

Twenty Years of Research on Second Language Reading Strategies in China: Retrospect and Prospect

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Abstract: Research on second language reading strategies in China emerged in the late 1990s, with most studies conducted from the perspective of English reading learning. The main research areas cover the definition and classification of reading strategies, comparative research, impact research, research on influencing factors, applied research and theoretical foundation research. Comparative studies mainly focus on disparities in strategy application yet lack exploration into how different strategies affect learning outcomes. Impact studies indicate that certain strategies correlate with working memory capacity, while research on their influences on other learning domains remains insufficient. Studies on influencing factors have yielded limited findings and deserve more attention. Most applied studies are empirical, verifying the effectiveness of strategies in teaching practice. Theoretical research in this field is also inadequate. Future research should explore the effects of diverse strategies on learning performance, their impacts across various learning domains, the regulation and control of influencing factors, theoretical exploration for developing new strategies, as well as comprehensive interdisciplinary studies. These efforts will advance the field and improve second language learners' reading proficiency.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition; Reading Strategies; Retrospect and Prospect

1. Introduction

Reading strategies refer to "the behavioral processes learners adopt to tackle difficulties in reading" Johnson & Johnson (1998), constituting an integral part of second language learning strategies. When learning a second language, learners employ various strategies and approaches to boost learning efficiency and effectively acquire vocabulary, grammar, sentence structures and language expressions [1].

Rooted in cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics, second language acquisition and other relevant theories, research on reading strategies explores the composition and operational mechanisms of second language learners' reading behaviors. Readers respond to textual information by adopting targeted methods and engaging in active thinking during reading. Studies have proven that reading is not merely a passive process of receiving textual information, but an active procedure involving information processing, decoding and connection with prior knowledge, which entails readers' psychological analysis, information construction and discourse analysis capabilities. To unpack the complex reading process, scholars have categorized reading into four major models: the top-down model, the bottom-up model, the interactive model and schema theory.

Research on second language reading strategies originated in the mid-to-late 1970s. Early studies centered on instructing students to apply reading strategies so as to enhance their reading efficiency and speed. Common strategies include skimming, scanning, guessing word meanings from context and analyzing text structure. These classic strategies still exert a profound influence on second language learners' cognition and practice of reading strategies, as well as teachers' instructional approaches. As research evolves, reading strategies have been endowed with new connotations. Traditional studies focused solely on the process of comprehending textual content, whereas contemporary research attaches greater importance to discourse analysis and in-depth learning. As early as 1977, applied linguist Hosenfeld conducted a comparative study between successful and unsuccessful second language readers [2]. Since then, numerous scholars have carried out extensive research on individual differences, the development, application and teaching of reading strategies, as well as their theoretical foundations and operational mechanisms. Domestic research in this field started relatively late in the late 1990s,

and most studies take English reading as the research object. The pioneering domestic study was A Study on English Reading Strategies of Chinese Students by Lü and Tu (1998) [3]. Based on an empirical investigation of 300 non-English major undergraduates, the study found that Chinese students adopted a variety of reading strategies, including cognitive strategies, memory strategies and metacognitive strategies. Overall, domestic research on second language reading strategies mainly consists of empirical studies on reading training and its effectiveness, research on influencing factors of reading strategies, studies on the correlation between reading strategies and second language competence, and comparative research on learners' reading strategies, among which comparative studies are relatively scarce. Later, adopting a mixed quantitative and qualitative method, Li and Pu (2017) statistically analyzed domestic papers [4]. They reviewed the research status from four dimensions: overall trends, research content, research types and research methods, and put forward prospects and suggestions for future studies. Building on their research in 2017, this paper reviews domestic literature on second language reading strategies from 2004 to 2024, focusing on achievements in comparative research, research on influencing factors, theoretical research and empirical research. By evaluating the current research status and identifying existing deficiencies, this paper aims to point out key directions for future studies in this field.

2. Definition and Classification of Reading Strategies

So far, academia has not reached a consensus on the definition of reading strategies. Several representative viewpoints are presented as follows. Using the think-aloud method, Hosenfeld (1977) concluded that strategies used by proficient readers fall into nine categories: (1) thinking about and predicting meanings while reading; (2) inferring word meanings from context; (3) marking read content to interpret new words; (4) analyzing illustrations and applying relevant information for comprehension; (5) reading questions and making inferences accordingly; (6) referring to notes and annotations; (7) identifying cognate words; (8) using general knowledge to understand unfamiliar words; (9) skipping over difficult content [5]. Block (1986) divided

reading strategies into global strategies and local strategies. Global strategies include predicting content, identifying text structure, synthesizing information, questioning textual content, interpreting texts, applying general knowledge, evaluating reading behaviors and processes, monitoring comprehension, correcting errors and responding to text [6]. Local strategies involve paraphrasing, rereading, questioning the meaning of sentences or words, and solving vocabulary-related problems. Based on think-aloud experiments, Sarig (1987) classified reading strategies into four types [7]. First, skill-based strategies: skimming, scanning, skipping, highlighting key words, marking texts, writing main ideas in margins and using glossaries. Second, grouping and simplification strategies: substitution, paraphrasing, circumlocution and using synonyms. Third, cohesion-detecting strategies: employing content schemata and formal schemata to predict subsequent content, identifying characters as well as their viewpoints and behaviors, continuously decoding textual meanings, referring to text summaries and capturing key information. Fourth, monitoring strategies: adjusting reading plans to complete tasks, skipping incomprehensible parts, regulating reading speed, correcting mistakes and conducting self-assessment. Oxford (1990) established the most comprehensive framework of learning strategies to date Ellis, (1999) [8]. This framework covers multiple categories related to reading strategies and is of great significance to research on second language reading. Cognitive strategies include summarization, interpretation, prediction, analysis and using contextual clues. They help readers delve into texts, comprehend meanings and grasp discourse structures, thereby improving reading comprehension. Memory strategies adopt approaches such as reorganizing and associating ideas, conducting semantic mapping, using key words and making lexical associations. These methods enable readers to better store and retrieve reading information, and strengthen their memory of vocabulary and textual content. Compensation strategies, including analogy, guessing word meanings in reading and consulting dictionaries, allow readers to tackle linguistic barriers flexibly, maintain reading fluency and boost reading efficiency. Metacognitive strategies require readers to focus attention consciously during reading, constantly monitor the reading process

and correct errors promptly to achieve reading goals. Affective strategies focus on readers' psychological states. By means of self-encouragement, anxiety relief and motivation stimulation, they create a positive reading atmosphere and help sustain reading engagement. Social strategies involve interaction with others, such as peer communication and mutual evaluation of reading comprehension. Such collaboration broadens thinking and deepens the understanding of texts. These strategies complement one another and form a sound reading strategy system, providing a comprehensive theoretical foundation and practical guidance for second language reading teaching and research.

3. Research Contents of Domestic Studies on Second Language Reading Strategies

3.1 Comparative Research on Second Language Reading Strategies

Zhang (2009) adopted questionnaires to investigate the use of reading strategies among sophomore non-English majors from universities of different tiers [9]. The results revealed significant differences in strategy employment among students at different institutional levels, and reading proficiency was positively correlated with the application of reading strategies. Yang et al. (2013) combined qualitative and quantitative methods to study reading strategies of college English learners [10]. They found that proficient learners used reading strategies more frequently and effectively than less proficient ones. Based on the classification of reading strategies, Zhu (2013) employed questionnaires to explore differences in strategy use between English and Chinese reading among English majors [11]. He suggested adjusting learners' reading purposes and attaching greater importance to metacognitive strategies in English reading teaching and strategy training. Some scholars also examined the application of English reading comprehension strategies and related differences among learners of varying proficiency levels. Zhou (2017) discovered that the participants adopted 20 types of reading comprehension strategies [12]. While no statistically significant differences were found in the quantitative data of strategy use across proficiency groups, obvious gaps existed in the quality of strategy application. Additionally, learners at all levels showed

relatively weak awareness of reading strategies and differed in reading motivation. Shi (2015) adopted think-aloud protocols, questionnaires and interviews to explore the use of unknown word inference strategies among intermediate Chinese English learners [13]. The research indicated that learners of different proficiency levels differed remarkably in word inference strategies, including the quantity and types of strategies as well as combination patterns, which further exerted distinct impacts on inference outcomes.

To sum up, existing comparative studies mainly focus on discrepancies in strategy use between proficient and less proficient readers. Proficient learners evidently employ a greater variety of strategies with higher flexibility. Nevertheless, a major limitation lies in that most studies merely compare strategy application between different learner groups, without exploring how distinct strategies influence learning outcomes.

3.2 Research on the Impacts of Second Language Reading Strategies

Ni (2017) explored the influence of interactive memory reading strategies on learners' working memory capacity by comparing data collected before and after strategy implementation [14]. The results showed that for participants with similar English reading proficiency and initial working memory capacity, those who received a semester of training on interactive memory reading strategies attained a notably larger working memory capacity than those using traditional memory strategies, proving that this strategy exerts a prominent effect on learners' working memory. Zhou (2021) verified the validity of the reading strategy descriptors in China's Standards of English Language Ability for higher education [15]. The findings demonstrated that these descriptors had good fitness, with reasonable difficulty ranking and grade division on the whole.

Theoretical research concerning the impacts of reading strategies on other learning domains remains scarce and started relatively late. Further studies are required to explore how reading strategies affect second language learners' vocabulary acquisition, grammar learning, memory competence, critical thinking and other abilities.

3.3 Research on Factors Influencing Second Language

Learners' Use of Reading Strategies Lu and Zhang (2014) selected high-proficiency and low-proficiency readers to analyze how textual markers affected their choice of English reading strategies [16]. The conclusions were as follows: first, high-proficiency readers showed no obvious preference for specific strategies when reading marked and unmarked texts, and textual markers produced limited effects on them; second, low-proficiency readers retained more content and structural information from marked texts than from unmarked ones. Qu (2014) used the think-aloud method to investigate reading strategies and metacognitive awareness among English majors [17]. Combined qualitative and quantitative analysis yielded three findings: reading strategies were correlated with reading comprehension proficiency; high-proficiency readers adopted more global strategies and problem-solving strategies than low-proficiency readers, while no significant difference was observed in the use of supportive strategies; there was a gap in the quality of strategy application between the two groups, and high-proficiency readers possessed stronger metacognitive awareness and more flexible strategy application skills for better reading performance. Apart from general English reading strategies, some researchers turned to the influencing factors and operating mechanisms of academic English reading strategies. Gu (2020) coded and analyzed structured journals and semi-structured interview data from 25 Chinese non-English major doctoral students. She identified three core factors governing academic reading behaviors: academic English reading motivation, reading strategies and reading difficulties [18]. These factors interact with one another, with metacomprehension acting as a moderator, forming an integrated model illustrating the mechanism of influencing factors for academic English reading. Reading efficiency is closely and positively associated with reading strategies. Hence, factors affecting reading efficiency also shape learners' selection and application of reading strategies. Based on cognitive load theory, Zeng et al. (2022) studied eye movement patterns of second language English learners at different proficiency levels during fast reading [19]. The results suggested that when cognitive load increased, high-proficiency learners could improve reading efficiency via flexible and effective reading strategies, whereas low-proficiency learners

struggled to make corresponding adjustments. This proves that eye movement patterns are also a factor affecting the use of reading strategies. Overall, domestic research on factors influencing second language reading strategies is insufficient and started late. More academic efforts should be devoted to this field in the future, so as to improve learning efficiency by regulating and controlling relevant influencing factors.

3.4 Applied Research on Second Language Reading Strategies

Most domestic studies on second language reading strategies fall into empirical research, which explores the effectiveness and influence of reading strategies on second language learners' reading learning. Xia (2006) examined the effects of reading strategy training on 132 freshmen non-English majors in vocational colleges [20]. The results indicated that students could basically master and effectively apply the trained reading strategies; the training significantly improved students' capabilities in objective evaluation, lexical inference, summarization, close reading and clarification-seeking, yet weakened their comprehensive inference ability.

Wang and Liu (2010) investigated reading strategy use among non-English major undergraduates and explored the correlation between speed reading strategies and speed reading competence [21]. By comparing strategy application of high-proficiency and low-proficiency readers, they verified that reading strategies act as a core factor affecting reading proficiency. Based on questionnaire surveys and statistical analysis of 200 non-English major freshmen, Wang (2015) concluded that students adopted metacognitive strategies less frequently and mostly relied on problem-solving strategies during reading; meanwhile, metacognitive strategies were positively correlated with English reading proficiency [22]. Dong (2014) conducted an experimental study on reading strategy training in college English teaching, and pointed out that explicit reading strategy training is more conducive to fostering students' awareness of metacognitive strategy use [23]. Adopting schema activation theory, Zheng (2015) designed experiments to explore foreign language reading teaching strategies [24]. The experimental results suggested that teachers should prioritize schema activation in teaching,

diversify reading strategy training activities to strengthen students' memory ability and improve teaching efficiency. Zhang and Shang (2015) adopted an experimental method to explore the impacts of metacognitive reading strategy training on reading strategy awareness and reading proficiency of low-level English learners [25]. Taking non-English major college students as research subjects, this study provides implications for college English reading teaching in China. It proved that metacognitive strategy training could effectively increase the frequency of metacognitive strategy use among low-proficiency learners, so as to improve their reading competence. Yang (2014) adopted empirical methods combining reading tests and questionnaires to compare the correlations among three categories of reading strategies, namely cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, as well as social and affective strategies [26]. Statistical analysis revealed that cognitive strategies exerted the greatest effect on English reading performance, followed by metacognitive strategies, while social and affective strategies had the slightest impact. Chang (2014) elaborated the theories of metacognition and metacognitive reading strategies, and carried out an empirical study on the effects of short-term metacognitive reading strategy training on non-English major postgraduates [27]. The findings showed that short-term training could effectively enhance online autonomous English learners' metacognitive awareness and reading scores. Xu (2007) noted that reading strategy training exerted a prominent influence on students' practical strategy use frequency and reading performance, and strategy instruction could be integrated into classroom teaching [28]. Some scholars have cultivated students' English reading literacy via graded reading. Based on the theoretical framework of Chinese middle school students' English reading literacy, Zhang (2018) conducted empirical research on graded reading instruction [29]. The research demonstrated that students made significant progress in reading ability, reading disposition, reading volume and reading frequency, which proves that graded reading facilitates the cultivation of middle school students' English reading literacy. Subsequent studies focused on constructing cultivation and evaluation systems for students' reading literacy. Giving full play to the advantages of online reading platforms, Cheng

and Chen (2019) adopted big data reflecting learners' actual reading behaviors and outcomes to formulate English reading proficiency standards, and built a big data-based system for the cultivation and assessment of English reading ability [30].

To sum up, most domestic studies on second language reading strategies are empirical researches rooted in teaching practice at basic and higher education stages, exploring the effects and effectiveness of learners' strategy application in real teaching scenarios. Despite different research focuses, these studies enrich domestic research achievements in this field, and mainly adopt research methods including questionnaires, interviews and classroom observation.

3.5 Research on Theoretical Foundations of Second Language Reading Strategies

Second language reading strategy research is supported by diverse theoretical foundations, mainly including cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics and social constructivism.

Li (2015) explored the effectiveness of reading strategies for EFL learners from the perspective of social constructivism [31]. He held that English reading strategies guided by social constructivist learning theory emphasize holistic monitoring of textual content, and enable learners to reconstruct new knowledge subjectively based on existing sociocultural knowledge. The research verified that reading models and theories including the top-down model, bottom-up model, interactive model and schema theory are effective under social constructivism, and positively influence learners' choice of foreign language reading strategies. In terms of theoretical research on second language reading strategies, Duan (2006) combined self-regulated learning theory and proposed that English majors should strengthen autonomous reading and select appropriate reading strategies [32]. Wang et al. (2007) argued that college English reading teaching should be strategy-oriented, and put forward the theoretical classification of pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading strategies, along with corresponding teaching guidelines [33]. Based on dynamic systems theory, Wang Miao interpreted online English reading and constructed a dynamic system model for it. In this model, learners, as the subject of learning, organize, reconstruct, give feedback on and

output language input in a circular manner to adjust their language systems constantly, which indicates that learners' language development is a dynamic process. Adopting mixed qualitative and quantitative research methods, Ma et al. (2013) analyzed the influence of chunk awareness on reading fluency [34]. The research found that chunk awareness could strengthen students' consciousness of strategy application, improve reading speed and boost basic reading proficiency. Language chunks mentioned in this study include complete clauses (independent and subordinate clauses), clause components and incomplete phrases, which are usually neglected in daily English teaching.

Overall, theoretical research on second language reading strategies is relatively insufficient. Future academic research should attach more importance to this field, explore and develop innovative second language reading strategies via theoretical research, and provide new ideas for second language learners' reading acquisition.

4. Future Research Focuses and Prospects

Current comparative studies mainly focus on disparities in strategy application. Future research should further explore how different reading strategies specifically affect second language learners' learning outcomes, such as vocabulary acquisition, grammar mastery, reading accuracy and reading speed, so as to provide evidence for targeted reading instruction. Second, existing research on the impacts of reading strategies on other learning dimensions is limited. Follow-up studies should extensively explore their effects on vocabulary learning, grammar development, memory capacity, critical thinking and other learning domains, clarify the action mechanism of reading strategies in second language learning, and support the cultivation of learners' comprehensive language competence.

Given the late start and limited findings of domestic research on influencing factors of reading strategy use, more in-depth studies are required to identify more influencing factors, and figure out feasible ways to regulate and control these factors, so as to help second language learners optimize strategy selection and improve learning efficiency. In addition, theoretical research in this field remains weak and deserves more academic attention. Researchers shall conduct in-depth exploration based on cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics,

social constructivism and other theories, combine theoretical research with teaching practice, develop more innovative and effective second language reading strategies for learners. Previous studies are mostly confined to single-dimensional research. Multi-dimensional integrated research is recommended for future studies: exploring the interactive relationship among influencing factors, strategy application and learning effects; analyzing the synergistic effects of multiple reading strategies based on diverse theoretical foundations; integrating research findings from different educational stages to build a systematic and comprehensive research framework of second language reading strategies, so as to offer solid guidance for theoretical development and classroom teaching practice.

5. Research Review

This study systematically sorts out domestic literature on second language reading strategies published over the two decades from the late 1990s to the present. It comprehensively summarizes the core research threads, research scopes and existing limitations in relevant studies. Han (2026) said that integrating advanced concepts into junior high school English reading teaching can transform traditional teaching models and enrich the supply of teaching resources [35]. Ying and Wang (2026) believed that the core essence of reading instruction lies in relying on context to serve in-depth objectives such as text comprehension and meaning exploration [36]. Over the past 20 years, most domestic research on second language reading strategies has centered on English reading contexts. Empirical investigations have been carried out across seven major dimensions: defining the concept of reading strategies, classifying strategy types, comparing strategy use among different learner groups, exploring their functional mechanisms, identifying influencing factors, examining classroom teaching applications, and tracing relevant theoretical origins. These efforts have laid a practical foundation for second language reading instruction. Existing research has confirmed that learners adopt reading strategies in distinct ways. Yang (2025) believed that cultivating thinking quality helps improve students' core literacy in English, and reading is one of the important approaches to boosting students' thinking development [37]. Liu (2025)

points out that the hierarchical questioning strategy for thinking-oriented junior high school English reading teaching divides the teaching process into three stages: text decoding, meaning construction and transfer and innovation [38]. Certain strategies can ease learners' working memory load. Multiple classroom teaching experiments have also proven that strategy training effectively improves reading efficiency while strengthening learners' vocabulary, grammar and text comprehension. Nevertheless, obvious gaps remain in this field. Current comparative studies merely examine disparities in strategy employment, with little analysis of how various reading strategies interact with other language skills such as listening and writing. Research on influencing factors remains insufficient, and scholars have only scratched the surface of how individual learner traits and instructional environments moderate reading performance.

6. Conclusion

Theoretical development is also underdeveloped: few indigenous frameworks for reading strategies have been created, and most studies simply adopt foreign theoretical models with limited original insights. To advance future research on second language reading, academia should expand research boundaries and quantitatively measure the layered impacts of different reading strategies on comprehensive language proficiency. Further exploration is needed into the interactions of influencing factors to clarify how variables including age, language proficiency and learning motivation regulate reading outcomes. Researchers should also advance indigenous theoretical construction by developing tailored second language reading strategies based on the characteristics of Chinese native speakers. Additionally, multi-dimensional integrated research should be promoted to bridge the divide between theoretical analysis, empirical research and classroom practice. Refining the research framework of second language reading strategies will not only enrich domestic theories of second language acquisition, but also supply actionable guidance for English reading classrooms. Ultimately, it will boost Chinese second language learners' ability to interpret texts and read independently.

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