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Extensive Versus Strategic Reading for Learning English at Khulna University, Bangladesh

Molla Nazim Uddin Ahmed¹
Molla Azizur Rahman^{*1}
Md. Obaidullah²

¹Khulna University, Khulna, BANGLADESH

²Northern University of Business and Technology Khulna, Khulna, BANGLADESH

Abstract

This article reports on a small-scale research study conducted to investigate the comparative utility of extensive reading versus strategic reading for learning English at the undergraduate level in the English Discipline at Khulna University, a public university in south-western Bangladesh. The study is based on the schema theory where background knowledge is the basis of comprehension. A pre-tested questionnaire was used to conduct a survey. Data was collected from 158 respondents, all undergraduate students in the English Department who were selected at random. The results of the study showed that strategic reading is more favorable to students compared to extensive reading for the purpose of learning ESL/EFL. Finally, the results showed that strategic reading was more effective than extensive reading for learning English. The paper concludes with a call for further large-scale studies.

Keywords: Reading strategies, schema theory, learning English language, undergraduate level.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning a language means learning the four basic skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing) of that language. Reading is one of the four basic skills which supports learning of the other three skills, especially, at the undergraduate level. Reading comprehension ability is considered a prime need for learning a language. Our aim was to make a comparative study of extensive reading versus strategic reading for learning the English language.

* Corresponding author, email: mazizurrahmanku@gmail.com

Reading is a key skill for learning a second language (L2) or a foreign language (FL). A student can read a text in different ways. Whenever students get a text for the first time, they start reading it depending on the type of text. If the text is an academic one, a student hardly reads it extensively. Still, extensive reading might help a student learn an L2/FL. Comparatively, English language learning also largely depends on strategic reading because strategy helps one to learn a language easily. There are several reading strategies like scanning, skimming, prediction, making inferences and so on. Through scanning one can locate particular information from a text. On the other hand, skimming is used to get an extensive idea of a text. Besides, one can look at the cover blurb, table of contents and outlook of the text to preview it. Moreover, one can guess or predict what is coming next after reading a few lines or paragraphs. One can also infer the meaning of unfamiliar words. Thus, these reading strategies can help students to learn more English language.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In Bangladesh, learning the English language is very important because of the growing demands for English speakers in the global market. In the case of foreign language learning, there is no alternative to learning to read for comprehension. A large number of students at the undergraduate level in our country cannot conceptualize/understand English texts prescribed in their syllabi for their lack of required proficiency in reading skills in English (Rahman, 2004).

English Discipline at Khulna University is a place for teaching and learning English language and literature. Here, the undergraduate students are taught reading strategies at the very beginning with a little practice. However, later on, they gradually forget the strategies they were taught-learnt and seldom make time to read English books, magazines, newspapers, etc. Therefore, a poor stock of vocabulary and the problems of understanding long, complicated sentences hinder their learning processes. When they find any text difficult, they depend on a translated version of it or go for memorizing short summaries. So, this study intends to investigate what these learners are presently doing to learn English language — whether they follow extensive reading or strategic reading.

1.2 Research Questions

To conduct this study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the perceptions and attitudes of the sample undergraduate learners towards extensive reading vs strategic reading?
2. Which one will be more helpful to undergraduates in learning English language skills: extensive reading or strategic reading?

1.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were:

1. To investigate the perceptions and attitudes of a sample of undergraduate students towards extensive reading vs. strategic reading in terms of effectively learning English for undergraduate studies.

2. To find out whether extensive reading or strategic reading is more suitable and/or more effective for learning the English language.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definition of Reading

The definition of reading largely depends on the purpose of the reader. Ur (2012) says that “reading is often seen as the recognition and comprehension of words. In the context of language learning, *reading* means ‘*reading and understanding*’ (p. 133). Aprizani (2016) defines reading as a set of skills which include comprehension in determining or finding out and making sense and meaning from the printed word. Dechant (1982) further gives a detailed description of the ‘*two-fold processes*’ of reading. First, it requires word identification (visual discrimination of the words, and recoding and the ability to pronounce the words), which is extensively affected by configuration cues, phonic cues, morphemic analysis cues, and sometimes by picture and context cues. Second, reading requires comprehension (decoding or associating meaning with the symbols that comprise the words) (p. 11). A reader has to be careful about identifying words while reading a text. If s/he is unable to do so, there is a huge probability that s/he will not understand what the text intends to convey. Finally, a language related definition of reading has been given by Urquhart and Weir (1998) who argue that reading is a language activity that involves, at some time or another, “inferencing, memory, relating text to background knowledge, as well as decoding, and obvious language aspects as syntax and lexical knowledge” (p. 18).

2.2 Extensive Reading

The term ‘extensive reading’ (ER) is also known as ‘free-time reading’ or ‘just reading’. Susser and Robb (1990) defined ER as:

- a) reading large quantities of material or long texts for global or extensive understanding with the intention of obtaining pleasure from the texts,
- b) individualized reading with students selecting the texts they want to read, and
- c) not being required to discuss the book in class.

To define ER, Simensen (1998) says that it usually means “silent reading’ and reading for pleasure and enjoyment. A global understanding of the text, ... Thus to some extent, ‘extensive reading’ is a concept comparable to ‘skimming’” (p. 149). This “probably is how someone would read when they read a novel in their free time” (Johansen, 2013, p. 12).

ER is the “silent reading by individual students of long, interesting texts (such as stories or books). It is sometimes known as ‘reading for pleasure’ or ‘sustained silent reading’ (SSR)” (Ur, 2012, p. 146). However, ER goes further in developing the ability of students to read independently in English and has several principles:

1. Firstly, students have to have access to a large variety of reading material to choose from.
2. Secondly, each student chooses his/her own reading material. The teacher may advise but does not choose for them.

3. Thirdly, students can stop reading material that they find boring or too difficult and swap it for something else.
4. Fourthly, the purpose of reading is enjoyment and interest, not a task from the teacher or textbook. In principle, the reading is its own reward.
5. Finally, the role of the teacher is to encourage her students to read and swap books, to help them choose, and to be a role model as a reader (Ur, 2012).

Therefore, ER is an “effective, and most likely enjoyable, alternative use of time spent both inside or outside the classroom” (Mermelstein, 2015, p. 196).

2.3 Strategic Reading

Reading that is done by following one or more reading strategies is called strategic reading. There is no fixed type or number of strategies for reading. They vary according to the purpose of reading. In simpler terms, Garner (1987) has stated that reading strategies are actions, or a series of actions, that are used to get meaning from texts. The use of reading strategies is a tool for pupils when reading, mainly because they will simplify the entire reading process, and not just the reading itself (Johansen, 2013). Hellekjær (2015) further found that “the most common ways of reading are skimming and scanning, or careful reading for detail and an experienced reader will automatically adjust her way of reading according to her reading purpose” (p. 2).

2.4 Learning English through Reading

Spears (2013) elaborates and discusses the reading skills required for learning a language with many examples. She puts much emphasis on improving vocabulary as a reading skill. According to her, acquiring a solid reading vocabulary is a lifelong proposition. She opines that the single best way to improve vocabulary is to read a lot. Thus, one has to look up any unfamiliar words each time s/he encounters while reading. She talks about the use of dictionaries (now on-line) and context clues for understanding new words. Context clues can be divided into four extensive types, namely: synonyms, antonyms, examples, and situations.

Gibson (2009) explores the effectiveness of strategy-based reading instructions for improving students’ reading comprehension. She found that strategy-based reading programs promoted and fostered critical thinking amongst students. While reading a text, these strategies required students to think deeply for the better understanding of the text. Students must also monitor their thought processes and ask questions when they read a text strategically. For this reason, if teachers understand the significance of reading strategies, they can instruct their students on how to learn a language better through reading.

Mart (2012) concludes that reading enhances a person’s stock of vocabulary, also reading vocabularies help develop speaking vocabularies. The students who read more develop more in both fluency and accuracy of expression in their speaking. Through reading, learners can also learn grammar which is important in learning the nature of EFL. Learners should pay attention to grammar because it will help them to build comprehensible sentences when speaking. Constant reading of their L2 will help them understand better how words fit together to form sentence patterns in the

language and also to learn collocations, which words fit together with which other words in what situations.

Quiroz (2014) examines the reading strategies of 19 bilingual undergraduate students (Chinese or Spanish) who varied in reading proficiency (good or average). Her results showed that the use of reading strategies affected both syntactic and vocabulary levels. Good readers used strategic reading techniques to identify the wrong sentences in a text, whereas average readers seldom used reading strategies to monitor their comprehension of incorrect sentences. Her overall findings were that greater knowledge plus more efficient use of reading strategies contributed to better reading comprehension in students' L2.

Pietilä and Merikivi (2014) conducted a study to investigate the influence of free-time reading on FL vocabulary development. What the learners read in their spare time appears to be crucial according to the results from their study. Those who read on a regular basis could acquire stronger L2 vocabulary skills. Reading target language texts about their own interests helped learners to learn much new L2 vocabulary. Thus, learners can become familiar with a large number of new words in a text about a subject they like and can use contextual guessing to help them learn the meaning of unfamiliar words.

Mermelstein (2015) conducted a study to explore how extensive reading can help EFL learners improve their writing abilities. He found that extensive reading not only helped these learners build their vocabularies but also increased the variety and fluency in their vocabulary use. Through extensive reading, those students learned to improve the content and organization of their writing. ER plays a vital role in improving learners' spelling accuracy. Fluency, content, organization, language use, vocabulary, and mechanics are the six key areas of benefits from extensive reading (ER).

2.5 Schema Theory and Extensive vs. Strategic Readings

Schemata use old knowledge to influence new information. "Schemas are organized representations of background knowledge which readers bring along to texts" (Short, 1996, p. 231). Students use their background knowledge or schemata when they read any text using extensive or strategic reading, though the degree of their use will vary. They will focus on their existing knowledge of sentence structures, and learn how to cope with any new sentence structure when doing either extensive or strategic reading.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

This study is based on "Schema Theory" which was first used in psychology by Bartlett (1932). He opined that a person has a schemata that represents that individual's background knowledge. According to Al-Issa (2006), "an important aspect of cognitive science, schema theory is a theory of how knowledge is acquired, processed, and retrieved" (p. 41). An (2013) describes schema theory as follows:

The fundamental tenet of schema theory assumes that a written text does not carry meaning by itself. Rather, a text only provides directions for readers as to how they should retrieve or construct meaning from their

own previously acquired knowledge. This previous knowledge is called the readers' background knowledge (prior knowledge), and the previously acquired knowledge structures are called schemata. (An, 2013, p. 130)

An (2013) concludes by saying that comprehending a text, according to schema theory, is an interactive process between the reader's background knowledge and the text. Therefore, the ability to relate the material in the text to one's own knowledge is necessary for efficient comprehension.

So, schema is the background knowledge of a person. Whenever a reader approaches a text, this background knowledge helps him/her to comprehend it. An extensive reader uses his/her background knowledge in one way and a strategic reader uses his/her background knowledge in another way to comprehend the same text. Whatever the case is, the readers learn something through this interaction process. Since the comparative effectiveness of extensive reading vs. strategic reading for learning English language is the basis of this study, we find schema theory suitable for this research work.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Design

This quantitative study provided an opportunity to measure variables. The study was conducted using surveys to collect data in July 2017. Both primary and secondary sources were used when doing the study.

3.2 The Study Area, Population and Sample

Undergraduate students from the English Discipline at Khulna University, Bangladesh were purposely selected for this study since the respondents could be easily and comfortably accessed. Considering a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error, a total of 158 respondents were selected as the sample, from the total of 265 students, using a simple random sampling technique. Amongst the 265 students, 54 were from the first year, 55 from the second year, 58 from the third year, 48 from the fourth year (term-I) and 50 from the fourth year (term-II). The sampling procedure used was based on Creswell's (2009) recommendations since the results from this study are intended to be generalizable. Creswell (2009) states "with randomization, a representative sample from a population provides the ability to generalize to the population" (p. 148).

3.3 Variables and Measures

Eight variables were used to investigate the extent to which the respondents prefer either extensive reading or strategic reading in learning English language. We used a five-point Likert scale as a technique to determine the level of the respondents' choice. The scale had five categories, which were coded as follows: 1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=very often and 5=always.

3.4 Instruments and Procedures

A written questionnaire (see Appendix) was used to collect data from the respondents. Before conducting the survey, the questionnaire was pre-tested on 20 respondents to check the validity and reliability of this instrument. Based on the pre-test results, some necessary modifications were made to the study instrument. After collecting the data, it was interpreted and analyzed using SPSS, version 24.0. The results were presented in charts.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part of the study deals with description and analysis of the results, demonstrating the ratio of extensive reading versus strategic reading for learning English language.

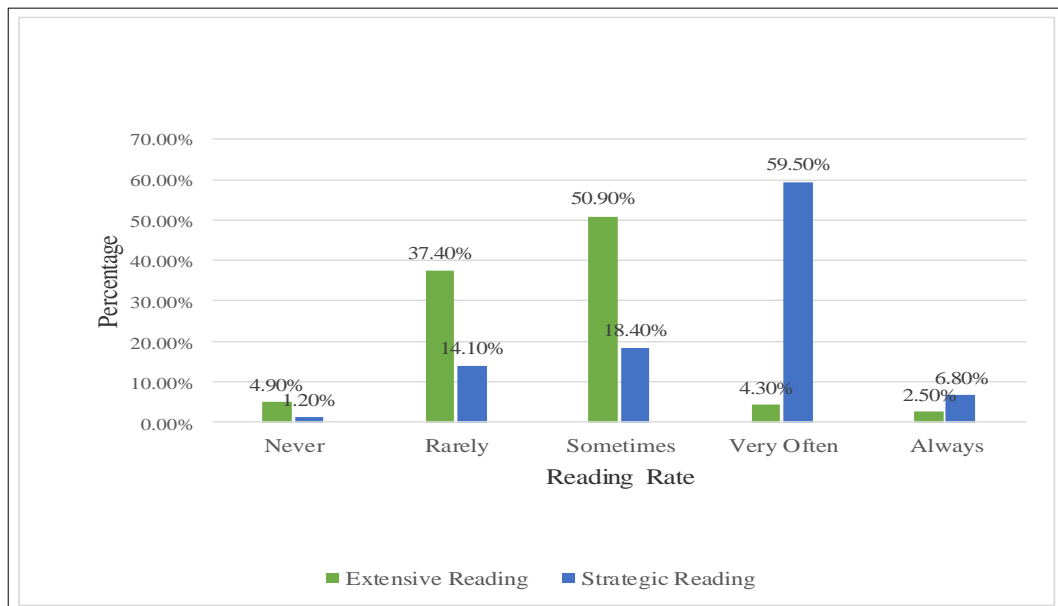


Figure 1. Scope of reading.

To answer how often the students used extensive reading, Figure 1 shows that 5% never, 37% rarely, 51% sometimes, 3% very often, and 3% always. On the contrary, 1% never, 14% rarely, 18% sometimes, 60% very often and 7% always used strategic reading. Since 67% of the students very often or always used strategic reading in comparison to only 6% who very often or always practiced extensive reading, it was found that these students more often practiced strategic reading.

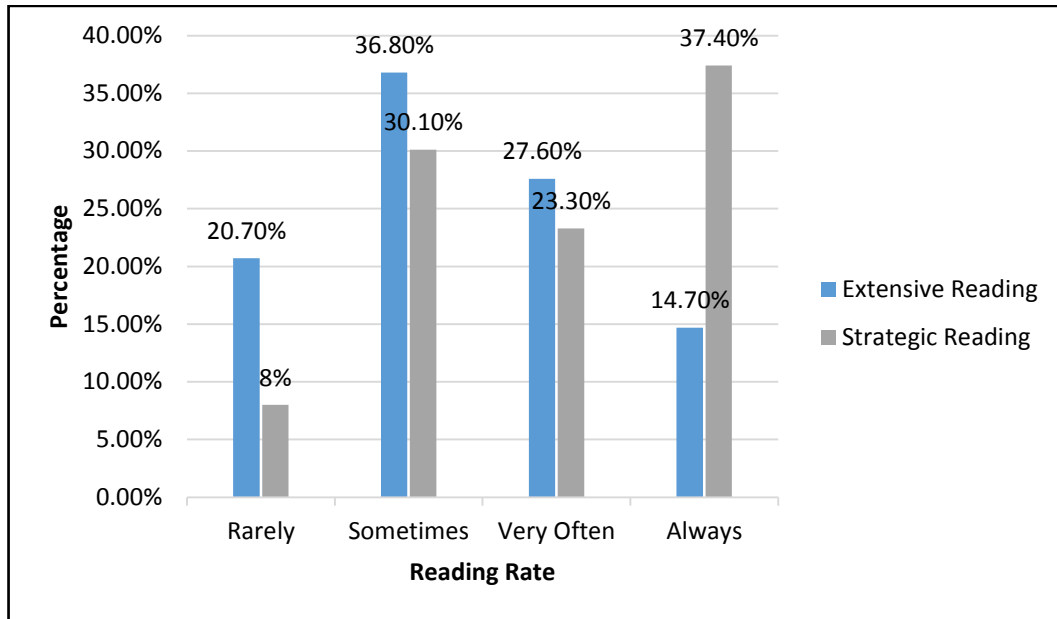


Figure 2. Paying attention to the elements of language while reading.

Figure 2 shows that 21% of the respondents rarely, 37% sometimes, 28% very often, 15% always pay attention to the elements of language while extensively reading a text. Conversely, 9% of the participants rarely, 30% sometimes, 23% very often and 37% always pay attention to the elements of language while strategically reading a text. It was surprising that 91% of the participants said that they paid attention to the language elements at the time of strategic reading, which was higher than that for extensive reading (79%).

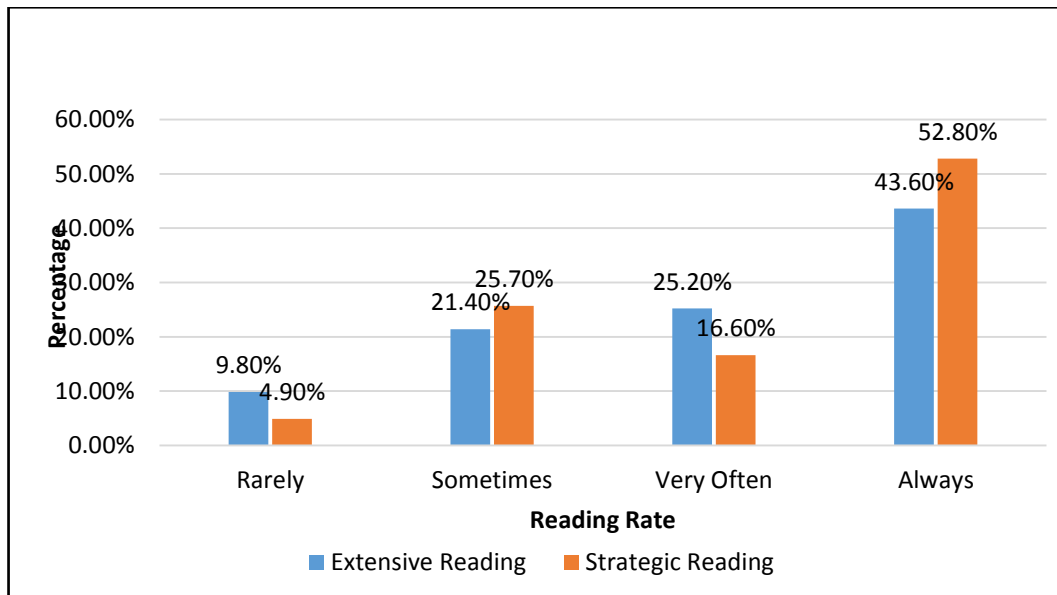


Figure 3. Consulting dictionaries while reading.

The results in Figure 3 show that 10% of the participants rarely, 21% sometimes, 25% very often, and 44% always consult dictionaries when they come across any unfamiliar word at the time of reading a text extensively, while 5% of the

respondents rarely, 26% sometimes, 17% very often, and 53% always check dictionaries when they find any unknown word when they follow strategic reading. In both cases — extensive and strategic readings — the results are close to each other in terms of consulting dictionaries.

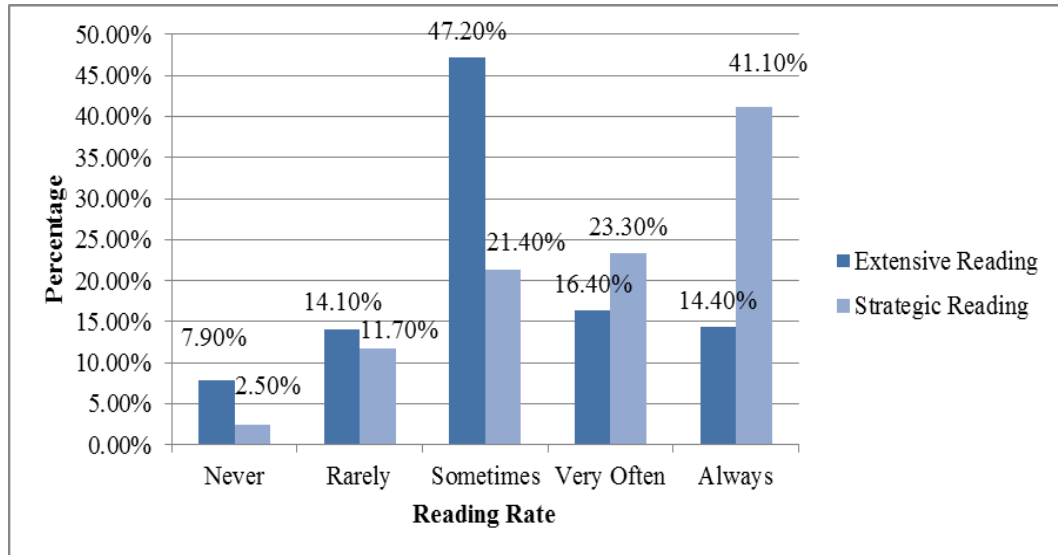


Figure 4. Looking at the sentence structures while reading.

The findings in Figure 4 show that 8% of the respondents never, 14% rarely, 47% sometimes, 16% very often, and 14% always have a look at the sentence structures when they read a text extensively. By contrast, 3% of participants never, 12% rarely, 21% sometimes, 23% very often, and 41% always pay attention to sentence structures while reading a text strategically. Since 41% of the students always consider sentence structures at the time of strategic reading in comparison to only 14% of the students who always focus on sentence structures while reading extensively, it is evident that students pay more attention to sentence structures when they practice strategic reading.

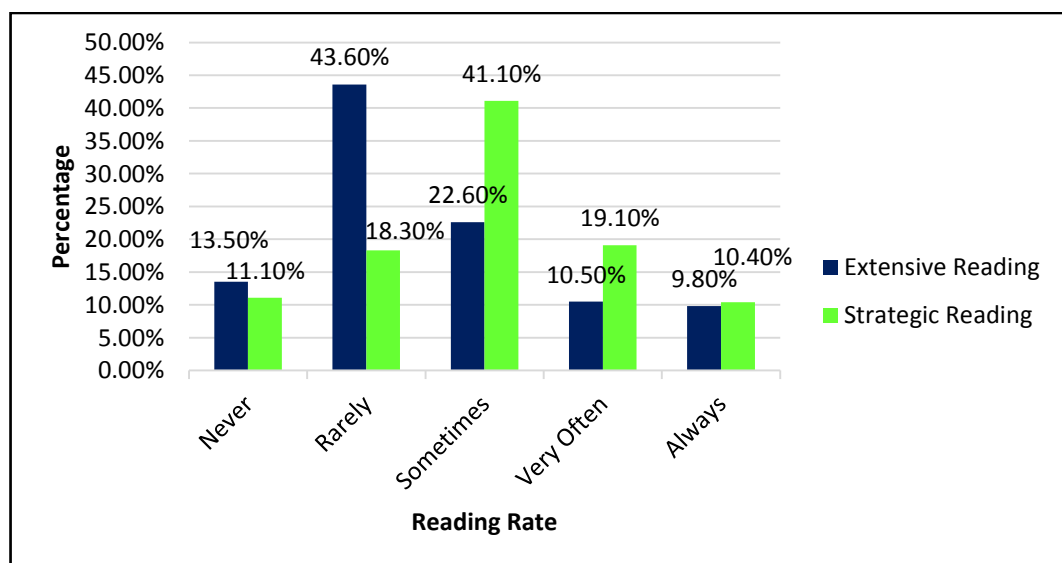


Figure 5. Trying to pronounce the words like native English speakers while reading.

Figure 5 shows that 14% of the students never, 44% rarely, 23% sometimes, 10% very often, 10% always try to pronounce some words like native English speakers while reading extensively for pleasure. On the other hand, 11% of the students never, 18% rarely, 41% sometimes, 19% very often and 10% always try to pronounce some words like native English speakers while following strategic reading techniques. If we consider the percentage who try to pronounce words like native English speakers, we find that those practicing extensive reading tried less often than those using strategic reading.

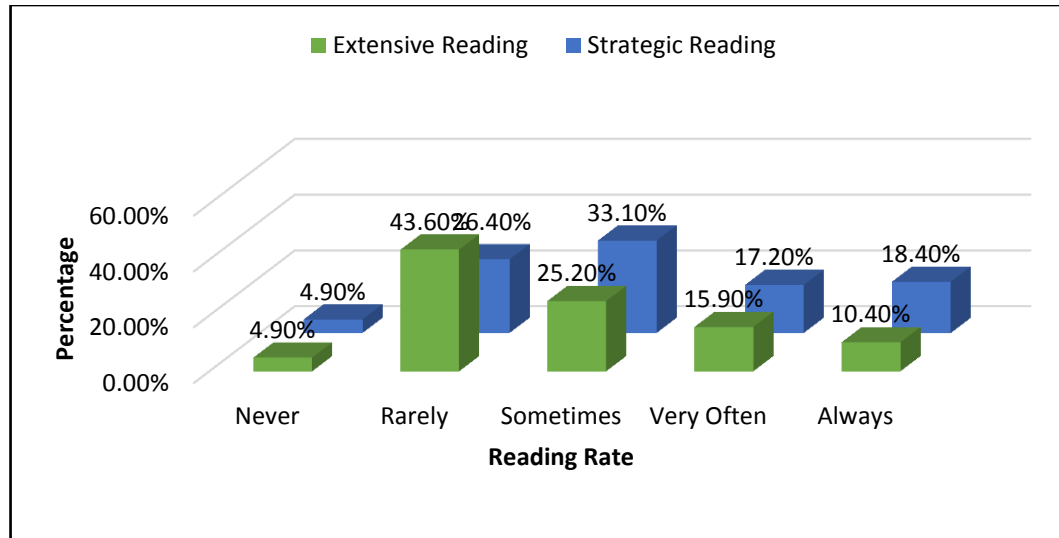


Figure 6. Noticing the use of punctuation marks while reading.

From Figure 6, we find that 5% of the students never, 44% rarely, 25% sometimes, 16% very often and 10% always notice the use of punctuation in texts while they read extensively. By contrast, 5% of the students never, 26% rarely, 33% sometimes, 17% very often and 18% always consider the use of punctuation when they read any text using strategic techniques. The comparative percentage of noticing the use of punctuation marks during reading keeps strategic reading ahead, 69% to 51%.

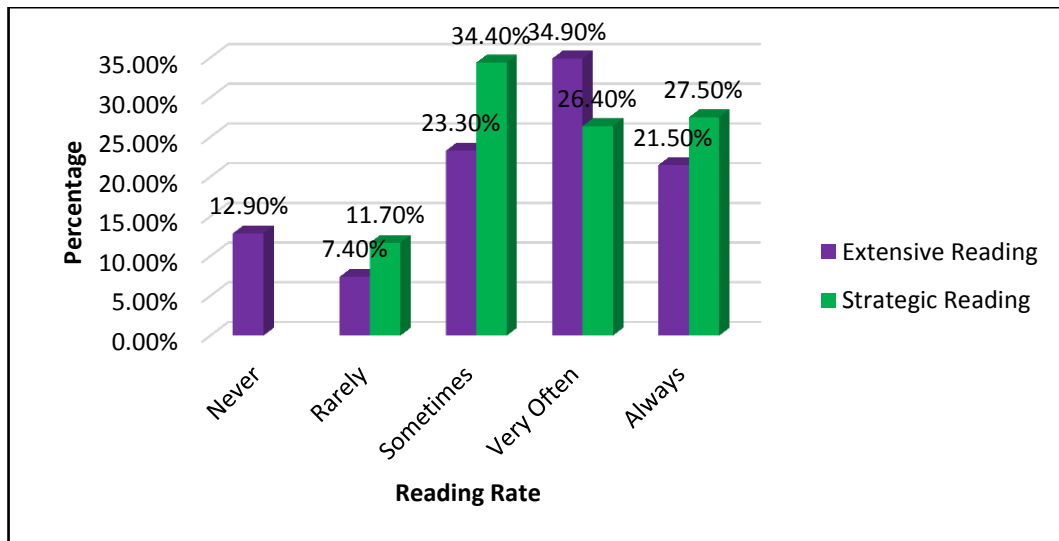


Figure 7. Trying to form a contextual understanding while reading.

Figure 7 shows that 13% of the students never, 7% rarely, 23% sometimes, 35% very often and 22% always try to form a contextual understanding during extensive reading. On the other hand, 0% of the students never, 12% rarely, 34% sometimes, 26% very often and 28% always try to form a contextual understanding during strategic reading.

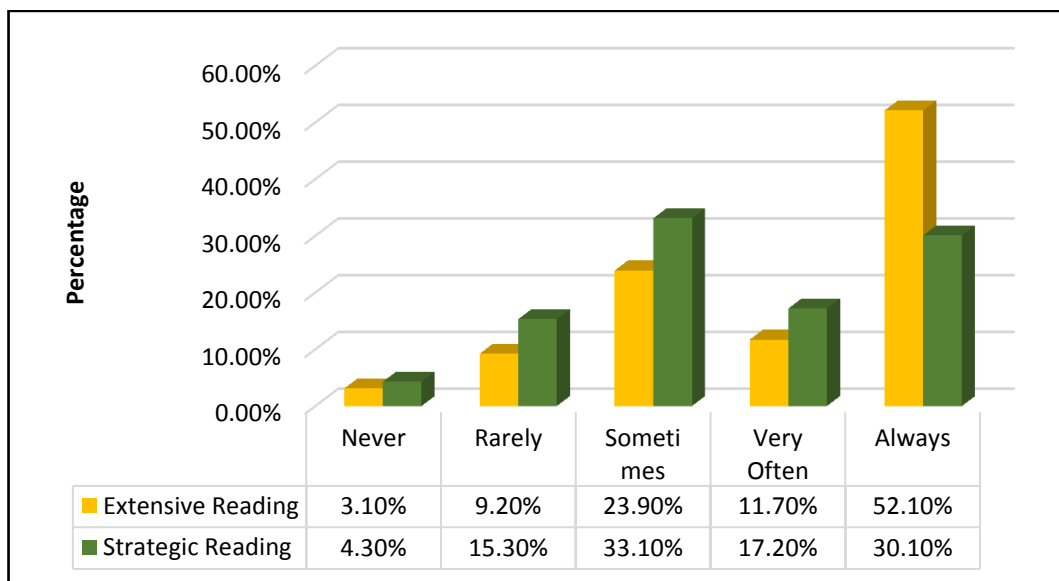


Figure 8. Reading technique after getting a book for the first time.

Figure 8 shows that 3% of the students never, 9% rarely, 24% sometimes, 12% very often and 52% always read the first chapter after getting a book when using extensive reading. On the other hand, 4% of the students never, 15% rarely, 33% sometimes, 17% very often and 30% of the students always read the first chapter after getting a book when they are doing strategic reading. Hence, the use of strategic reading techniques was slightly more dominant amongst the students.

4.2 Discussion

The study suggests that strategic reading remains ahead of extensive reading in terms of learning English language. In other words, students showed a more positive attitude towards strategic reading in comparison to extensive reading. One of the noticeable findings of this study was that students pay more attention to the elements of language while reading a text strategically. Consulting a good dictionary is a prescribed way of learning any L2/FL. Here we find that in both cases — extensive and strategic readings — the results are close to each other in terms of consulting dictionaries.

Another important finding is that students always considered sentence structure at the time of strategic reading in comparison to extensive reading. Paying attention to different sentence structures is crucial to learning the target language effectively. And, it was evident from the results from the study that students paid more attention to the sentence structures at the time with strategic reading, and it also became clear that strategic reading was more helpful in learning the English language than extensive reading.

It is desirable that EFL students become able to pronounce words more like native English speakers. Students often try to do so, and if we consider the findings for pronouncing words like native English speakers, it can be seen that the findings for extensive readers are lower than those for strategic readers. So, it becomes obvious that students concentrate more on correct pronunciation when they follow strategic reading.

Punctuation is of paramount importance for good writing, which requires students to be more attentive when reading and while writing as well. Errors in punctuation marks can cause readers to have trouble understanding a piece of writing. [Trask \(1997\)](#) rightly says, “the problem with poor punctuation is that it makes life difficult for the reader who needs to read and understand what you’ve written” (p. 2). In this study, we find that noticing punctuation marks during reading keeps strategic reading ahead. In other words, students were more aware of appropriate use of punctuation marks when they read a text strategically.

Overall, the findings make it clear that students are more careful about almost all necessary aspects of learning English when they follow strategic reading; and, the use of strategic reading technique was predominant amongst the sample students.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The students did not get enough time to read a text for pleasure. On the other hand, willingly or unwillingly they read their academic texts strategically. For this reason, they paid equal attention to the elements of language when they read a text strategically. However, when searching to understand the meaning of a new word they consulted dictionaries equally for both types of reading, which is essential for developing the vocabulary of students and for assisting students to master L2 skills ([Sahardin et al., 2015](#)). The students paid more attention to sentence structures when they read a text strategically. Some other things that the students did more when doing strategic reading rather than extensive reading were that they tried harder to pronounce words like native English speakers, they noticed the use of punctuation

marks more, they tried harder to form contextual understanding and they previewed the text more after getting a text for the first time. Thus, this study finds that the students had a positive attitude towards strategic reading and concludes that strategic reading has been more effective for learning ESL/EFL. The results of this study could be more generalized if the sample size and study area were larger. Further studies may get more comprehensive results taking a larger sample and a broader study area.

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APPENDIX

A Questionnaire on

Extensive Versus Strategic Reading for Learning English at Khulna University, Bangladesh

Background Information of the Respondent:

1. Name of the Respondent:

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2. Name of the Discipline:

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3. Year and Term of Study:

.....

4. Gender:

.....

5. Date of Birth:

.....

The responses of the respondents are given below where the following scale indicates the varied degrees of weight:

1–Never; 2–Rarely; 3–Sometimes; 4–Very Often; 5–Always

To give your opinion, please put a tick mark (√) in the box you choose:

Part A: Questionnaire about Extensive Reading

| Sl. | Questions | Answer | | | | |
|-----|---|--------------|---------------|--------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| | | Never (1) | Rarely (2) | Some- times (3) | Very Often (4) | Always (5) |
| 1. | Do you get enough scope for reading for pleasure? | | | | | |
| 2. | Do you pay attention to the elements of language when you read a book, newspaper or magazine extensively? | | | | | |
| 3. | Do you consult dictionaries when you come across unfamiliar words during extensive reading? | | | | | |
| 4. | Do you look at the sentence structures during extensive reading? | | | | | |
| 5. | Do you try to pronounce the words like native English speakers while reading for pleasure? | | | | | |
| 6. | Do you notice the use of punctuation marks during extensive reading? | | | | | |
| 7. | Do you try to form a contextual understanding during extensive reading? | | | | | |
| 8. | Do you start reading the first chapter after getting a book? | | | | | |

Part B: Questionnaire on Strategic Reading

| Sl. | Questions | Answer | | | | |
|-----|---|--------------|---------------|--------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| | | Never (1) | Rarely (2) | Some- times (3) | Very Often (4) | Always (5) |
| 1. | Do you get enough scope for strategic reading? | | | | | |
| 2. | Do you pay attention to the elements of language when you read a book, newspaper or magazine strategically? | | | | | |
| 3. | Do you consult dictionaries when you come across unfamiliar words during strategic reading? | | | | | |
| 4. | Do you look at the sentence structures during strategic reading? | | | | | |
| 5. | Do you try to pronounce the words like native English speakers while reading in the class? | | | | | |
| 6. | Do you notice the use of punctuation marks during strategic reading? | | | | | |
| 7. | Do you try to form a contextual understanding during reading strategically? | | | | | |
| 8. | Do you use previewing strategy after getting a new English text? | | | | | |

Thanks for your cordial co-operation.

Signature of the Respondent
and Date

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THE AUTHORS

Molla Nazim Uddin Ahmed received his Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Khulna University, Bangladesh. He completed his B.A. (honors) in English, and later he secured First Position in M.A. in English Language. His research interests include English Language Teaching (ELT), English Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, and Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

Molla Azizur Rahman is an Assistant Professor of English at Khulna University, Bangladesh. He has been teaching English language and literature in several universities since 2007. His articles have appeared in several peer-reviewed journals. His research interests include English Language Teaching (ELT), Sociolinguistics, Psycholinguistics, Phonetics and Phonology, and Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

Md. Obaidullah is a Lecturer in the Department of English at Northern University of Business and Technology Khulna, Bangladesh. He has published several articles in peer-reviewed national and international journals. His research interests include Sociolinguistics, Corpus Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), World Englishes, and Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL).