Four Korean University EFL Learners’ Perceptions of Reading Instruction and Reading Strategy Development

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This case study explored how formal reading instruction and perceived self-efficacy in English contribute to Korean EFL learners’ reading strategy development and reading practices. The data were collected from individual interviews with four Korean college students. The findings revealed that English reading instruction was teacher-centered and the students spent a lot of time learning and practicing test-taking skills to achieve higher scores in English tests such as CSAT and TOEIC. On the whole, the students revealed negative attitudes such as having low confidence as English readers and feeling afraid while reading in English. At the same time, however, they had a strong instrumental motivation for reading in English, achieving a higher score on the high stake exams. Regarding reading strategy instruction and development, very few English teachers seemed to introduce and implement reading strategy instruction in the class. Despite this, the students struggled to develop their own reading strategies according to the type of English reading comprehension instruction that they received. Pedagogical implications and action based recommendations for English educators are suggested.

I. INTRODUCTION

For college students in Korea, the mastery of English reading comprehension is crucial for both academic and professional success. To a great extent, this skill is often essential for the acquisition of academic knowledge in general. It is true that even native speakers of English are challenged by demanding academic reading and are expected to use appropriate cognitive and meta-cognitive reading strategies to achieve this end. Unquestionably, reading English text as a second language or as a foreign language is

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more challenging for non-native learners. As they face more difficulties due to their linguistic shortfalls, they must invest more effort into comprehension of English texts. Therefore, having effective reading strategies is especially important for becoming a successful reader in an ESL or EFL context. Previous studies have shown that ESL/EFL students who used reading strategies and were aware of their strategy use while reading English texts demonstrated higher achievement in reading comprehension (Bang & Zhao, 2007; He, 2008; Jimenez, Garcia, & Pearson, 1996).

This study explored the retrospective and current experiences of four Korean college students in learning to read in English and to develop reading strategies in an educational setting. There have been a few studies on reading practices and reading strategy use in Korea (Chun, 2006; Lee, 2008; Maeng, 2006; Song, 1998; to name a few). However, there seems to be little information about the subjective beliefs and attitudes of EFL learners who face the challenge of reading academic English text. The use of retrospective interview data in this study is an attempt to address this apparent gap in the research literature by exploring how students conceptualize reading in English. One of the goals of this study was to record how the students had experienced their formal instruction in an EFL setting and to ascertain how these experiences contributed to students’ reading processes and reading strategy use and development. More specifically, the research question was “How does EFL learners’ personal history in reading instruction contribute to their subsequent reading practices and reading strategy development?”

Critical reviews of the existing literature concerning cognitive and meta-cognitive theories on reading strategy use in the L2 context informed the choice of research design of this study. The importance of learner centeredness and of socio-cultural factors affecting learners forms the basis of the rationale of this study (Gee, 1990; Heath, 1991; Kern, 2000; Street, 1984). In short, this study is based on not only linguistic factors but also on cognitive and meta-cognitive factors in addition to the issues of society, culture, identity, and voices of students.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are a number of definitions of reading strategies in the L2 literature (Brantmeier, 2002; Carrell, Gajdusek, & Wise, 1998; Cohen, 1986; Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002).1

1 According to Cohen (1986), reading strategies refer to “those mental processes that readers consciously choose to use in accomplishing reading tasks” (p. 7). Brantmeier (2002) defined reading strategies as the comprehension processes that readers use in order to make sense of what they read. Carrell, Gajdusek, and Wise (1998) defined reading strategies as “actions that readers select and control to achieve goals or objectives” (p. 97).
study uses the definition of Mokhtari and Reichard, which describes reading strategies as generally deliberate activities undertaken by active learners, many times to remedy perceived cognitive failure.

Quite a few studies have been carried out on L1 reading strategies, including reading comprehension, cognitive, meta-cognitive, and socio-affective strategies (Allen, 2003; Carrell, 1984; Carrell, Pharis, & Liberto, 1989; Oxford, 1990). There have also been a number of studies on ESL students' reading strategy use with English text (Anderson, 1991; Bang & Zhao, 2007; Block, 1986; Carrell, 1989; Jimenez et al., 1996; Padron & Waxman, 1988; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001; Vann & Abraham, 1990). The previously-mentioned research investigated strategies used by students who were learning either English as a second language or Spanish as a second language. Block (1986) compared the reading comprehension strategies used by native English students and ESL college students who were all poor readers in a remedial reading class at a university. This study concluded that language backgrounds did not seem to explain the different patterns of reading strategy use found in this group of students, and suggested that strategy use is a stable phenomenon which is not tied to specific language features. Anderson (1991) investigated the reading strategy use of Spanish-speaking ESL learners in the United States. This study concluded that both good and poor readers used the same kinds of strategies, but poor readers did not know how best to apply the strategies. Jimenez, Garcia, and Pearson (1996) explored the cognitive, meta-cognitive, and other reading strategies of 6th and 7th grade Latina/o readers. The authors concluded that the successful Latina/o English learners seemed to enhance their awareness of English and Spanish at an equal level.

Compared to L1 reading strategy studies, interestingly enough, there have been few studies on reading strategy use for English text in an EFL context (He, 2008; Maghsudi & Talebi, 2009; Saricoban, 2002). Saricoban (2002) examined different strategy use of 110 students at a university in Turkey. The frequency of strategy use by both successful and less successful readers was not significantly different at the pre-reading stage. However, successful readers differed in use of some strategies at the while-reading and post-reading stages. He (2008) examined the relationship between goal-setting, reading strategy use, and reading comprehension. The study found that participants in the strong-mastery-strong-performance (SMSP) group tended to use more strategies than any of the other participants. They also achieved higher scores on the reading comprehension test.

The recently released studies concerning reading strategy use in an EFL context in Korea have utilized largely quantitative data (Chun, 2006; Kim, 2006; Lee, 2008; Lee & Oxford, 2008; Maeng, 2006; Song, 1998; Song, 1999). Given this state of affairs, it is still difficult to find qualitative studies looking at students' perspectives about reading in English and interacting with text regarding reading strategy use while reading academic
English texts. More specifically, Song (1999) investigated the relationship between reading strategy use and English reading ability with sixty seven undergraduate students. Kim (2006) trained one hundred and seven university students in paraphrasing and translation strategies. Chun (2006) examined how 110 Korean college students used reading strategies in reading English, depending on different texts, tasks, and L2 reading ability. Maeng (2006) studied the types of reading strategies used by 112 Korean undergraduate students during the various reading stages: pre-reading, reading, and post-reading stages. Lee (2008) investigated the relationship between gender and the pattern and frequency of reading strategy use with four hundred and sixty six Korean college students. This study was also interested in the relationship between gender differences and their reading proficiency level in terms of reading strategy use.

In terms of research on reading practices and reading strategy use among Korean EFL college students, the previous studies have tried to examine the relationship between reading strategy instruction and comprehension, in addition to reading strategy frequency and reading strategy pattern. In the majority of studies, changes in reading comprehension were measured after a group of students were trained to utilize reading strategies in the classroom for a period of time.

The previous studies also focused on finding numerical links between various factors affecting reading strategy use. The data from the studies was collected and analyzed using statistical analyses such as regression, factor analysis, and descriptive statistics. The researchers focused on determining the frequency of strategy use, the relationship between strategy use frequency and comprehension test scores, and the relationship between the proficiency level of learners and their reading strategy use. These studies aimed to account for the difference between successful and unsuccessful learners using quantitative data.

While the quantitative data is important, such information needs to be examined in the context of learners' attitudes towards their reading strategy use and reading practices. Quantitative data does little in terms of adequately describing how students develop reading strategies. This information is necessary if we are to create a platform from which to critique reading instruction and to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of reading strategy instruction within the current system of education. Furthermore, the previous studies on Korean EFL learners' reading strategy seldom espouse a learner-centered approach opting instead to investigate the issue from the point of view of the teachers. This imbalance in the literature was the impetus for this study.

To summarize, most of the previous studies focused on teacher-oriented strategy training programs and quantitative strategy use pattern analysis. The absence of learner-centered studies on reading strategies in Korea has meant that the learners' subjective thought processes regarding reading comprehension remain largely unexplored in the literature.
III. METHODOLOGY

1. Participants

In this study, four Korean college students were selected using a purposeful sampling technique (Martella, Nelson, & Marchand-Martella, 1999). One of my colleagues informed students in her class about the study and initially nine students volunteered to participate. Later four students from this group were selected to participate in the study. The criteria for the selection of the participants were: 1) all participants were required to have taken a general English course and planned to or were taking an English as a Foreign Language reading course at the time of the study, 2) all participants were required to have taken a course in their major that used an English textbook, 3) all participants were required to have had different majors, excluding English majors, and 4) all participants had to have been willing to participate in the study. I selected students who had already taken an English course in university and thus were somewhat familiar with college level English classes. They were all taking an intermediate level TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) class at the time of this study and took or were taking a general English course or an EFL reading course. In order to explore the students’ methods of approaching reading English academic texts related to their areas of study, I also selected students who had taken at least one course in their major in which an English textbook was used. Since students majoring in English followed a different reading curriculum, the participants in this study were all majoring in different non-English subjects.

Two male students (Jinho and Kimin) and two female students (Yunjung and Mina) voluntarily participated in this study. Their real names have been disguised for the purpose of preserving their anonymity. The participants all attended one of the mid high ranked universities in Seoul. There were several differences among the participants in terms of gender, major, hometown, length of studying English, length of enrollment in university, and self-rated reading ability in English. The participants’ majors were computer engineering, business administration, philosophy, and international trade. Mina was from Seoul whereas the other students were from Busan or Gwangju. Jinho had studied English for thirteen years whereas the others had studied English for ten years. Jinho studied English for three years longer than the others because he had taken the CSAT three times prior to entering the university. The students were asked to rate their proficiency in English.

2 The general English course, the EFL reading course, and the TOEIC class were divided into advanced, intermediate, and lower levels. The students took or were taking at least one intermediate level English course at the university at the time of this study.
reading, writing, listening and speaking as either excellent, good, fair or poor. While students self-reported themselves to be “good” or “fair” listeners and readers, they rated their writing and speaking as either “fair” or “poor”. The demographic information is summarized in Table 1.

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<td><strong>Summary of Four Students Profile</strong></td>
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2. Data Collection Procedures

An informal interview and two formal interviews were conducted in Korean with the individual students regarding their views on reading in English, reading instruction, and reading strategy use. Each interview lasted about 60 to 90 minutes. Each participant answered several semi-structured interview questions which touched on 1) perceptions of reading in English, 2) reading (strategy) instruction, and 3) reading strategy development (Appendix). Several open-ended questions (for example, “What do you do when you are confronted with a difficulty while reading English text?” and “What did you do in your English reading class as a student?”) were also asked to the students.

The students were asked to bring English books that were used in classes in their major which they had used or were using at the time of the study. They were also asked to bring book(s) used in their English classes, that is, textbooks used in their elementary and secondary schools as well as the ones used in the EFL reading class and the TOEIC class at their college classes. The students’ textbooks enriched the context through which I was able to reflect on the connection between educational experiences and resulting reading strategy development. The students were interviewed about their feelings regarding the
reading material that they put forth. They were asked whether they thought it was hard or easy, boring or interesting, and so on.

3. Data Analysis

The interview data gathered from the discussions with students was audio-recorded and transcribed then translated into English. The transcriptions were coded and divided into categories. Creswell (1998) indicates that “the researcher will be identifying incidents, events, and activities and constantly comparing them to an emerging category to develop and saturate the category” (p. 240). In addition to content analysis by identifying events and comparing them to an emerging category, this study employed analytic induction (Patton, 2002) to analyze the data with the goal of accessing participants’ perceptions of reading in English, reading strategy instruction, reading strategy development, and reading practices. Each open-ended question that was asked over the course of the interviews was also analyzed in terms of content in order to categorize the data collected.

In addition to the interview data, I attempted to enhance the analysis through triangulation of multiple sources of data such as supplementary materials like the students’ elementary, secondary, and college textbooks and field-notes. I took detailed field-notes over the course of the study to track my ideas and feelings while interviewing the students. These notes were then analyzed to identify themes related to the research question. After analyzing each data source, a cross-case analysis was conducted to classify emerging themes.

Finally, to enhance the validity of the analysis, I asked one of my fellow teachers who specializes in qualitative case study design to check my transcripts. She also reviewed my coding and sorted quotes that related to the research question. In the following section, I described each participant’s reading profile including reading practices, reading perception, reading instruction, and reading development. The emerging themes of cross-case analysis related to the research topic follow the descriptions of each student’s reading profile.

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3 Analytic induction is a method used in qualitative data analysis. It is usually used for in depth systematic examination of concepts. In this study, this method was used to explore the similarities between the students’ responses to the interview questions.
IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Students’ Reading Profiles

1) Jinho’s Reading Profile

Jinho was a science-oriented student and who felt interested in analyzing sentences in reading in English. However, in general, he had a negative self-image as an English reader and had a negative attitude towards reading in English. He perceived himself as being a weak English reader even though he rated his reading ability in English as good. He thought he had minimal reading experience and felt apprehensive about reading texts in English as revealed in the following excerpt:

Jinho: When reading an English book, I can’t move on smoothly. It feels like I need to become a machine to quickly translate what I am reading. Unless it is a really easy fairy tale, (reading) becomes a burden for me.

He did not start learning English until junior high. In secondary school, he learned to read in English by translating and analyzing sentences. He applied what he learned from his teachers who followed the traditional methods of teaching English, translating and breaking down sentences into parts of speech. He tried to understand sentences in English by breaking them down into subject-verb-object. In his early days of learning the language, Jinho believed that he had also developed several test-taking strategies of his own to help him answer questions on time and get a higher score on his CSAT. His main strategies were guessing, reading the first and last parts of a passage carefully, and attending to phrases that follow conjunctions.

In college, Jinho had taken or was currently taking four English classes—one EFL class, one TOEIC class, and two English-only classes in his major. Although the instructors used English textbooks in the classes, the ways they used them were different. The instructors in his major translated parts of the text they thought were important. Jinho highlighted the sections the professors emphasized and usually wrote down any translations of text the professors offered during class. The TOEIC class focused on teaching test-taking skills. The instructor briefly explained the reading passage and provided the answers to the comprehension questions. Jinho added some more test-taking skills such as reading the questions first and then trying to find the answers by going back through the passage in addition to the strategies he used in high school. In the EFL class, it seemed that the teacher tried to develop students’ reading strategies by asking them to discuss passages in small groups, to note the main points of each paragraph, to attend to the overall
organization of passages and to reread the text. Jinho enjoyed the class since he could develop these reading strategies. On the whole, Jinho felt that his ability to read English texts and monitor his reading had improved in college, but his reading ability as measured in a test situation had not improved very much as indicated by the following:

Jinho: It’s been about 8 years since high school, but I think my (English reading) skills are about the same. However, I definitely feel that I have more background knowledge about the English language and am better able to read long books. I feel that I have gained a wider perspective and can now look at English texts and see the big picture. However, I don’t think there would be much difference when compared to reading short passages.

2) Kimin’s Reading Profile

Kimin was a sociable person who considered face-to-face communication much more important than learning how to read in English. He preferred to read translated versions of English books, and his priority in learning English was on improving his speaking and listening.

Kimin: I don’t think reading (in English) is too important. You should be able to have conversations. Usually, reading (in English) means reading a book written in the (English) language. You can find translations for that anyway. Of course, reading in the original language can help understand the materials directly, but I think the important skills in English are speaking or listening, rather than reading.

His motivation for learning to read in English was instrumental and extrinsic. He studied English only for exams for university admission and for getting a higher score on TOEIC tests. At the time of this study, he felt uncomfortable reading English texts, even though he was an avid reader of Korean books. He also felt that he was lazy and careless in reading English texts since he believed that a good English reader should be able to ascertain the intention of the writer—a skill he felt he had mastered. Kimin learned to read in English in junior high school by focusing on translation and grammar-oriented instruction that he received in class. He thought these methods were boring and lowered his motivation towards learning English.

In junior high, he reported using comprehension strategies he had developed on his own, and not those of his teachers. He found it hard to follow the grammar instruction provided by his teachers and therefore did not study what he was taught. Instead, he used his own
methods for understanding English text, mainly using a dictionary and skipping difficult parts of the text. His reading strategies had not changed much in high school. As he had in junior high, he simply skipped the parts that he did not understand. Also, he spent a great deal of time memorizing words so he would not need to look them up in the dictionary. With the exception of vocabulary development, Kimin’s high school English class did not have a significant effect on his reading ability. The translation method of learning did not appeal to Kimin, and he stuck to his own ways of understanding the text, trying to guess the meaning of the text based on vocabulary and skipping parts that were too hard.

In university, Kimin took three required classes in which the instructors used English textbooks. Two English textbooks were used in courses in his major, and the other was used in the TOEIC class. In lectures for courses in his major, Kimin’s professors referred to the English textbooks to emphasize important parts of the text, which they then translated into Korean. Kimin underlined the sections in the textbooks the professors read and discussed, but he never reviewed the materials on his own, nor did he translate any other sections of the textbooks. He never used the textbooks, even to study for tests. In the TOEIC class, the instructor taught students how to skim passages and answer questions more effectively by becoming familiar with various question types. Kimin learned that the first question following a TOEIC passage was regarding its main purpose, which could usually be found in the first paragraph. The other TOEIC questions were usually about specific details in the passage. The instructor told the students to read the questions first and then return to the passage and skim it for information to answer the questions. Kimin’s attitude towards the TOEIC class was generally positive since he needed to achieve a good TOEIC score before graduation and he thought that what he had learned in the TOEIC classes was helpful for his reading skill development. On the whole, however, Kimin did not do much reading of English texts during college and thought that his strategies for reading English texts had remained unchanged. His pattern of reading English texts in college was similar to the one that he had used since junior high. He learned test-taking skills but in general he stuck to his own reading strategies which largely relied on making sense of passages using familiar words regardless of the text type.

3) Yunjung’s Reading Profile

Yunjung was an audio-visual learner. She believed that she understood the text in English well if she was able to visualize what she read. She also tended to infer the meaning of new words by sounding them out. Yunjung did not perceive herself as a good English reader and she always perceived reading in English as a problem solving exercise the main purpose of which was to achieve a higher score on tests. In other words, to her, English was not a language, but a field of study such as math and science in which she was
Yunjung: I haven’t read that many English books and did not like English that much. I just tried to prepare for the university exams. That was analogous to fitting the right piece in a puzzle, but instead of pieces words were used. That was the way I studied.

Yunjung started learning to read in English in the fourth grade. She remembered that the teacher usually played English tapes so students could follow chants or songs in the textbook. She usually used supplementary materials such as drawing pictures on the boards to educate students about the pronunciation of English words. The teacher usually read words or short sentences first, and students repeated after her. Following the teacher’s instruction, Yunjung often memorized words or sentences in the text, and whenever she encountered parts she did not understand, she tried to read them aloud.

In junior high school, English teachers asked students to translate each sentence or paragraph and corrected the commonly mistranslated parts in addition to explaining grammatical points. They often offered supplementary reading materials, asking students to identify the topic sentence and the main idea. With the readings, the teachers taught students to read the title first, read the first and the last sentence carefully, and pay attention to the parts with transition words.

Yunjung noted everything the teacher had said in class regardless of whether she understood it or not. She did not use highlighters or colored pens, but she usually underlined parts of the text with a pencil. One of her most often used strategies was to read the passages out loud, sometimes as many as twenty times, until she had nearly memorized them. She did the same with the supplementary readings and her class notes. Beyond memorizing, she felt reading texts quickly was achieved through the methods that her teachers taught in class. She also had a tendency to guess the content by reading the title first and then reading the text with her initial guesses in mind.

In regular high school English class, Yunjung was taught English reading more intensively but in much the same way as in middle school. She also learned test-taking skills including getting used to the question types, figuring out the main idea while reading as fast as she could, reading the first and the last sentence carefully, skimming the passage for the frequently used words, reading the questions first and skimming the passage for the answer. She thought that her reading habits were further developed at this time.

In college, she often referred to her notes and the Korean version of textbooks used for classes in her major. She tried to translate the text line by line as the professor did in the class. The method of teaching reading comprehension employed in the EFL class was similar to the one she was accustomed to in secondary school. Yunjung liked the class
since it was student-oriented, but she did not think she learned or developed new reading strategies from the class. She did develop better test-taking skills for getting a higher TOEIC score in the TOEIC class. On the whole, she did not read any other types of English texts besides the English textbooks used in her required courses. She was aware that her limited reading practice after entering university contributed to her lack of improvement of her reading proficiency.

4) Mina’s Reading Profile

Mina was a kinesthetic learner who often marked key information in passages she read. Mina believed that she was a good reader since she usually achieved higher than average scores on reading comprehension tests. Despite this, however, she did not perceive herself as an excellent reader since she had learned to read in English solely for the purpose of obtaining high scores on tests.

Mina has been learning English reading comprehension since her fourth year in primary school. When she first began her studies, teachers employed audio-visual methods and total physical response methods to motivate students to learn English. At the same time, the teachers employed traditional teaching methods such as asking students to repeat after them while referring to the textbook in addition to memorizing words. Mina learned English by imitating the pronunciation of native speakers shown in videos, taking care to replicate their lip movements exactly. She also practiced by repeating after her teacher and memorizing words.

In junior high school, her English teachers read text line by line, translating each sentence into Korean and putting notes on the blackboards about grammar points and idiomatic expressions. Corresponding to the ways she was taught reading in English, Mina mainly relied on strategies such as translating, making notes, highlighting, using the dictionary, and using grammatical knowledge. In her high school, she was taught mainly test-taking skills including skipping the parts she did not understand while reading, guessing the meaning of unknown words in context and reading comprehension questions prior to reading the text. Mina tried to practice what she learned at school when she read English passages. Her previously developed strategies such as note-taking, highlighting, translating, looking up dictionary definitions of unknown words, and using grammatical knowledge were implemented alongside some new strategies that included skipping, guessing the meaning of unknown words in context, and reading questions first. The following elaborated the changes in her reading strategy use from middle school to high school and how those changes influenced her current reading practices.

Mina: During middle school, since the sentences were not that difficult, I could
understand most of the texts once I identified subject-verb-object. But then when there was a certain word that I didn’t know, I was stuck and could not answer the question. However in high school, I learned that by understanding the context, I could provide answers even if there were words that I didn’t get. And teachers used to tell students to skip parts that we didn’t understand when taking the national college exam, since there never was sufficient time to complete the exam. I listened to the teachers, practiced analyzing the context, and over time, I finally got what they meant. I carefully read the beginning and end of the text, and I only spent a lot of time reading examples when I didn’t understand the meaning; otherwise, I just skipped it. I found it a good strategy since I actually got most of the answers right by doing that. Even now, when there are words that I don’t know, I skip to the next lines and try to do my best to understand the overall context. I got used to the way I analyzed the questions back then, so I still do the same nowadays.

Just as with the other students, Mina’s English reading practices in college were limited to the texts that the instructors taught in the class. The instructors for classes in her major, which used English texts, usually announced in advance the chapters on which they would lecture and during class translated parts of the text containing key concepts into Korean. Mina took lecture notes and wrote notes on the class handouts, underlining the important parts and circling transition words with different colored pens. She usually reviewed what she read in the class by herself, trying to translate her notes or highlighted lines of the handouts. Rather than using the line by line translation technique she was taught in high school, she chose what to read and what to ignore while reading textbooks in English.

The way English reading was taught in the EFL class was very similar to the way she was instructed in high school. She felt that she already knew the class reviewed strategies. The class focused on reading passages in English and answering comprehension questions; the instructor sometimes invited students to find the main idea, paraphrase the content, and present their ideas in class. The TOEIC instructor prepared handouts with reading passages where the students were asked to answer comprehension questions while reading the passage. She learned many of the same test-taking skills as she did in high school. On the whole, she was aware that she spent fewer hours per week reading in English than she had in secondary school and that her reading practices were limited to readings for tests.
2. Cross-Case Analysis

1) Instrumental and Extrinsic Motivation for Learning to Read in English

Every participant, except Mina, revealed negative attitudes towards reading in English. They mentioned having low confidence, being afraid, and feeling an immense amount of pressure while reading in English. Due to this, most students reported that they rarely participated in their English classes. On the other hand, they all perceived that mastering English reading was very important albeit burdensome. The students felt pressured to achieve a high score on the CSAT to enter a university, and later, they believed that achieving a high score on the TOEIC would ensure a better job after they graduated. Their primary goal in reading English had been to achieve a higher score on CSAT or TOEIC, and they equated reading in English to reading test passages and answering questions. Yunjung’s perception of her reading practices in English captured this attitude well:

Yunjung: I never thought that English was another language of a nation just like Korean. Throughout my life, I just thought it was an academic subject, some analytic problem that you had to solve.

2) Reading Instruction That Is Teacher Centered, Translation Focused, and Test Focused

The interviews conducted in this study revealed several commonalities in the way that students learned English reading comprehension. Only the two female participants began learning to read in English in elementary school. The instruction at this level of education incorporated audio-visual, total physical response, and traditional translation methods. Though the two male students did not begin learning English in elementary school, all participants had some exposure to English reading comprehension starting from junior high school. At that juncture in their education, the reading lessons were mainly focused on translating each sentence into Korean in addition to expanding on grammar and vocabulary points. High school reading instruction utilized methods similar to those used in middle school. While the reading in the textbooks were used to introduce new vocabulary and grammar, teachers usually translated passages and analyzed sentence structures without paying much heed to reading strategies beyond those needed for test-taking purposes.

In college, participants were faced with reading English textbooks used in classes for their majors as well as EFL textbooks and TOEIC preparation texts. College instructors in each participant’s major were likely to translate certain parts of their text adding a brief summary of those parts afterwards. The students reported that they seldom read the
textbooks used in classes related to their majors prior to or following lectures. In light of this habit, the students tried to meet the class objectives simply by listening to their instructors’ lecture. The following exemplifies the rationale behind these practices:

Kimin: For me, the university textbooks in my major were more like ornaments to me. I was more dependent on the PPT presentations that the professors gave me. The PPT slides contained all the same details as the books and were like summaries. The textbooks were more like, the professors telling us to open a certain page, reading it and interpreting for us. So, as my professors were explaining in Korean about what was in the book, I just listened to that.

Yunjung: If there was a word that I didn’t know during a professor’s lecture, I tried to find the word here (pointing to her textbook), wondering “What was it she just said?” When she mentioned ‘physical’ in Korean, I tried to find the word ‘physical’ in the book, wondering where it was, while trying to understand the meaning after finding the word. But I didn’t know many words and it was really difficult to do that while looking at the English book and listening to the Korean lecture. I couldn’t read the book and understand what the professor was saying at the same time.

On the other hand, students approached the reading for EFL and TOEIC classes quite differently. All of the students, except Kimin, had taken an EFL class by the time they entered this study, and were taking a TOEIC class at the time of this study. In these classes, unlike in the classes related to their majors, students approached the readings with regard to the instruction that they received as well as the course objectives in those classes. In other words, the way students read the EFL textbooks was related to reading strategy instruction in a limited sense as opposed to the reading for the TOEIC classes which was related to learning and practicing test-taking skills.

3) Lack of Satisfactory Instruction Regarding Implementation of Reading Strategies

As mentioned above, the participants’ personal learning histories were mostly limited to translation-focused reading and learning test-taking skills. There was very little instruction on the part of the English teachers geared towards implementing reading strategies in general. In both junior high school and high school, very few teachers tried to teach reading strategies. Those who did often discontinued teaching them when students did not respond positively to them. Jinho’s summarized this situation when he said:
Jinho: Back in high school, most classes were focused on reading, but there were a few teachers who led their classes differently. It was more like understanding the context of the given text, and focusing on what the overall text was talking about. When the passage was long, the students were supposed to read the passage first and to summarize it in a few sentences. However, the teacher got tired of doing this since the students were not participating and just focused on the university entrance exam.

In university, Jinho, Yunjung, and Mina were taught reading strategies in their required EFL class. They learned reading strategies such as searching for the topic of each paragraph, finding topic sentences and main ideas, and paraphrasing. Even the EFL classes, however, included aspects of the traditional ways of teaching English reading. For example, both the instructors and students often translated reading passages, and students were asked to answer related comprehension questions.

In the TOEIC class they were taking at the time of this study, the students were taught skills in order to maximize their success on formal English examinations. For this reason, time management, that is, answering questions as quickly as possible, was always a factor in incorporating reading strategies. As mentioned above, the skills with which the students became most familiar included reading questions first, reading the first and last sentences carefully, guessing the meaning of unknown words in context, skipping, finding key words, underlining important words, and making use of familiar words in getting the overall message of the reading. In addition to the test-specific reading strategies, the students struggled to develop their own reading strategies. As shown in the next section, their personal strategies seemed to correspond to the way they had learned to read English texts in formal educational settings.

4) Struggles to Develop Reading Strategies Corresponding to School Reading Instruction

The findings regarding the participants’ reading strategy development revealed that the strategies that students employed the most were related to the way they were taught English reading comprehension in school. The reading instruction that students had received in formal educational settings continuously shaped the way students utilized and developed reading strategies. More specifically, Mina and Yunjung’s English reading instructions in elementary school—that is, repeating, memorizing, imitating what the teachers said, and reading texts aloud—led them to perceive these techniques as the basis of English reading.

Secondary school further cemented the girls’ reading practices in that they had more opportunities to practice the reading techniques they were taught at school. During this
time, they relied heavily on translating and analyzing sentence structures since those were the main strategies taught. In addition, the girls developed their own reading strategies such as looking up unknown words in the dictionary, skipping, note-taking, and reading aloud.

Studying for the CAST also proved to be a valuable opportunity for adopting reading strategies. At this time, the female students in this study became more familiar with strategies like guessing the meanings of unfamiliar words from context, underlining, reading the first and the last parts of the passage, referring to examples to understand the main idea, and summarizing. In short, the two female students appeared to implement the reading strategies that they were taught in class at an earlier age which allowed them to further develop their own reading strategies in reading English texts.

On the other hand, the two male students had a tendency to rely more on their own reading strategies rather than the strategies they had learned at school. As with the female students, the male students had learned reading comprehension mainly through translating, analyzing sentence structures, and looking up unknown words in the dictionary. Jinho attempted to read English texts in the CSAT preparation books using the same strategies, but after discovering that these methods were not effective given the time constraints of the examination, he started utilizing his own strategies to achieve a better score on the CSAT. Jinho’s personal strategies included guessing the content of the reading by looking at questions prior to reading and relying on familiar words to decipher unfamiliar ones. He also read the first and the last sentences carefully, circling important parts.

In Kimin’s case, he used his own strategies in reading all types of English text. His strategies included guessing the meanings of unknown words in context, skipping the parts he did not understand, and guessing the content of the passage based on the words he recognized.

In short, the findings confirm that EFL reading instruction in secondary school contributed to reading strategy development implicitly or explicitly. The female students seemed to adhere to the reading strategies they were taught in school more rigorously than the male students. In addition, all of the students’ reading strategies developed with the goal of successfully answering comprehension questions in the shortest possible time in order to achieve a higher score on the CSAT.

5) Static Reading Strategy Use and Limited Reading Practices in College

After entering university, the students’ English reading texts grew to include passages from the TOEIC, EFL textbook, and textbooks that were required reading for their majors. Whereas the female students did not think that the manner in which English reading was instructed in the EFL class contributed to their reading strategy development, Jinho
believed that the EFL class helped him to develop several reading strategies. He reported that he learned to re-read in order to find the main idea of the passage as well as to find the links between paragraphs. In addition, he learned to pay attention to the format and organization of what he was reading.

Further, Yunjung and Mina perceived that the TOEIC class presented many of the same approaches as they had previously learned while studying for the CSAT, and thus they did not think that this class contributed to developing their reading strategies. However, Kimin’s response reflected that over the course of the TOEIC class, he learned and developed reading strategies like skimming to find the main idea, going back and forth to the text to find answers to questions, and reading questions first.

The differences of reading strategy use and the different perceptions of reading strategy development between the female students and the male students seemed to originate from the difference in age at the time of their initial exposure to reading strategy instruction as well as from the amount of such exposure. In other words, the female participants of this study were exposed to English reading strategies earlier than the male participants. In addition, in contrast to the male students who did not explicitly learn reading strategies in high school, the female students appeared to be explicitly instructed in this area albeit in a rather limited sense since they mainly learned test-taking skills. In college, they tried to perfect and further develop the reading strategies they had learned in secondary school. On the other hand, the male students developed reading strategies independently rather than in class. They also appeared to learn reading strategies explicitly in either the EFL class or in the TOEIC class after entering university.

On the whole, the English reading instruction the students received in college contributed to the students’ current reading practices at the time of this study. The students struggled to develop their own reading strategies corresponding to the ways they learned to read at school. At the same time, they felt that their reading practices were limited to using the textbook in the class and their reading strategies which they had developed little in college. The participants shared their personal opinions about why this was the case:

Jinho: My skills for reading varying types of text have improved, and reading English texts is no longer a difficult challenge for me, so this is a positive sign. However, there was no improvement in terms of my ability to read texts on tests.

Kimin: There hasn’t been much improvement since I entered university. I’ve only read English texts covered during class, and nothing else. Improving TOEIC scores is my priority, and the reading lessons in the TOEIC course were the most helpful. Even now, I don’t quite work hard (to read English texts). Just as before, I usually memorize words, understand based on the words that I know,
and skip the parts that I don’t know. I mean, when I read the texts.

Yunjung: I haven’t read any English texts besides the English text books used in class. I don’t think my reading skills have improved.

Mina: I spend way less time reading English texts since I came to university, and I usually read English for tests, which was the case in high school too. My text reading strategy hasn’t much changed from high school either. I identify the key message, mostly skip examples, and read through the text while checking whether my assumption is valid or not.

To summarize, it seemed that they utilized reading strategies which they had learned and developed in secondary school and that these remained static after entering university. They reasoned that they did not have the same amount of English reading as they had in high school. In addition, they did not put much effort into reading English texts outside of class. In other words, since they did not feel an urgent need to read texts in English to achieve a higher score on the CSAT as they had in high school, they neglected to read much English in college unless it was explicitly assigned.

V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to shed light on the subjective learning experiences of four Korean college students regarding the connection between English reading instruction and the development of reading strategies. The findings that emerged from the interview data collected in this study revealed several interesting conclusions.

First, it seems to be the case that the primary objective of English reading instruction at the high school level is simply to transmit the content of text rather than to teach students to actively interpret what they read. This type of teacher-oriented instruction deprived students of the opportunity to personalize the reading process by denying students the chance make use of their own views and opinions while interpreting the text. The unintended consequence of this teaching method is that students are encouraged to passively accept the information that teachers offer them. This was also the case for the English learning environment in college. Among the courses that the participants in this study described, only the EFL course seemed to focus on teaching the students how to successfully implement reading strategies.

Second, it appears that the students often had negative experiences regarding the overall atmosphere in their reading classes. The instructional methods used in these classes were
seen as impersonal and un-engaging. Further, many times the course design fostered a sense of anxiety among the students as they often reported a great deal of pressure regarding correctly answering comprehension questions which followed their readings. These factors contributed to students perceiving themselves as inadequate or passive readers. In fact, all except one participant had negative perceptions of reading in English and not surprisingly low self-confidence with regard to reading English text. Therefore, teachers need to be aware of the students’ perceptions and make more of an effort to empower students to play a more active role in the classroom. While it is important to teach students decoding skills in reading in English, as Lee and Oxford (2008) claim, teachers need support students in developing positive self-images as English readers.

On the other hand, this research supports the idea that students need to learn how to use different types of reading strategies with different text types. It appears that the participants in this study mainly learned reading skills for test-taking purposes during their elementary and secondary education. The result was that this type of instruction severely limited the students reading strategy development. While it is true that the participants also seemed to develop their own reading strategies in addition to the reading skills that they were taught in school, most of the participants seemed to continue to use many of the same reading strategies that they had developed in high school. Their reading strategies had changed little over the course of their college careers. In addition, participants put little time and effort into reading English texts in college. This is evidenced by the fact that they seldom read in English outside of the required reading material for the classes in which they were enrolled.

Therefore, instructors at the college level should carefully design their courses to encourage students to read texts in English and to provide relevant strategies for the texts that they assign. Instructors should clearly indicate the material that students are expected to read and understand in the context of the course objectives. Modeling may also offer a wide range of reading strategies and approaches. Students may find it helpful if the teachers demonstrated how best to approach the text. By demonstrating their own way of reading the text, perhaps through the think-aloud technique, the students can learn to apply some of the teachers’ strategies in their own studies. In addition, self-study may offer viable opportunity to practice reading strategies. By assigning a pre-class reading task asking students to reflect on a particular aspect of the given text or alternatively, to submit a summary of a passage pertinent to the topic of the lecture, students may be encouraged to read English text using varied reading strategies. Group projects may also be utilized to foster discussions about the content and interpretations of the class readings.

Finally, it is important to note that given the small population size utilized in this study, the implications drawn here are limited. In addition, as a researcher, I recognize the claims made in this study are subjective in nature, and therefore, this study reflects many aspects
of how I understand and make sense of the significance of the participants’ reading practices and strategy use and development. However, given that this qualitative case study addresses a significant gap in the existing literature on L2 reading strategies, I believe it is essential that other studies address the research question brought up in this study while utilizing a larger number of participants. Further research into the subjective experiences and biases of learners will ultimately broaden our knowledge of the importance of reading strategy use to the great benefit of not only researchers and professionals in the field of education, but also to the learners themselves.

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**APPENDIX**

Sample Interview Questions
(Adapted from Auerbach & Paxton, 1997; Jimenez et al., 1996)

1. Students' conceptions of reading in English
   1) What do you think reading in English is?
   2) Do you think you are a good reader? What characterizes a good reader?
   3) What do you think is your biggest problem learning to read in English?

2. Students' reading (strategy) instruction
   1) When did you first learn reading English texts?
   2) How did you learn to read English texts in school before entering college?
   3) How do you learn to read English texts in your English class at college?
   4) What textbooks did (or do) you use in the class?

3. Students' reading strategy development
   1) What reading strategies do you recall learning in English reading classes in the past? In what ways did you learn those strategies?
   2) What kinds of reading strategies have you developed to use since you entered school?
   3) Does the way you learn reading affect the way you use your own reading strategies? If so, in what ways do instructional methods affect your strategy use?
Applicable levels: Secondary / Tertiary
Key words: reading instruction, reading strategy development, learner belief

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