

Original Article

# A Comparative Study of English Reading Learning Strategies between Successful Students and Underachieved Students in a Junior High School

Lin Yi<sup>1</sup>, Wang Hongyuan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Sichuan University of Science and Engineering, China

Received: 01 January 2022

Revised: 03 February 2022

Accepted: 15 February 2022

Published: 23 February 2022

**Abstract** - Reading is one of the main ways of language input. Improving English reading efficiency affects the overall development of learners' comprehensive language ability. It is of great practical significance to study it under the background of abundant reading resources but widespread fragmented reading. In this study, the students from two classes in a middle school in a city in southern Sichuan Province were taken as the research objects, and the questionnaire survey and SPSS were used to analyze the overall use of reading strategies of those first-grade students as well as the differences in reading strategy use between underachiever and overachiever. The finding shows that the use frequency of cognitive strategy, metacognitive strategy, effective strategy and social strategy of junior high school students is medium. There are significant differences in the use of the four strategies between the underachieved students and the successful students. The comparison of urban students' learning strategies will also give some enlightenment to rural middle school teaching under the background of rural revitalization strategy.

**Keywords** - Learning strategies, English reading, Underachiever and Overachiever.

## 1. Introduction

The Plan for Popularization of High School Education (2017-2020) (hereinafter referred to as the Plan) was approved by the State Council and issued by the Ministry of Education and four other departments. The main objectives of the Plan include that the structure of ordinary high schools and secondary vocational education is more reasonable and the enrollment scale is roughly equal, which means that junior high school students under the policy of educational diversion will face greater pressure to further their studies. As one of the key subjects in the senior high school entrance examination, the reading comprehension part has the largest proportion in the senior high school entrance examination papers everywhere, and the choice and use of reading strategies are closely related to reading scores. According to the National English Curriculum Standard(2018), using effective learning strategies helps improve students' English learning effect and efficiency, cultivating students' autonomous learning habits and abilities and promoting the development of students' lifelong learning ability.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Researches Abroad

The research on reading strategies abroad originated in the 1970s. With the development of modern cognitive psychology theory, psychologists and educators have realized the significance of studying learning strategies.

Research on reading strategies has gradually emerged as an important branch of learning strategies. Earlier research on reading strategies abroad can be traced back to the comparative study of reading strategies used by English learners of different proficiency levels by Hosenfeld(1977), an applied linguist. The results showed significant differences between learners with higher language proficiency and learners with lower language proficiency in the use of reading strategies, especially in the use of context or inference. Hong-Nam et al. (2014) studied the relationship between the awareness of using English reading strategies and senior high school students' reading achievement. The results showed differences in the use tendency of reading strategies among senior high school students of different levels.

As for the use of reading strategies by learners of different levels, most studies abroad showed significant differences between successful language learners and unsuccessful learners in using English reading strategies. However, the research objects of most studies were mainly high-level learners, and the comparative study on learners of different levels in the basic stage is still insufficient.

### 2.2. Domestic Researches

The research on reading strategies in domestic academic circles began at the end of the last century, mainly based on empirical research, and the research was mainly carried out from the following three aspects: the improvement of reading



performance or ability by reading strategy training (Lv, Tu, 1998; Wu 2006; Zheng 2009; Zhang 2010; Wang, Wu, 2017), the use of reading strategies (Li, 2006; Yang, Qin, 2007; Xia, 2008; Xi, 2010; Zhou, 2017), a comparative study on the use of reading strategies by learners at different levels (Zeng, Wu, 2010; Yang, Wang, Zhao, 2013; Qu, 2014). At the same time, some researchers put forward the training approaches of reading strategies based on previous theories and personal teaching experience (Gai, 2010).

Most of the research on reading strategies in China focused on college students and senior high school students, less on students in the basic stage, especially in junior high school. Hence, the research on English reading strategies of junior high school students needs to be enriched.

### 3. Research Method

#### 3.1. Research Questions

Two questions are put forward in the present research as follows.

First, how do junior high school students use English reading strategies?

Second, what are the differences between successful and underachieved students using English reading strategies?

#### 3.2. Research Objects

In this study, the students in a Grade One middle school in a city in southern Sichuan province were taken as the research objects. A total of 101 students from two classes were selected by random sampling, and questionnaires were distributed to them. The number of questionnaires returned was 101, and the number of valid questionnaires was 91; that is, the effective questionnaire rate was 90.09%. According to Kelly's theory (1939), the top 27% of students with average scores in two exams are classified as successful, and the bottom 27% are underachieved students.

#### 3.3. Research Instruments

The reading strategy questionnaire used in this study was based on the SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) designed by Oxford (1990) and the questionnaire on the use of reading strategies designed by Zhang (2019). The Likert scale was adopted, in which 1 means never doing it, 2 means rarely doing it, 3 means sometimes doing it, 4 means often doing it, and 5 means always doing it. The reading strategies in the questionnaire were divided into four categories, including four categories of reading strategies: cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, emotional strategies and social strategies. There were 17, 13, 2 and 2 related questions in each category, respectively. The reliability and validity test by SPSS showed that the Alpha value was 0.934 (> 0.7) and the KMO value was 0.837 (> 0.7), which indicated that the questionnaire used in this study has good reliability and validity.

### 3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, firstly, the English scores of 101 students in two classes in the first and second monthly exams were collected, and the average scores of the two exams were ranked to classify successful students and underachieved students. Then, according to the questionnaire of English reading learning strategies filled in by students, SPSS was employed for descriptive analysis. The successful and underachieved students' use of English reading strategies was tested by independent sample T.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. The Use of Junior High School Students' English Reading Strategies

The survey results of this questionnaire are analyzed and discussed according to the strategy research method of Oxford (1990). The average value of each strategy is divided into three grades, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Criteria of frequency of application of learning strategy

Mean Score	Degree	Frequency
4.5-5.0	Almost always	High
3.5-4.4	Often	High
2.5-3.4	Sometimes	Medium
1.5-2.4	Seldom	Low
1.0-1.4	Almost never	Low

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of the application of four reading strategies

Reading Strategy	Mean	Number	Frequency
Cognitive strategy	2.9024	91	Medium
Metacognitive strategy	2.9324	91	Medium
Emotional strategy	3.1264	91	Medium
Social Strategy	2.8132	91	Medium
Reading Strategy	Mean	Number	Frequency

As shown in Table 2, the average values of the four strategies are 2.9024, 2.9324, 3.1264 and 2.8132, respectively. According to Oxford's frequency rating scale, the frequency rating of the four strategies is medium; the subjects generally use English reading learning strategies "sometimes". It shows that the students in Grade One of this school do not often use English reading strategies in their English reading study and examination, and they pay more attention to the use of emotional strategies (including overcoming anxiety and controlling emotions) in the choice of strategies, which is far from the requirements of the curriculum standards. Therefore, in the teaching process, teachers should strengthen the introduction and explanation of reading strategies, give students ample opportunities to practice, and provide guidance to students in the practice process to comprehensively improve students' ability to use English reading learning strategies efficiently.

**4.2. Differences in Four strategies between Overachievers and Underachievers**

sub-strategies under four categories between 25 successful students and 25 underachieved students. The results are shown in Table 3 and Table 4.

The independent sample T-test was conducted on whether there were differences in four learning strategies and

**Table 3. Independent samples test of the four strategies**

Item	Mean		t	p
	Underachiever	Overachiever		
Cognitive strategy	2.52706	3.31294	-4.541	0
Metacognitive strategy	2.51077	3.4708	-4.78	0
Emotional strategy	2.52	3.58	-3.124	0.003
Social Strategy	2.28	3.16	-2.909	0.005

**Table 4. Independent samples test of the subitems of the four strategies**

Item	Subitem	Mean		t	p
		Underachiever	Overachiever		
Cognitive strategy	Using context	2.34	0.9609	-4.233	0
	Transfer	3.04	1.01325	-3.084	0.003
	Note-taking	2.4	1.32288	-1.604	0.115
	Translating	2.64	1.06771	-5.108	0
	Summarizing	2.48	1.10755	-2.578	0.013
	Deduction	2.37333	0.75154	-3.877	0
	Images and sounds	2.68	0.61403	-0.456	0.651
	Expanding	2.6	0.83766	-4.734	0
	Resourcing	2.45333	0.96379	-1.833	0.073
Metacognitive strategy	Planning	2.18	1.02184	-3.709	0.001
	Organizing	2.32	1.42829	-2.102	0.041
	Managing	2.6	1.13761	-0.419	0.677
	Monitoring	2.47	0.72572	-5.106	0
	Concentrating	2.82	0.85391	-4.9	0
	Evaluating	2.62	0.77835	-4.643	0
Emotional strategy	Overcoming anxiety	2.56	1.44568	-2.376	0.022
	Controlling Emotions	2.48	1.1547	-3.025	0.004
Social Strategy	Collaborating	2.28	1.17898	-2.909	0.005

Table 3 showed significant differences in the use of metacognition, cognition, emotion and social strategies between students with successful students and underachieved students (P values are .000, .000, .003 and .005, respectively, all less than .05), which is consistent with previous research results. According to Fig. 4, there are significant differences in the use of sub-item strategies between successful students and underachieved students under the four categories, and the specific differences are as follows.

First, in cognitive strategies, underachieved students and successful students are using contextual situations ( $p=.000$ ), transfer ( $p=.003$ ), translation ( $p=.000$ ), summary ( $p=.013$ ), deduction ( $p=.000$ ) and expansion ( $p=.000$ ). The average value of translation strategy, transfer strategy and expanding strategy used by successful students is the biggest difference from that used by students with learning difficulties. The frequency grades of students with learning difficulties are in the middle level, while those underachievers are all in the high frequency; underachieved students often use these three strategies. This shows in reading study and examination, the top academic students often use English-Chinese translation, make use of existing knowledge or experience to help them understand the text, skillfully use the skills of skipping and scanning, be good at grasping the summary sentence or topic sentence of the article, and predict and understand the relevant topics of the article through non-verbal information such as the title of the article, diagrams and pictures contained in the article and actively interact with text and related information. Underachieved students are deficient in these aspects for three reasons.

Due to the limitation of vocabulary and the lack of grammar knowledge, it is difficult for underachievers to translate articles or get the topic sentences of articles as freely as successful students to reduce the difficulty of reading tasks. Teachers should cultivate students' vocabulary and memorizing strategies according to students' learning practice and teaching requirements (Long & Zhou, 2019). Besides, underachievers do not pay attention to accumulating knowledge and experience in their daily life and study, and they cannot realize the correlation between old and new knowledge and experience, which makes them unable to transfer this knowledge and experience to articles to promote reading comprehension. In addition, underachievers are weak in reading pictures, and it is difficult for them to understand the content expressed by non-verbal information. Therefore, for them, the information in the article cannot promote text reading, and when they cannot understand it, it will become their psychological burden. However, there is no significant difference between them in taking notes ( $p=.115$ ) and using target resources ( $p=.651$ ). The average value has not reached a high level ( $\geq 3.5$ ), which shows that the successful students and underachieved students sometimes use two strategies of taking notes and using target resources, such as marking key information in reading texts and using various resources to

look up new words and related information of text background information. Therefore, teachers should strengthen the guidance of cognitive strategies in the teaching process, cultivate students' strategy use, help students make good use of key sentences in the text, and promote students' ability to grab information quickly. At the same time, teachers should also emphasize the search for new words and the acquisition of relevant information when reading, studying and revising papers after exams so that students can learn new words in the context, expand their knowledge, and broaden their horizons.

Secondly, in the metacognitive strategies, there are significant differences between underachieved students and successful students in the use of planning management ( $p=.001$ ), pre-organization ( $p=.041$ ), self-monitoring ( $p=.000$ ), concentration ( $p=.000$ ) and self-evaluation ( $p=.000$ ), and self-management. The above data shows that when applying metacognitive strategies, successful students can arrange their reading-related studies more systematically, such as making a plan for reading several articles a week for themselves. They also have clear requirements and expectations for their reading level. At the same time, successful students are more likely to skip reading and finish reading tasks with more concentrated energy when encountering new words in reading. When reading, they are more able to adjust their own speed according to different tasks constantly, the development of the article's content and so on, and clearly realize which parts of the article they have mastered and which are still unclear. After reading, they often analyze the reasons, reflect and improve their reading learning according to the situation and results of reading learning. Underachieved students often have no plans for reading and learning, and they passively receive the opinions of articles in the process of reading. They cannot form their own opinions of the articles, cannot complete the reading tasks and can't extend to the development of other learning abilities through reading and learning. This reflects that underachieved students do not have a strong sense of autonomous learning. To a certain extent, the current education model in China makes students easily develop the habit of relying on teachers. They are not good at independent thinking, arranging and reflecting on their own learning. In addition, in the application of metacognitive strategies in reading learning, successful students and underachieved students are less able to choose suitable materials according to their own level, which requires teachers to cultivate students' self-study ability, balance the roles of "teacher" and "trainer", pay attention to integrating students' learning strategies into English learning (Zhang, 2015), provide more reading resources, and help students grade and select materials according to their own situation.

Thirdly, in the emotional strategies, there are obvious differences between underachieved students and successful students in overcoming anxiety ( $p=.022$ ) and controlling

emotions ( $p=.004$ ). When applying emotional strategies, successful students can help them to adjust their mentality and emotions and better complete reading activities by adjusting their emotions and using some skills in reading. The underachieved students are deficient in these two aspects. On the one hand, since teachers often focus on explaining and training reading skills in class, these students do not pay attention to the influence of emotional strategies on reading learning and examination. On the other hand, these students do not realize the importance of emotional strategies and cannot intentionally cultivate some skills to relax when encountering difficulties in reading. Studies in psychology show that emotional factors are an important basis for the success and failure of language learning (Da, 2005). In the process of English learning, students will encounter many unexpected difficulties, interruptions and setbacks, which will easily lead to negative emotions such as shyness, discouragement, annoyance, disgust and shame. What kind of consequences these emotions will lead to largely depends on whether learners can treat them correctly and detect the existence of these bad emotions in time, and adjust themselves accurately (Fang, 2010). Therefore, in the process of reading teaching, teachers should also involve students' perception of their emotions and adjust relevant knowledge so that students can not only realize the importance of emotional strategies but also actively use these emotional strategies in reading and face reading tasks with a positive attitude.

Fourthly, in terms of social strategies, there is no significant difference in the use of cooperation with others ( $p=.005$ ) between underachieved students and successful

students. The above data shows that the two groups of students seldom ask for help from their teachers and peers when they encounter difficulties in reading and seldom exchange experiences with teachers or peers after reading. Therefore, teachers can encourage students to ask for help, guide the class to form a good atmosphere of cooperation or carry out relevant experience exchange activities to reduce students' psychological burden, thus naturally promoting students' use of social strategies in reading. Sharing is an excellent learning quality. Teachers can create an English learning community so that students can learn together, learn and be more willing to share experiences and resources, and put forward positive ideas and reasonable advice (Duan, 2020).

## 5. Conclusion

In this study, a questionnaire survey was used to analyze the students' overall use of English reading learning strategies in Grade One of a middle school in a city and the differences between the successful students. It underachieved students in the use of reading learning strategies. The results show that the use frequency of cognitive, metacognitive, emotional, and social strategies is medium. There are significant differences in the use of cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, emotional strategies and social strategies between successful students and underachieved students, and the degree of differences in the sub-strategies of the four strategies is different. This study will provide reference suggestions and enlightenment for English teachers when guiding students at different levels to cope with reading.

## References

- [1] The National English Curriculum Standard, The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, Beijing: People's Education Press, 2018.
- [2] C. Hosenfeld, "A Preliminary Investigation of the Reading Strategies of Successful and Nonsuccessful Second Language Learners," *System*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 110-123, 1977. *Crossref*, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X\(77\)90087-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X(77)90087-2)
- [3] Kay Hong-Nam, Alexandra Leavell, and Sheila Maher, "The Relationships Among Reported Strategy Use, Metacognitive Awareness, and Reading Achievement of High School Students," *Reading Psychology*, vol. 35, no. 8, pp. 762-790, 2014. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02702711.2013.807900>
- [4] Z. Lv, and Y. Tu, "Research on Chinese Students' Reading Strategies," *Tsinghua Journal of Education*, 1998.
- [5] J. Wu, "An Analysis of Strategies-Based Instruction on English Reading Comprehension," *Studies in Language and Linguistics*, no. 1, pp. 123-125, 2006.
- [6] H. Zheng, "Research on English Reading Strategies Training at University," *Heilongjiang Researches on Higher Education*, no. 6, pp. 202-203, 2009.
- [7] W. Zhang, "Research on the Application of English Reading Strategies by College Students," *Higher Education Exploration*, no. 4, pp. 83-86, 2010.
- [8] L. Wang, and Y. Wu, "The Effects of Reading Strategy Training on Reading Comprehension: A Meta-Analysis," *Foreign Language Teaching*, no. 3, pp. 50-56, 2017.
- [9] X. Li, "Investigation on the Overall Use of Language Learning Strategies in College English Reading," *Journal of Sichuan International Studies University*, no. 6, pp. 137-141, 2006.
- [10] D. Yang, and X. Qin, "Investigation and Analysis of English Reading Strategies of Major English Freshmen," *Education and Vocation*, no. 8, pp. 184-186, 2007.

- [11] G. Xia, "An Analysis of the Factors of English Reading Strategies Used by Freshmen in General Engineering Colleges," *Foreign Language Teaching*, no. 1, pp. 64-69, 2008.
- [12] X. Xi, "A Survey on the Use of Cognitive Strategies in English Reading of Senior Two Students," *Journal of Teaching and Management*, no. 24, pp. 49-51, 2010.
- [13] Y. Zhou, "A Survey of College Students' English Reading Comprehension Strategies," *Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages*, no. 3, pp. 86-94, 2017.
- [14] S. Zeng, and S. Wu, "A Study on the Differences of Metacognitive Strategies of English Reading Between High-Group Students and Low-Group Students," *Theory and Practice of Education*, no. 21, pp. 40-42, 2010.
- [15] F. Yang, F. Wang, and X. Zhao, "A Comparative Study of Reading Strategies of English Learners," *Theory and Practice of Education*, no. 21, pp. 44-46, 2013.
- [16] L. Qu, "A Study of EFL Reading Strategies and Metacognitive Awareness Based on Sound Thinking Method," *Foreign Language World*, no. 4, pp. 30-38, 2014.
- [17] X. Gai, "Ways to Cultivate Reading Strategies in College English Class," *Continue Education Research*, no. 4, pp. 160-161, 2010.
- [18] D. M. Kelley, and E. Rieti, "The Geneva Approach to this Rorschach Method," *Journal of Personality Assessment*, no. 3, no. 4, pp. 195-201, 1938.
- [19] R. L. Oxford, *Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know*, Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1990.
- [20] W. Zhang, "Reading Strategies of Senior High School Students," MA, Xi' An International Studies University, 2019.
- [21] X. Long, and S. Zhou, "Problems and Solutions of English Learning Strategies Teaching in Primary Schools," *Theory and Practice of Education*, vol. 39, no. 20, pp. 44-47, 2019.
- [22] B. Zhang, "Learning Strategy Guidance in English Teaching: Training Methods and Teachers' Roles," *Journal of Jilin Business and Technology College*, vol. 31, no. 6, pp. 111-113, 2015.
- [23] H. Da, "A Research Into the Causality Model Affecting Junior High School Students' English Academic Achievement," *Psychological Science*, vol. 28, no. 4, pp. 948-988, 2005.
- [24] Y. Fang, "Allied Studies on High School English Language Learning Strategies and Achievements," *Modern Education Science*, no. 1, pp. 80-82, 2010.
- [25] S. Duan, "A Probe into the Teaching of English Learning Strategy Cohesion in Junior and Senior High Schools," *Basic Education Curriculum*, no. 14, pp. 44-49, 2020.