğretim yılının birinci döneminde bir eylem araştırması çalışması gerçekleştirilmiştir. Konu ile ilgili literatür taraması yapılmış ve bilişsel okuma stratejileri öğrencilere öğretilmiştir. Öğrencilerin okuduğunu anlama aktivitelerine verdikleri cevaplar, öğrenciler tarafından doldurulan geri bildirim kartları ve araştırmacı öğretmenin yansıma sayfaları olmak üzere üç farklı kaynaktan veri toplanmıştır. Verilerin nicel ve nitel analizi, öğrencilerin bilişsel okuma stratejilerinin farkında olduklarında ve bunları kullandıklarında, anadil kullanımının önlenebileceğini ortaya koymuştur.

Introduction

L2 reading has attracted a lot of attention up till now and the process of reading has been described in various ways. While some researchers describe it as a cognitive process of understanding a written linguistic message, others describe it as a passive skill in early accounts (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Despite the ongoing disagreement about the nature of the reading process, most researchers agree on some features such as having a purpose in mind while reading, and being familiar with the text. It is claimed that when a reader has highly developed prior knowledge of or experience on the topic that is to be read, it will be easier to comprehend it since during the reading comprehension process, all the linguistic knowledge, background knowledge, and the knowledge of the cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies are used by the readers (Grabe & Stoller, 2002).

Reading in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes is a complex process. Nowadays, to ease the reading process, most EFL instructors implement the Grammar Translation Method and use students' mother tongue as a tool for conveying meaning in the texts. According to some researchers, the complete deletion of mother tongue while teaching a second language is not appropriate (Butzkamm, 2003). It is claimed that if the mother tongue is used appropriately, it can be very useful as Brown (2000) claims by saying that "first language can be a facilitating factor and not just an interfering factor" (p. 68). Similarly, the foreign language instructors are encouraged to use L1 in language classes to affect the dynamic of the classroom, and it is asserted that "starting with the L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners' lived experiences, allowing them to express and themselves" (Schweers, 1999, p.7). As some of the researchers suggest, the use of L1 may be helpful in EFL classes; however, in reading activities the use of the mother tongue may cause some problems. The main problem is being dependent on it. The students who use L1 in reading comprehension do not try to get the meaning from the context. They may misunderstand the message in given in text and express themselves within their limited command of the target language. To solve this problem, the use of L1 is to be avoided during reading comprehension activities and this can be managed by teaching and using the cognitive reading strategies, since reading in English requires the readers to be aware of the reading strategies that can improve their reading comprehension (Butzkamm, 2003).

In this action research study, to help the students understand the reading texts without using their mother tongue; reading lessons were restructured with cognitive reading strategies. The aim was to make the students be more active so they could make connections between the prior knowledge, and the new content. At first, students were expected to predict the content of the text by the help of visual aids, titles, and comprehend the texts by questions. What is more, they were expected to use their prior knowledge, and make predictions accordingly. Additionally, the instructors would model them by asking questions that would check their prior knowledge of the topic, help them to communicate their ideas and demonstrate their level of comprehension.

Review of Literature

Language learning strategies (LLS)

In general, language learning strategies are specific actions taken to accomplish a given task (Oxford, 2011). The aim of these strategies is to promote learner autonomy and to make

learning more effective. Different criteria and taxonomies exist for classifying language learning strategies. According to Cohen (2011), learners construct their meanings by using language learning strategies which affect learning directly. Oxford (2011) also provides a comprehensive definition: "…language learning strategies are specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques that students use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language. Strategies are tools for the self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative ability" (p.15).

Different definitions of language learning strategies are presented in a brief and well summarized table. As it seen in Table1, these strategies are mostly defined as "behaviours, processes which are consciously selected by learners, conscious or semiconscious thoughts, deliberate actions" to enhance learning.

Table 1. Definitions of language learning strategies

1	O'Malley& Chamot (1990, p. 23)	*"The special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn or retain new information."*
2	Wenden (1987, p. 6)	*"Learner strategies […] refer to language learning behaviours learners actually engage in to regulate the learning of a second language. These language learning behaviours have been called strategies."*
3	Cohen (1998, p. 4)	*"Learning strategies are processes which are consciously selected by learners and which may result in action taken to enhance the learning or use of a second or foreign language, through the storage, retention, recall and application of information about the language".*
4	Cohen (2011, p. 278)	*"Strategies are specific behaviours that learners select in their language learning and use. Language learning is the conscious or semiconscious thoughts and behaviours used by the learners with the explicit aim of improving their knowledge and understanding of a target language."*
5	Oxford (2011, p. 8)	*"Language learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning, easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations."*

As seen in Table 1, there is a change over time in these definitions. When the focus of previous definitions was on the product of learning strategies, the focus now is on the processes and the characteristics of LLS. All in all, as seen, different researchers use inconsistent basic terminology while defining and categorizing the language learning strategies. As a result, there are still some difficulties with definition and classification. After the description of what language learning strategies are, reading strategies will be discussed.

Reading strategies

Reading strategies are defined as "*a range of tactics or actions that readers employ consciously in order to comprehend texts better*" (Paris et al., 1991). Due to the fact that reading strategies are conscious to the foreign language readers, their selection and use of these strategies are expected to be controlled by them. Strategies are not isolated actions; as a result, they are to be considered as a process since they are interrelated *(*Paris et al., 1991). Although

there are a large number of inconsistent classifications of reading strategies, in literature, the most common reading strategies fall within four categories which are cognitive, metacognitive, text-level, and word-level strategies (Yetgin, 2003).

Cognitive strategies which are used in reading comprehension consist of "guessing from context, analysing, skimming, taking notes, and summarizing" are defined as "*mental steps or operations that learners use to process both linguistic and sociolinguistic content*" (Wenden & Rubin, 1987, p. 19). Language learners tend to use cognitive strategies to set up relationship between the new and their existing prior knowledge and to operate on the new information to facilitate learning (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Metacognitive strategies, which are used in reading comprehension consist of "monitoring, evaluating, planning, and arranging", are defined as "*higher order skills that help readers gain awareness of whether they comprehend a reading text or not.*" (Oxford, 2001). With the help of these strategies, readers have a chance to observe their reading process and themselves as learners. These strategies also help them to analyse resources, choose the most convenient resource, and set goals for the comprehension of the text (Oxford, 2001).

Text-level strategies, which are used in reading comprehension consist of strategies such as "relating the text to one's background knowledge, predicting, using titles and illustrations, reading with a purpose, skimming, and scanning", are defined as "*top-down and text processing strategies*" (Barnett, 1988). Readers tend to use these strategies while approaching a reading text as a whole, from a holistic perspective (Barnett, 1988).

Word-level strategies, which are used in reading comprehension consist of strategies such as "guessing from the context, identifying grammatical category of words, using word families and word formation to understand the meaning of unknown words", are defined as "*bottom-up and word-processing strategies*" (Barnett, 1988). Readers tend to use these strategies to comprehend the smaller parts such as vocabulary, structure or details of the reading text. (Barnett, 1988).

It is also possible to categorize reading strategies into the stages which are pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading stages.

Pre-reading strategies

It is quite important to organize the readers before reading. Some researchers point out that the background knowledge is one of the most important components in the reading process (Koda, 2005). The knowledge an individual reader already possesses can be activated through specific activities such as brainstorming, mind or concept mapping, and the use of pre-questions and visual aids (Wallace, 1992).

Having a definite purpose and goal for reading a given text is another pre-reading strategy that can be used in this stage. This strategy helps the readers to stay focused and also become more attentive (Chamot et al., 1999). During this stage, instructors are expected to ask questions to facilitate the use of prior knowledge and help the students by providing them with overviews and introducing unfamiliar vocabulary items before they read the texts (Singhal, 2001). Overviews given by the instructors can take the form of outlines, class discussions, or visual aids, which are expected to help students to get ideas of what the texts are about before reading (Aebersold & Field, 1997). Other suggested pre-reading strategies that could be adopted

are making predictions based on titles or related photos, identifying the structure of the text and skimming for the general idea (Auerbach & Paxton, 1997).

While-reading strategies

It is important for the reader to give his utmost attention to the reading text while reading it. The understanding of the reader is to be continuously checked by asking questions (Chamot et al., 1999). When the reader is unable to comprehend what he is reading or faces an obstacle in comprehension, it may be necessary to adopt a strategy which helps to gain understanding. One such strategy is re-reading the material (Grabe & Stoller, 2002).

Another strategy which is to be used during reading is to use semantic, syntactic and graphophonic cues to get the meaning of unfamiliar words from the context (Wallace, 1992). By gaining understanding of key words from the reading material, the context becomes clear and this process helps the readers grasp the meaning of the material being read by using the ideas as clues to the meanings of unknown words, instead of translating in into L1 (Aebersold & Field, 1997). Monitoring understanding by asking relevant questions to the readers during reading is another strategy. By asking questions while reading, the readers' minds can stay focused and this facilitates the reading comprehension process.

Synthesizing relevant information from a given text while reading is another strategic tool. Readers can benefit from reading by reflecting on what has been read and also by integrating new information with existing knowledge (Urquhart & Weir, 1998). Scanning to get a sense of the overall meaning is another strategy that helps readers comprehend the text and answer comprehension questions (Aebersold & Field, 1997).

Post-reading strategies

Post-reading is the stage to evaluate the comprehension of the text. If the set goal was achieved and understanding gained, the post-reading period is the time to summarize major ideas discovered (Urquhart & Weir, 1998). Post-reading activity period offers an opportunity for the readers to reflect upon what they have read. In this stage, the readers are expected to connect what they have read with their prior knowledge, make the text clear, and extend their understandings in critical and creative ways (Urquhart & Weir, 1998). Drawing conclusions and paraphrasing are other strategies suggested in this stage. By the help of these strategies, the comprehension of the text can be checked and the ideas are restated (Aebersold & Field, 1997).

In this action research study, all cognitive, metacognitive, text-level and word-level reading strategies were identified, introduced and their importance was explained to the students. These strategies were also practiced as pre-reading, while-reading and post reading strategies during the training session. Then, the students were asked to choose five of these techniques which facilitated their comprehension more. All reading strategies were written on the board and five of them were chosen according to their preferences. Then, in the action research process, those chosen strategies were used. Those strategies were; prior knowledge, prediction, modelling by asking questions, skimming and scanning.

Prior (Background) knowledge

According to the literature reviewed, readers' prior knowledge in form of schemata has a great role in the construction of the meaning of the text (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). Considering the fact that reading a text is an interactive process between the reader and his/her prior knowledge, a good reader can be defined as the one who constructs meaning from the text and his/her own prior knowledge. A good reader also monitors comprehension, makes inferences, uses text clues for comprehension (Anderson & Pearson, 1984).

Prediction

Another strategy used for reading comprehension is the prediction. As a strategy for enhancing comprehension, "*it helps the reader set a purpose for their reading*" (McKown & Barnett, 2007, p. 17). In pre-reading stage, "*Prediction activates prior knowledge, sets a purpose for reading, and engages the reader from the outset*" (Pesa & Somers, 2007, p. 31). Prediction can be prompted by talking about the title of the text, introducing related visual aids, and introducing key words (McKown & Barnett, 2007). In while-reading stage, prediction strategy helps readers to monitor their comprehension. Instructors are expected to ask questions to guide predictions (Pesa & Somers, 2007). In post-reading stage, prediction "*can help students to interpret, analyse, and deepen their understanding*" (Pesa & Somers, 2007, p. 32). All in all, readers may have difficulty in comprehension of a text without prediction strategy.

Modelling by asking questions

Modelling strategy facilitates comprehension and helps students understand the text while reading it words (McKown & Barnett, 2007). The instructors who use this strategy are expected to read the target text with students, stop at intervals, and ask related questions. Then, the answers of the questions are discussed as a whole-class activity so as to comprehend the text better (McKown & Barnett, 2007).

Skimming and scanning

Skimming and scanning are considered as the most common reading strategies which can help readers to get specific information from the text. Skimming is defined as getting "a quick gist" of a reading text, while scanning is defined as "reading quickly to locate specific information". It is necessary to teach the readers how to use skimming and scanning for comprehension (Pesa & Somers, 2007).

Reading comprehension

Readers who have acquired reading strategies can comprehend what they have read by constructing meaning and combining information from the text with their existing prior knowledge (McKown & Barnett, 2007).

The effect of using L1 in reading comprehension

Although some researchers suggest the use of mother tongue as a facilitator of language acquisition, it causes a wrong habit of word-to-word translation (Baker, 2006). Despite the wrong habit formation, mother tongue is used a lot to comprehend the text as Kavaliauskienè and Kaminskienè (2007) claim "no matter how good the students are the majority keeps

mentally translating" (p.133). Similarly, Wechsler (1997) states that "learners cannot escape the influence of first language" (Wechsler, 1997) and even proficient readers use their mother tongue (Baker, 2006: 22). Regarding the mother tongue hidden in the readers' mind in variable degrees, the use of L1 in language classes offers various benefits and drawbacks.

Methodology

Participants

This action research study was carried out with a preparatory class at Başkent University in Ankara, Turkey with 30 students aged 19 to 22 and me as a teacher-researcher. The students were elementary level learners. The participant students enrolled in different academic majors have different language learning backgrounds and come from different parts of Turkey.

The study was conducted in the first term of 2016-2017 academic year. The action research lasted 3 weeks entailing 10 class hours of instruction and 5 hours of implementation. Training included the teaching of all cognitive, metacognitive, text-level and word-level reading strategies and the use of those strategies during reading comprehension activities. This study focused on how the learning of reading strategies by students facilitates the reading comprehension while avoiding the use of L1.

Method and data collection procedures

This action research study implemented in five stages, namely, problem identification, literature review and discussions with colleagues, planning and implementation of strategies, data collection and analysis, and report writing.

Problem identification

The first phase of this research was the identification of the problem. During reading classes when reading assignments were given, the students were trying to look up every difficult word in the dictionary. They lacked the abilities such as drawing inference or to guessing the meaning of unknown words. They were trying to use L1 to understand a text in target language. Additionally, the students were not aware of reading strategies. As result, they were not prepared to deal with reading texts in target language. To solve this problem, an action research which involves teaching reading strategies and avoiding the use of L1 in reading comprehension activities was designed.

Literature review and discussions with colleagues

The reading lesson plans were carefully designed considering the needs of the students. They were developed through discussions with colleagues and the review of literature. All reading strategies were investigated through the review of literature and the reading courses were modified with the aim of avoiding the use of L1 and helping the students understand the reading texts by using chosen reading strategies.

Implementation of strategies

All cognitive, metacognitive, text-level and word-level reading strategies were explained to the students and they were used in training session. Then five of the reading strategies, which facilitated the reading comprehension process more, were written on a piece of paper by the students. Then the papers were collected and the most preferred strategies were listed on the board. The most preferred strategies were prediction, using visuals, prior knowledge, previewing the text by skimming and scanning, and modelling, so in this action research, those chosen strategies were used and the reading lessons were planned accordingly. Procedure and strategies used in a reading lesson are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Procedure and strategies used in a reading lesson

Stages	Procedure	Strategies
Pre-Reading Stage	-Class discussion and talking about the topic, pictures and the title - Reading very fast to get the main idea of a text.	*-Prediction, using visual aids, activating prior knowledge* *-Skimming*
While-Reading Stage	-Dramatizing and discussing the content by asking questions to make the meaning clear. -Talking about the content and clarifying the meanings of the unknown words by using gestures and visual aids instead of translation. -Reading the text to get detailed information -Answering comprehension questions, completing missing parts	*-Modelling,question-answer technique* *- Using visual aids* *-Scanning* *- Question-answer*
Post-Reading Stage	- Class discussions and answering inference questions	*- Inference*

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected qualitatively and quantitatively from three different sources: (i) students' answers to reading comprehension activities, (ii) feedback cards completed by the students, and (iii) reflection sheets of the teacher researcher.

Students' answers to reading comprehension activities

Students' answers to reading comprehension activities were collected, and their answers were assessed by the teacher researcher. During training session, 7 elementary level reading texts were used. Then five more elementary level reading texts were used and the scores were evaluated.

Feedback cards completed by the students

After each reading comprehension activity, the students completed a feedback card (as shown in Table 3) to express their opinions about the readings, strategies and ideas.

Table 3. Feedback cards

	YES	NO
Q.1. Were you able to answer the comprehension questions?		
Q.2. Did you understand the details in the reading text?		
Q.3. Did you use Turkish to understand the text?		
Q.4. Do you think the strategies we used helped you to comprehend the text?		
Q.5. Did you use the prediction strategy?		
Q.6. Did you use your prior knowledge?		
Q.7. Did you skim and scan the text?		
Q.8. Did the teacher help you to understand the text by asking questions?		
Q.9. What are your ideas about the reading strategies? ……………………………………….. ……………………………………………………………………………………………………..		

Reflection sheets of the teacher researcher

The teacher researcher also took notes and wrote her reflections after each reading comprehension activity. These reflection sheets included the ideas on the effectiveness of using reading strategies and the performances of the students.

Report writing

The final phase was report writing. In this phase, how the implementation of the action research affected the students' learning was evaluated and how the results of the study could be generalized to similar populations was investigated. Conclusions with regard to the readers' growth were made and how these conclusions would impact the planning and the instruction for the other classes at Başkent University was reflected.

Findings

Data were collected quantitatively and qualitatively from students' answers to reading comprehension activities, feedback cards completed by the students and reflection sheets of the teacher researcher. The findings will be discussed according to them.

Students' answers to reading comprehension activities

According to the data collected from the students' reading performances and reading worksheets, it was found out that the reading comprehension of most of the students (n.27) improved, although the increase was slight. The collected data revealed that the performances of the students' in reading comprehension were partially affected by the different question types. The scores of the worksheets show that most of the students (n.27) comprehended the texts and answered all types of questions accurately while some of them (n.3) had problems with reference and vocabulary questions. During reading comprehension activities, the students were encouraged to use the target language and avoid the use of mother tongue. So, the definitions of the key words were clarified by the students by using gestures, pictures and

clarification. All students (n.30) answered most of the questions easily because they learnt how to use the reading strategies to understand the text.

Feedback cards completed by the students

Table 4 presents the results of the feedback cards completed after each reading comprehension activity by the students.

Table 4. Results of the feedback cards

	Text 1		Text 2		Text 3		Text 4		Text 5		TOTAL	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Q.1.	28	2	29	1	27	3	28	2	28	2	28	2
Q.2.	28	2	28	2	29	1	28	2	27	3	28	2
Q.3.	1	29	1	29	2	28	1	29	0	30	1	29
Q.4.	30	0	30	0	30	0	30	0	30	0	30	0
Q.5.	29	1	28	2	29	1	30	0	29	1	29	1
Q.6.	27	3	28	2	26	4	28	2	26	4	27	3
Q.7.	30	0	30	0	30	0	30	0	30	0	30	0
Q.8	20	10	25	5	15	15	18	12	22	8	20	10

As Table 4 shows, most of the students (n.28) could understand the general meaning and details of the reading texts easily without using L1. All of them accepted that using strategies helped them comprehend the reading text more and they thought that by the help of strategies such as prediction, prior knowledge, modelling and questioning, reading a text might be easier and unknown words could be predicted in the context.

The majority of students (n.29) used the prediction strategy more than the other strategies during reading. Most of the students (n.27) believed that making predictions before reading a text was a beneficial strategy for reading comprehension and it helped them to comprehend the reading texts without using their mother tongue. All of the students (n.30) also stated that skimming and scanning helped them to comprehend the text more. They (n.20) also found modelling technique very useful, since on feedback cards, some of them wrote:

> "...reading the text together with the teacher and clarifying the context by using visual aids, gestures and by asking questions helped us a lot to comprehend the texts."

They also stated that being aware of reading strategies helped them a lot, because they knew what to do and why to use the strategies.

Reflection sheets of the teacher researcher

According to the data collected through the reflection sheets developed by the teacher researcher, when the students learnt what the reading strategies were and how to use them, they became more successful in reading comprehension activities and they didn't focus on the unknown vocabulary in reading texts. Reading strategies let the students participate in the

reading process, because they actively took roles in this process by sharing their ideas, opinions, predictions and background knowledge. When the reading comprehension activities and strategies were assessed, it was realized that reading strategies enabled students to think more about the topic, to generate more ideas, to link them with their previous knowledge and to comprehend the text without using translation.

In conclusion, in this action research study, findings reveal the learners' development in the use of reading strategies without using L1. Through the emphasis on reading strategies and the importance of avoiding the translation technique during reading comprehension activities, the students achieved progress in reading comprehension without using L1.

Discussion and Conclusion

In EFL classes, the use of L1 in reading comprehension activities is a big problem, as there is a great tendency to use the mother tongue when the students are faced with difficulties that may hinder their comprehension. While reading a text, to comprehend the text better and check their comprehension, the students tend to use L1. Moreover, L1 is used by the students when tackling vocabulary items in a text to confirm the meaning they get, or learn the exact meaning of an unfamiliar word. Seng & Hashim (2006) investigated in the use of L1 while reading second language (L2) texts in a collaborative situation among tertiary ESL learners. In their study titled;" Use of L1 in L2 reading comprehension among tertiary ESL learners", they identified reading strategies utilized by the subjects and discovered possible reasons for the use of L1 while comprehending L2 texts. Through reading strategies, it was found that the L1 was used by all the students in the study and that more than 30% of the total instances of strategy use involved the L1. The study also revealed various reasons for the students' use of the L1 while reading L2 texts particularly in the context of group reading. One reason was that the L1 facilitated resolutions of word-related and idea-related difficulties. Furthermore, using the L1 might have helped the students reduce affective barriers and gain more confidence in tackling the L2 texts. Similarly, in their study titled: "Reading Comprehension Strategies & Mother Tongue Use in Eap Courses in Israeli Academia", Gordishevsky & Slabodar (2015) stated that especially in the case of weaker students, the use of L1 will facilitate their understanding and internalization of various reading comprehension strategies. To this end, presentation of text-coping techniques using the students' L1, as well as initial exemplification of these techniques using an authentic academic text in the students' mother tongue are necessary.

Although the use of L1 is necessary for the reading comprehension in target language, it causes a wrong habit of word-to-word translation (Baker, 2006). In order to solve this problem and help the students comprehend the texts and vocabulary items without using L1, different reading strategies are to be taught and used. In her study titled: "Dictionary Use While Reading: The Effects On Comprehension and Vocabulary Acquisition for Students of Different Verbal Abilities", Knight (1994) stated that although students express reliance on dictionaries, teachers are expected to discourage the use of L1 and advise them to guess the meaning of a word from the context. She also stated that teaching cognitive reading strategies will help students comprehend the texts better. Similarly, the findings of this action research show that when the reading strategies such as activating prior knowledge, making predictions by using visual aids and titles, skimming-scanning and modelling by asking questions are

taught and used, the students do not need to use L1 to comprehend the text since these strategies help them understand better.

In conclusion, by teaching reading strategies, teachers can help EFL students to comprehend the reading passages (Robertson, 2008) and they can also avoid the translation into L1. In this action research, it is clearly seen that, when the reading strategies are taught and integrated into the reading lesson, the students' comprehension develops more and the use of L1 can be avoided.

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