



## **Exploring Adult Undergraduates' Learning Strategies and their Perceived Reading Comprehension Difficulties**

Sharifah Amani Bte Syed Abdul Rahman<sup>1</sup>, Noor Hanim Rahmat<sup>2</sup> and D Rohayu Mohd Yunos<sup>3</sup>

Academy of Language Studies  
UiTM Johor Branch, Pasir Gudang Campus.

Corresponding email: [shari348@johor.uitm.edu.my](mailto:shari348@johor.uitm.edu.my), [patanim@gmail.com](mailto:patanim@gmail.com), [droha932@johor.uitm.edu.my](mailto:droha932@johor.uitm.edu.my)

---

### **Article Information**

#### **Keywords**

Adult learners, Reading Comprehension Strategies, Reading Comprehension Difficulties, Reading Comprehension.

---

### **Abstract**

According to Tommaso (2015), mainstream students who fail to use reading strategies will experience difficulty inferring conceptual meaning during reading. They may also not be able to self-monitor their learning and understanding, as well as evaluate texts and clarity. However, based on the assumptions of adult learners (Knowles, 1990), adult learners are reported to have the readiness to learn and are motivated towards learning. Adult learners are also reported to be internally motivated and self-directed and these characteristics help in their understanding of understanding texts. As such adult learners' use reading strategies and their perception of reading comprehension difficulties may reveal interesting findings. The purpose of this research is to look into the reading comprehension strategies used by adult learners, as well as how they perceive reading comprehension difficulties. This research adapted the categories for reading comprehension intervention strategies by Hock and Mellard (2005), and Meta cognitive, cognitive and social strategies by Nasab and Motlagh (2015); as well as reading difficulties by Garcia, et al (2014). Findings revealed that there was significant difference in the use of social strategy and even though there was no significant differences for cognitive and Meta cognitive differences, individual descriptive analysis revealed interesting results. The findings also revealed that the highest mean is for cognitive strategies.

---

### **BACKGROUND OF STUDY**

Reading comprehension has been reported to be a dynamic and interactive process between the text and reader. Some classroom teaching focus on the text-making is suitable for the reader to comprehend. Others, design activities to cater for the different needs of the learners. In addition to that, many teachers also design lessons to teach students to use specific learning strategies during reading comprehension.

## OBJECTIVE OF STUDY

The objective of this study is to find out the perceived reading difficulties among adult learners. Strategies such as cognitive, Meta cognitive and social strategies often reported to have impact on the reading comprehension of students. Hence, this research looks into the influence of learning strategies on their reading comprehension.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Are there any significant difference between gender for students' reading difficulties and their use of metacognitive and social affective strategies?
2. In what ways do students' perception of reading difficulties influence their reading comprehension?
3. In what ways do the use of metacognitive strategies influence their reading comprehension?
4. In what ways do the use of social strategies influence their reading comprehension?
5. Which strategy recorded the highest mean for reading comprehension?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

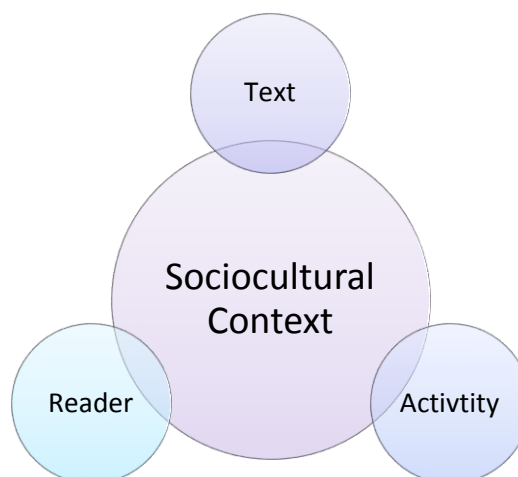
### *READING SKILLS*

According to Basaraba et al (2013), the three-level model of reading comprehension helps teachers teach in the classroom. Literal comprehension involves the learners to identify specific events from the text. Next, inferential comprehension requires the reader to infer implicit meaning from the text. Finally, evaluative comprehension demands that the reader evaluate situations and make judgements

In addition to that, the RAND model was developed to show the heuristics for thinking in comprehension. The model showed the process of extracting and constructing meaning through the interaction of three elements-the reader, the text and the activity (or the purpose for reading). Figure 1 below shows the summary of the relationship of the three main elements in the model. When readers are given texts to read, their ability to comprehend and elicit meaning from the text is influenced by the text given, the activity designed by the teacher and also the reader's schemata. This schemata is then influenced by their socio cultural context.

FIGURE 1

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN READING –THE READER, THE TEXT AND ACTIVITY. (ADOPTED FROM RAND -SNOW, 2002)



### *READING COMPREHENSION AMONG ADULT LEARNERS*

Burt et al (2005) studied adults' reading comprehension behaviour and found that adult learners may bring in their background, cultural issues into their reading text. Adults do so by their ability through their social interaction with their course mates. However, their background information is useful for them most of the time, some information may sometimes impede comprehension when their schemata did not support the information

in the text. Instead of using their schemata to help in understanding the reading text, the limited knowledge may in turn hinder their understanding.

However, the study by Tommaso (2015) reported that adult learners are able to interact with the text actively through paraphrasing, summarizing and relating materials to personal experience. Adult readers use previous knowledge of concepts and experiences to make sense of the content of what they are reading. Adult learners' vast experience may provide scaffolding towards the understanding of new information. In addition to that adults are capable of making use of their learnt knowledge into their future learning.

The study by Knowles (1990) also reported favourable adult learners' behaviour in reading comprehension. These learners were reported to be internally motivated and self-directed and these traits helped the adult learners to understand the text.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

FIGURE 2  
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

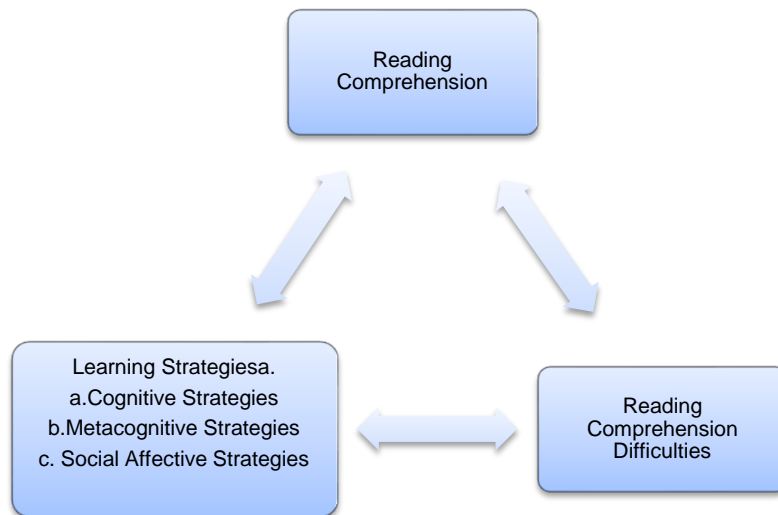


Figure 2 shows the theoretical framework of the study. This study is rooted from several established theories on reading comprehension difficulties and learning strategies.

**LEARNING STRATEGIES**

According to Seri et al (2012), when it comes to reading comprehension, cognitive strategies are activities that are used by learners in order to understand the linguistic input and get knowledge. Meta cognitive strategies, on the other hand, deals with knowing about learning. Finally, social affective strategies refer to strategies that learners use to learn by interaction with their classmates and questions are asked from the teacher to understand the subject.

**READING COMPREHENSION DIFFICULTIES**

According to Garcia et al (2014), some ESL learners find difficulties in understanding during reading comprehension. Some may lack focus when they read passages. Some learners are also found to be lazy when it comes to reading passages, while some found it difficult to read without aids and some may have problems with their vocabulary. In addition to that, some ESL learners may find reading boring.

**PAST RESEARCH**

The study by Nasab and Motlagh (2015) investigated the relationship of Meta cognitive, cognitive and social/ affective strategies with EFL adult learners' reading comprehension. The quasi-experimental study employed the Oxford training model where students were exposed to strategies accompanied with comprehension texts. Learners' progress and relationship of those strategies were measured during the sixteen sessions. Independent

sample t-test with Pearson indicated that Meta cognitive group significantly outperformed the other groups. Hence, Meta cognitive strategies were more in line with EFL learners reading comprehension.

**METHODOLOGY**

**RESEARCH DESIGN AND SUBJECTS**

This is a pilot study to find out how learning strategies influence perception of reading difficulties among UiTM distance learning TESL students. Quantitative data is analyzed using SPSS to reveal descriptive findings.

**INSTRUMENT**

The instrument used in this research is a questionnaire. It comprises of 4 sections. Section A is the demographic profile, section B looks at the perception of reading difficulties, section C looks at meta cognitive strategies used, and section D looks at social affective strategies.

**DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

**INTRODUCTION**

The discussion of the findings of the research will be done to answer the five research questions.

1. Are there any significant difference between gender for students’ reading difficulties and their use of Meta cognitive and social affective strategies?
2. In what ways do students’ perception of reading difficulties influence their reading comprehension?
3. In what ways do the use of cognitive strategies influence their reading comprehension?
4. In what ways do the use of Meta cognitive strategies influence their reading comprehension?
5. In what ways do the use of social strategies influence their reading comprehension?
6. Which strategy recorded the highest mean for reading comprehension?

**OVERALL**

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: Are there any significant difference between gender for students’ reading difficulties and their use of Meta cognitive and social affective strategies?

(a) Reading comprehension.

TABLE 3

RESULTS OF INDEPENDENT T- TEST COMPARING MALE AND FEMALE IN DIFFICULTIES IN READING COMPREHENSION

Results		Independent T-Test				
		<i>n</i>	$\bar{x}$	<b>SD</b>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Difficulties in reading comprehension	Male	4	3.34	.16	.20	.85
	Female	16	3.32	.23		

*\*T-test significant is at .05 (2 tailed)*

(b) Cognitive Strategies

Table 3 indicates the result of mean score and standard deviation between male and female on class discussion. ( $\bar{x}$  = 3.34) for male and ( $\bar{x}$  = 3.32) for female. The Independent T-Test comparing between male and female reported that there is no statistically significant difference in the mean score ( $t(18) = .20$ ),  $p = .85$  at the 0.05 level.

## (c) Meta Cognitive Strategies

TABLE 4  
RESULTS OF INDEPENDENT T- TEST COMPARING MALE AND FEMALE IN COGNITIVE

Results		Independent T-Test				
		<i>n</i>	$\bar{x}$	<b>SD</b>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Cognitive	Male	4	3.53	.49	-.23	.82
	Female	16	3.60	.27		

*\*T-test significant is at .05 (2 tailed)*

## (d) Social Affective Strategies

Table 4 indicates the result of mean score and standard deviation between male and female on class discussion. ( $\bar{x} = 3.53$ ) for male and ( $\bar{x} = 3.60$ ) for female. The Independent T-Test comparing between male and female reported that there is no statistically significant difference in the mean score ( $t(18) = -.23$ ,  $p = .82$ ) at the 0.05 level.

TABLE 5  
RESULTS OF INDEPENDENT T- TEST COMPARING MALE AND FEMALE IN COGNITIVE

Results		Independent T-Test				
		<i>n</i>	$\bar{x}$	<b>SD</b>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Metacognitive	Male	4	3.50	.85	.23	.82
	Female	16	3.43	.50		

*\*T-test significant is at .05 (2 tailed)*

Table 5 indicates the result of mean score and standard deviation between male and female on class discussion. ( $\bar{x} = 3.50$ ) for male and ( $\bar{x} = 3.43$ ) for female. The Independent T-Test comparing between male and female reported that there is no statistically significant difference in the mean score ( $t(18) = .23$ ,  $p = .82$ ) at the 0.05 level.

TABLE 6  
RESULTS OF INDEPENDENT T- TEST COMPARING MALE AND FEMALE IN SOCIAL AFFECTIVE

Results		Independent T-Test				
		<i>n</i>	$\bar{x}$	<b>SD</b>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
SocialAffective	Male	4	2.46	.46	-3.50	.003
	Female	16	3.45	.52		

*\*T-test significant is at .05 (2 tailed)*

Table 6 indicates the result of mean score and standard deviation between male and female on class discussion. ( $\bar{x} = 2.46$ ) for male and ( $\bar{x} = 3.45$ ) for female. The Independent T-Test comparing between male and female reported that there is statistically significant difference in the mean score ( $t(18) = -3.50$ ,  $p = .003$ ) at the 0.05 level. This means there is a slight difference in the use of social affective strategies across genders; with the female respondents recording slightly higher mean than their male counterparts.

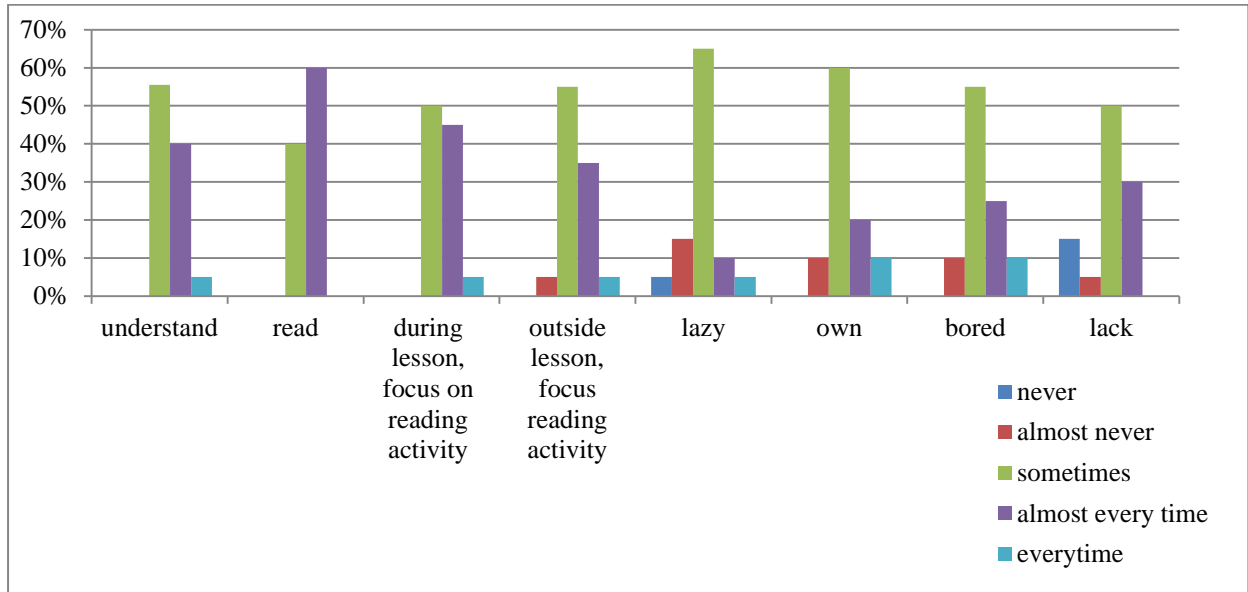
**FINDINGS FOR READING DIFFICULTIES**

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: Are there any significant difference between gender for students' reading difficulties and their use of Meta cognitive and social affective strategies?

Figure 7 shows the percentage for perceived reading difficulties among adults' learners. This discussion will proceed by reporting some of the highest frequency for "almost every time" from the figure. The adult learners reported that almost every time, answer all questions after they read the passage (60%), they understand

academic texts (40%), and also focusing on the passage when they read something outside (35%) the classroom content. Adults are reported to use their background knowledge (Tommaso; 2015). And this knowledge often facilitates rather than hinder their understanding.

FIGURE 7  
PERCENTAGE FOR DIFFICULTIES IN READING COMPREHENSION



**FINDINGS FOR COGNITIVE STRATEGIES**

RESEARCH QUESTION 3: In what ways do the use of cognitive strategies influence their reading comprehension?

FIGURE 8  
PERCENTAGE FOR COGNITIVE STRATEGY

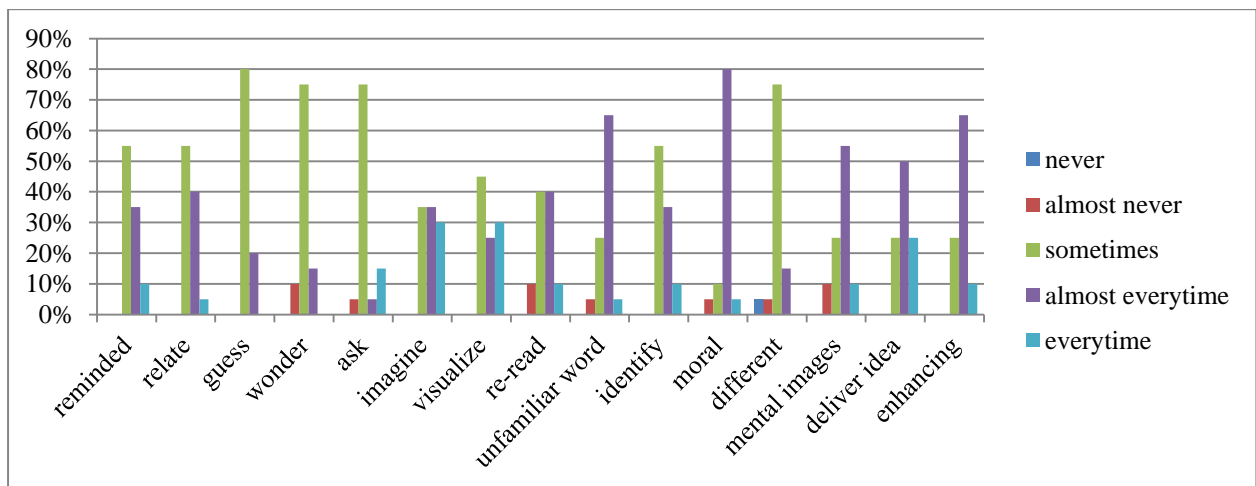


Figure 8 reports the percentage for learners' use of cognitive strategies. An obvious observation is that adult learners almost every time looked for phrases or figurative language used by the authors in enhancing (65%) their style of writing. This finding can be supported by the report by Tommaso (2015) who revealed that adults are keen to use their new knowledge into their future learning. In addition to that, almost every time, the adult learners would identify the moral or lesson of the story or text (80%), and also guess the meaning of unfamiliar words (65%) using contextual clues.

**FINDINGS FOR META COGNITIVE STRATEGIES**

RESEARCH QUESTION 4: In what ways do the use of Meta cognitive strategies influence their reading comprehension?

FIGURE 9

PERCENTAGE FOR METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES

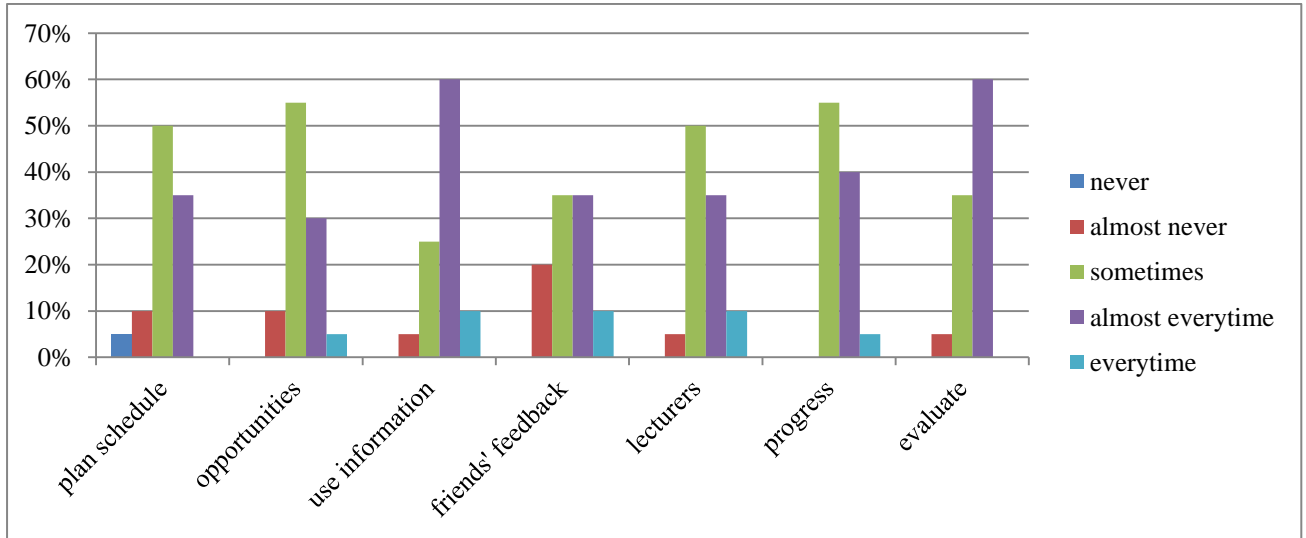


Figure 9 shows the percentage for Meta cognitive strategies used by the adult learners. Almost every time, the adult learners would use information (60%) to help them improve, evaluate (60%) their own understanding of the text, thought about their progress (40%) and also asked for their friends' feedback (35%). This finding is also in accordance with the study by Knowles (1990) who also reported that adults have the readiness to learn and are often highly motivated learners.

**FINDINGS FOR SOCIAL AFFECTIVE STRATEGIES**

RESEARCH QUESTION 5: In what ways do the use of social strategies influence their reading comprehension?

FIGURE 10

PERCENTAGE FOR SOCIAL AFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

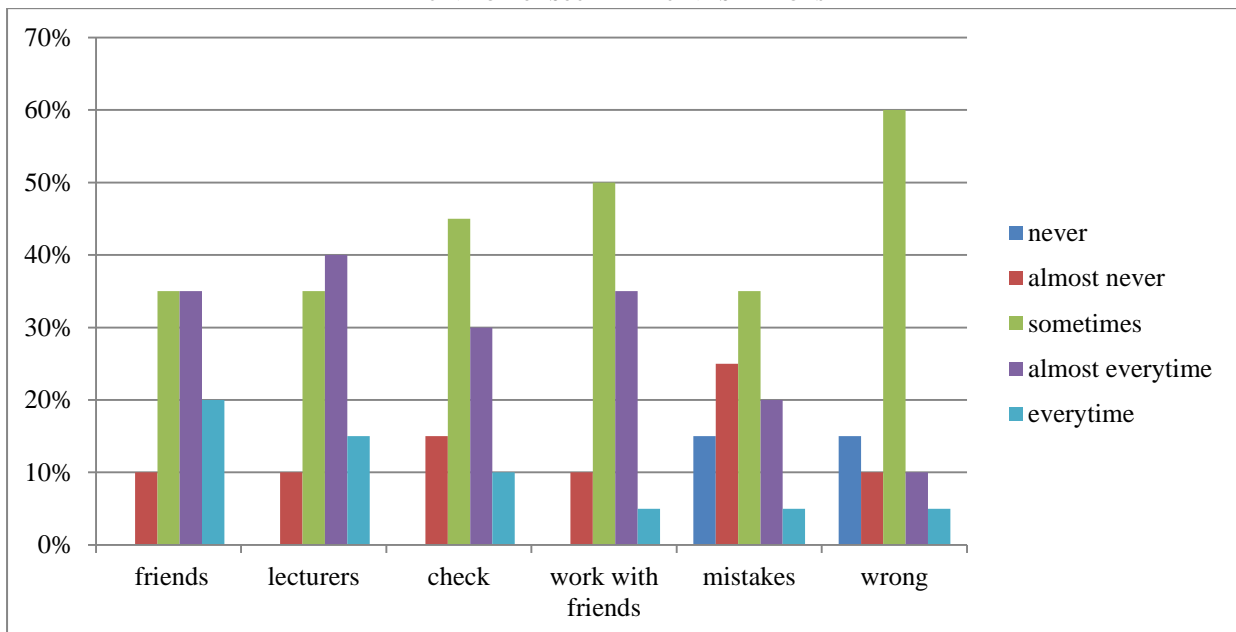


Figure 10 depicts the percentage for social affective strategies used by adult learners. The findings reveal that almost every times, the adult learners did not mind writing the wrong answers (60%), making language mistakes (35%), working with their friends (50%) and also checking answers with their peers (45%). This is also true for Knowles (1990) who found that adult learners are very highly motivated and hence, were not hindered by mistakes. Burt et al (2005) also reported that adult learners are very prone to socializing and this interaction may help boost their motivation towards learning.

### **STRATEGIES COMPARED**

RESEARCH QUESTION 6: Which strategy recorded the highest mean for reading comprehension?

TABLE 11

STRATEGIES COMPARED

STRATEGY	GENDER	N	MEAN
COGNITIVE	male	4	3.5333
	female	16	3.5750
META COGNITIVE	male	4	3.5000
	female	16	3.4286
SOCIAL STRATEGY	male	4	2.4583
	female	16	3.4479

Table 11 shows the mean values of strategies compared. The use of the three strategies across genders are compared. It was reported that the highest mean is Cognitive for both male and female participants. This finding is, however, not in accordance with the findings by Nasab and Motlagh (2015) who found that adult learners used Meta cognitive strategies more often than the other two strategies. This could possibly be because the adult learners in this research are mainly teachers who have had many years of teaching experience and their nature of job enabled them to read many different types of text-academic and non-academic.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **SUMMARY FINDINGS**

- This study revealed that among male and female adult learners, there was a significant difference in the use of social strategy.
- For adult learners in this study, the most common strategy used for reading comprehension was Cognitive Strategy.
- Although there were no significant differences in the use of Cognitive and Meta Cognitive strategies, individual frequency revealed varying results.

### **PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION**

It is encouraged that Reading Comprehension classes focus on the teaching of separate strategies as part of the reading comprehension activities. Past research has proven that successful use of the strategies will improve the learners' reading comprehension abilities.

### **SUGGESTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

It is suggested that future research looked at the patterns for more adult learners and focusing on comparison of adult learners from different content or programme backgrounds, different cultural background or even different age groups.



## REFERENCES

- Basaraba, D. et al. (2013) Examining the structure of reading comprehension: Do literal, inferential, and evaluative comprehension truly exist? *Reading and Writing, An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Volume 26, Issue 3, March 2013, pp. 349-379.
- Burt, M., Peyton, J.K. and Duzer, C.V. (2005) How Should Adult Reading Instruction Differ from ABE Reading Instruction? *The CAELA Guide for Adult ESL Trainers*. Retrieved from [http://www.cal.org/caela/scb/III\\_D\\_TeachingReading.pdf](http://www.cal.org/caela/scb/III_D_TeachingReading.pdf)
- Di Tommaso, K. (2015) Strategies to Facilitate Reading Comprehension among College Transition Students. Retrieved from <http://www.collegetransition.org/promisingpractices.research.readingstrategies.html>
- Garcia, Y.P., Ramayan, A.J.R. Sepe, A.P. & Silor, A.C. (2014). Difficulties in Reading Comprehension and Metacognitive Strategies for Technology Livelihood Education Students. Proceeding at the Global Summit on Education GSE 2014 (E-ISBN978-967-11768-5-6).
- Griffiths, G., Sohlberg, M. M., & Biancarosa, G. (2010). A review of models of reading comprehension with implications for adults with mTBI and the Campus Reader. In *CampusReader (Further Reading)*. Retrieved from: [www.campusreader.org](http://www.campusreader.org).
- Hock, M. and Mellard, D. (2005) Reading Comprehension Strategies for Adult Literacy Outcomes. Vol 49 (3) Retrieved from [atlasabe.org/\\_literature.../rb\\_-\\_reading\\_-\\_comprehension\\_strategies](http://atlasabe.org/_literature.../rb_-_reading_-_comprehension_strategies)
- Kherzrlou, S (2012) The Relationship between Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies, Age and Level of Education. *The Reading Matrix*. Volume 12(1), pp 50-61
- Knowles, M. (1984). *Andragogy in Action*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mellard, D.F., Fall, E., and Woods, K.L (2010) A path analysis of reading comprehension for adults with low literacy. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*. Vol 43(2). Pp 154-165 Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2860173/>
- Nasab, M.S.B., and Motlagh, S.F.P. (2015) A Complete Review for Metacognitive, Cognitive, and Social Affective Strategies as Essential Components of Learning Strategies and their relationships with EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension Promotion. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*. Vol 6(3) Retrieved from <http://www.journals.aiac.org.au/index.php/alls/article/view/1525>
- Serri, F., Boroujeni, A.J. and Hesabi, A. (2012). Cognitive, Metacognitive and Social Affective Strategies in Listening Comprehension and their Relationships with Individual Differences. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*. Vol 2(4), pp 843-849. Retrieved from [http://www.researchgate.net/publication/268257283\\_Cognitive\\_Metacognitive\\_and\\_SocialAffective\\_Strategies\\_in\\_Listening\\_Comprehension\\_and\\_Their\\_Relationships\\_with\\_Individual\\_Differences/links/54b8b4a70cf269d8cbf6fe4e.pdf](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/268257283_Cognitive_Metacognitive_and_SocialAffective_Strategies_in_Listening_Comprehension_and_Their_Relationships_with_Individual_Differences/links/54b8b4a70cf269d8cbf6fe4e.pdf)
- Snow, C. (2002) RAND Reading Study Group. *Reading for Understanding. Towards an R&D Program in Reading Comprehension*. Science and Technology institute. Retrieved from RAND Reading Study Group. Retrieved from [http://www.prgs.edu/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph\\_reports/2005/MR1465.pdf](http://www.prgs.edu/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph_reports/2005/MR1465.pdf)
- Tommaso, K.D. (2015) Strategies to Facilitate Reading Comprehension among College Transition Students Retrieved from <http://www.collegetransition.org/promisingpractices.research.readingstrategies.html>