CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.1. Background of the study

English is an international language, and it is becoming more and more important for non-English speakers to learn English, including in Iran, where this research study is based. Based on the national educational policy in Iran, English language is a compulsory subject for all students. Generally, from guidance\textsuperscript{1} school to pre-university stage each student has to attend seven years of English classes, two hours per week. In addition, after entering university, students have to obtain some credits in English language courses that mostly test students on their reading comprehension skills and are usually presented in the class through a grammar-translation model of teaching.

One of the main purposes of EFL instruction in Iran is to train students who can efficiently read (mostly scientific) texts in English. It has been noticed that proportionately less time is assigned to explicit teaching of comprehension strategies in Iranian classrooms, as a result of which students do not get the opportunity to learn how to decode elements of a text efficiently and comprehend the meaning through contextual clues in the text. Several studies have attested to this problem. Mazdayasna and Molaei (2015), for example, conducted a needs analysis for general English courses to set up a model for setting priorities. The responses from the instructors participating in the study indicated that almost 90% of the instructors of private and state high school believed that students needed to improve their reading skill. The researcher’s own experience has shown that children in English classes can read aloud well and still not understand what they read or answer questions about what they have just read. Since they are not taught to use comprehension strategies while reading a text, they are unaware of the nature of their problems during reading and are not equipped to deal with them as they arise. Moreover, exercises and exams in books and classes require superficial understanding of the texts and students have been found to employ a bottom-up strategy of translating the text sentence by sentence, a

\textsuperscript{1}Kindergarten
strategy commonly found in grammar translation approaches (Kiany, Mahdavy, and Ghafar Samar, 2011).

In a study, Molavi Vardanjani (2013) studied the reasons contributing to Iranian EFL learners’ difficulty in learning English. Dependent upon teachers’ responses, students’ poor English ability was found to be mostly due to poor foundational knowledge (45%), inefficient ways of learning (35%), and weak motivation (17%). In another study, Tavakoli and Kheirzadeh (2012) investigated the causes of reading difficulty among Iranian EFL post-graduate and under-graduate learners. The results showed that lack of content knowledge; unknown vocabulary and words with multiple meanings make a text incomprehensible to the participants of the study.

Speaking out of the researcher’s experience as an English teacher, students have always had problems with reading texts, and have not been able to share or discuss their problems with reading with their teachers. In staff meetings with administrators and parents, the researcher has listened to complaints from parents and the teachers who stated that their children were either not able to read at home on their own, or were reluctant to read any unfamiliar texts. Similarly, the results of the Needs Analysis conducted by the researcher confirm the claim that parents believed that their children have problems to read on their own at home. This had a negative impact on students performance in official tests like KET (Key English Test) and PET (Preliminary English Test), where they were unable to score the desired level of grades.

The importance of learning comprehension strategies was brought home by another personal experience of the researcher. While applying to a few Indian universities to enroll in postgraduate ELT studies, the researcher had to take the IELTS exam and score a reasonably high grade. While preparing for IELTS, the researcher learnt to apply reading strategies and found that these greatly improved his own reading skills. This led him to realize that students in his home country could benefit from instruction on improving reading efficiency by using comprehension strategies. The researcher then decided to find out a way to help EFL learners in his country and himself with reading skills. He looked up a few articles on reading skills in English, and the literature convinced him that the key to helping learners in his country become more efficient readers was to change their
orientation toward a text. In other words, helping readers acquire strategies which could help them make plans for their reading, monitor their progress, and get the needed information faster and more easily would contribute positively towards their reading proficiency.

The literature on EFL reading has extensively reported on the importance of using reading strategies to improve reading comprehension, and a preliminary study of the available literature on the topic convinced the researcher that this issue was worth investigating further. Some of the books and articles he read related to the theoretical stance on reading efficiency popular in the field, while others related to specific studies in context. A brief overview of the research ideas that informed the researchers’ perspective on EFL reading and led the researcher to investigate the problem of reading comprehension faced by EFL learners is given below.

According to Williams and Burden (1997) cognitive strategies are mental processes that learners use to obtain, storage, and retrieve information. Reading strategies assist the learners to be aware of reading objectives and help them to be independent in learning (Paris & Jacobs, 1984). Alderson (2000) believes that employing meta-cognitive strategies by the learners helps them to monitor their reading activity. High proficient readers employ more strategies in their struggle to comprehend a text (Yau, 2005). Reading strategies assist understanding of texts reading (Salataci & Akyel, 2002).

In a study Zarobe and Zenotz (2015) investigated reading strategies and CLIL (content and language integrated learning): the effect of training in formal instruction. The experimental groups received strategic training in reading strategies. Students trained strategically in reading seemed to have greater meta-cognitive awareness and so, they obtained better results.

Khoshsima and RezaeianTiyar (2014) investigated the effect of summarizing strategy on reading comprehension of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. The results indicated that summarizing strategy had a considerable effect on learners’ reading comprehension. Hemmati and Kashi (2013) worked on the impact of oral retelling and summary writing techniques on Iranian upper intermediate EFL learners reading comprehension. They tried to find out whether instruction of oral retelling and summary
writing had any impact on reading comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners. The results showed that both oral retelling and summary writing have improved the learners reading ability, but oral retelling has been more effective than summary writing.

GholamiMehrdad, Ahghar, and Ahghar (2012) investigated the effect of teaching cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies on EFL students reading comprehension across proficiency levels. The results revealed that teaching cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies had no significant impact on the reading comprehension of elementary and advanced learners, but it significantly affected the reading comprehension of intermediate students. Zare (2013) in exploring reading strategy use and reading comprehension success among EFL investigated the connection of the reading comprehension achievement and reading strategy use. The results of the study indicated that there is a strong positive correlation between comprehension achievement and strategy use.

In short, an analysis of the studies carried out in the EFL contexts reveals that to a great extent, explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies and application of these by learners can improve reading skills. The studies also show that the concept of helping learners to become independent readers has not been taken into enough consideration, at least in the Iran context.

This study aims to address this issue by focusing on the belief that explicit instruction of the strategies through an intervention can create more independent readers. Moreover, the study aims to explore the result of more extended practice of application of the strategies during the phase of intervention, making available more logistic help (supplying hard copies of guidelines for personal review and practice), reviewing, and employing a comprehensive set of comprehension strategies in reading classes by the researcher with the intention of creating independent readers.

1.2. Theoretical framework

The five reading comprehension strategies (guessing meaning from the context, skimming and scanning, inference, and summarization) employed in the study are cognitive skills. Cognitive strategies are used by learners to handle tasks and learn more successfully. Cognitive strategies such as summarization, inference cause intentional manipulation of
language to enhance learning. ‘In explicit instruction, teachers tell readers why and when they should use strategies, what strategies to use, and how to apply them. Although it can be helpful to provide students with instruction in individual comprehension strategies, good readers must be able to coordinate and adjust several strategies to assist comprehension. Multiple-strategy instruction teaches students how to use strategies flexibly as they are needed to assist their comprehension.’ (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001, p. 46) Also, the report by National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) suggests that the explicit teaching of comprehension strategies will equip the learners with means that they can resort to when there is a barrier in comprehension of texts.

The foundation of this study is based on elements of two theories: (a) Bandura’s (1971) social cognitive theory and (b) Vygotsky’s (1978) socio-cultural learning theory. Bandura (1963) stated that parents teach children through modeling and instrumental education. When the parents explicitly describe and model what they want the child to learn, they create an environment in which children can clearly observe the new concepts and learn it. According to Bandura (1963, 1971) learning and change in behaviour takes place on direct instruction or instrumental education. The process is consolidated when teachers or parents explicitly transfer what they want to the learner to learn and utilize rewards or punishments as a means to give feedback to the behaviour.

Bandura (1989) believes that observational learning happens in four stages. The first step is attention of the learner to the new concept, the second step is retention of the new concept in memory, the third step is motor reproduction in which the learner repeats the new concept, and finally, self-motivation of the learners with fulfillment and learning of the new concept. These four stages are very substantial steps for the learners follow during explicit instruction of the reading comprehension strategies since it requires the learners to be attentive to the explanations and modeling by the teacher, store the new information, engage in modeled steps, and be inspired to learn the new concepts. In his social cognitive theory, Bandura (1986) also argues that motivation has a great impact on self-efficacy i.e. self-efficacy in reading is influenced by demands that are raised by the reader about her success or failure in process of reading.
Vygotsky (1978) argued that the cultural and social context play an important role in cognitive and intellectual progress of learners. He believed that language contributes to individual and mental development of children. Vygotsky used the concept of a zone of proximal development (ZPD) to explain the child development and language learning, indicating that language learning should be associated with social life and interaction with parents, teachers, peers and adults. ‘The ZPD (The zone of proximal development) is the difference between what one can achieve alone and what one can achieve with the help of a more knowledgeable or capable person. As a result of interactions in the ZPD, children internalize culturally appropriate knowledge and behaviours that they can eventually demonstrate independently’ (Alvermann, Unrau, & Ruddell, 2013, p. 68).

Vygotsky (1978) proposed that communication of peers, cognitive and social interactions are crucial elements in the learning process. ‘It is imperative for a child to interact with the teacher and peers in order to learn a new concept’ (Lencioni, 2013, p. 10). Vygotsky (1978) states that children can promote their learning by observing and imitating modelers (teacher) or peers. According to him, if teachers programme their teaching keeping the ZPD in mind, it can support the learners in building on their primary competence, help them absorb the new concepts and move to the next stage. Both Bandura and Vygotsky propose that learners can acquire the new concepts by observing and imitating teachers, peers, parents, or other adults.

This study employs the concept of explicit teaching and modeling from Bandura’s (1977) social cognitive theory, and the interaction between the teacher and the learners from Vygotsky’s socio-cultural learning theory. The study is based on the belief that comprehension is the central focus of teaching learners to read and it is not something limited to decoding words.

1.3. Statement of the problem

Reading in English is a challenge for most of the Iranian students. A major concern of the English teachers in Iran is teaching reading skills to learners in such a way that they can read efficiently on their own, without the help of the teacher. Reading in English is a
challenge for most Iranian students at both school and university. There is no schooling available in the medium of English in Iranian public schools, and learners do not receive much professional help in either learning how to read a text on their own and overcoming the reluctance to read long texts. Reading a text in English is not an activity enjoyed by students, as it implies having to decode many words by using a dictionary, which is time-consuming.

During classroom reading sessions, students are inactive receivers of information from the teacher most of the time. There is little scope for the students to work on their own during reading time, and the teacher is the one that reads out and teaches the text to the class by paraphrasing or translating, using a grammar translation model of teaching. Teachers usually use bottom-up strategies to decode meaning, such as explaining each word or translating the text sentence by sentence. Most of the time reading sessions consist of a short duration dedicated to pre-reading in which the teacher usually proposes some yes/no questions. Then the teacher reads the text aloud and translates it or paraphrases the main idea. At the end of the session, the class is taken through the comprehension questions that are provided at the end of the lesson.

Most students have the habit of reading an English text only in the classroom and in the presence of the teacher; they usually do not read on their own, in private, due to the reasons already mentioned. Misconceptions about the reading skill by teachers, using it as a medium for teaching vocabulary and a tool for pronunciation practice of speaking has worsened the situation. In EFL contexts like Iran, strategy teaching is still not a popular pedagogical practice for teaching reading comprehension. In a study, Molavi Vardanjani (2013) investigated the approaches that teachers choose for teaching English. The responses of the teachers reveal that they seem to prefer the traditional ways of teaching (a form of Grammar translation). Half of the teachers participating in the study explain the main idea of reading materials in Persian (44%) and 26% of the teachers translate the texts into Persian word by word. Around 70% of the teachers participating in this study stated that they applied traditional methods for teaching reading skill in their classes.

Through his (limited) experience of reading about research into reading skills, and learning reading skills himself, the researcher feels that what readers in reality need is to
move from symbol to meaning. They need to learn to do reading activities at the level of discourse, and not be stuck in the level of discrete-point items to be decoded. At this stage, learners come across unknown words, phrases and idioms, which slow down their speed. Consequently, learners prefer not to start any kind of reading on their own, and mostly try to depend on the teacher to get themselves rid of the pressure of reading by themselves. To summarize, the most common factors contributing to the problems of reading in the context of Iran are:

1. Reading a text is mostly done by the teacher in class
2. Learners are not taught reading strategies
3. Learners do not have enough exposure to English at school or outside; as a result their vocabulary is severely limited
4. Teachers adopt a word by word reading strategy to interpret a text for learners
5. Learners are not encouraged to read texts outside the syllabus
6. Reading texts are used as a vehicle for vocabulary lists and pronunciation practice

The other, and equally common problem that merits attention is that teaching reading comprehension in Iran’s schools or universities is practiced in the traditional method of translating text to Persian (Grammar translation method) (Mehrpour, Sadighi & Bagheri, 2012; Rahimi, Riazi & Saif, 2008; Chalak, 2015). Results of interviews with the EFL Iranian students in a study regarding strategy use revealed that the majority of them were not familiar with the concept of strategy and its application in either L1 or L2 (Mehrpour, Sadighi & Bagheri, 2012; Zahedi and Dorrimanesh, 2008). Soleimani and Hajghani, (2013) argue that ‘very few studies have been conducted to investigate the actual effect of teaching reading comprehension strategies on learners reading comprehension performance in Iran’ (p. 594). In the same vein, Jafarpour Boroujeni, Roohani, and Sharif (2014) say that ‘there is an apparent paucity of research on the predictability of FL proficiency within the Iranian EFL context with the aim of predicting FL proficiency through LLSs’ (p. 45).

The majority of research on explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies in Iran to date has examined the effects of explicit teaching of meta-cognitive reading comprehension strategies such as meta-cognitive strategies awareness and success in
learning English as a foreign language (Rahimi & Katal, 2012), meta-cognitive awareness and comprehension monitoring in reading ability of Iranian EFL learners (Khonamri & Mahmoudi Kojidi, 2011), or the effectiveness of meta-cognitive strategy awareness in reading comprehension (Tavakoli, 2014). Moreover, most of the studies have been conducted on pre-intermediate and advanced levels such as the role of reading strategies awareness on reading comprehension performance of advanced Iranian EFL learners (Fatehi Rad, 2011), the relationship between reading aloud strategies and comprehension among the Iranian EFL learners in pre-intermediate levels (Zolfagharkhani & Kowsary, 2013).

In contrast, very little research has been done on the suitability and the applicability of explicit teaching of cognitive reading comprehension strategies in the context of Iran such as effects of explicit instruction in cognitive and meta-cognitive reading strategies on Iranian EFL students reading performance and strategy transfer (Aghaie & Zhang, 2012). Moreover, only a few studies have investigated issues such as the effect of summarizing strategy on reading comprehension of Iranian intermediate EFL learners (Khoshsima & Rezaeian Tiyar, 2014) or the effect of scanning and skimming on the rate of and reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners (Khosravi, 2000); most other studies have not addressed the effect of teaching multiple strategies to Iranian learners. ‘It is critical for readers to employ multiple strategies while reading, especially when they begin to encounter more complex texts’ (Ballou, 2012, p. 61). There are also very few studies which have been conducted on these issues at the intermediate level, expect studies such as the one on the effect of background knowledge and IQ on reading comprehension and recall process of a group of Iranian intermediate students (Khosrojerdi, 2013) and the effect of summary writing as a critical reading strategy on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners (intermediate level) (Shokrpour, Sadeghi, & Seddigh, 2013).

Researchers such as Dole, Nokes, & Drits (2009) and Davis (2012) have reviewed the research conducted on effects of teaching of multiple strategies in reading comprehension, and drawn conclusions similar to this researcher’s argument. Davis (2012) believes that ‘MCSI (multiple comprehension strategies instruction), teaches students to deploy several strategies so they are better equipped to handle the complex demands of text
comprehension in a way that resembles the cognitive and meta-cognitive reading processes of experienced and skilled readers. Unlike MCSI instruction in a single strategy does not help readers develop the strategic expertise needed to fully tackle the comprehension demands readers can encounter when reading’ (p. 2).

National Reading Panel (2000) in its report suggests the benefits of teaching and application of multiple reading comprehension strategies in reading a text for increasing quality of reading. Research result by Davis (2010) reveals that ‘instruction in the use of multiple comprehension strategies has a positive impact on student achievement in grades 4 and 8’ (p. 192). Boulware-Gooden et al, (2007) investigated effectiveness of multiple meta-cognitive strategies on learners reading comprehension. Their results also showed that teaching multiple strategies positively affect the learners reading ability.

To sum up, research result prove that explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies and conscious application of reading strategies can improve second language reading in EFL/ESL learners. In the environment of Iran, English is a foreign language; researchers believe that strategy teaching is required for Iranian learners to become efficient readers (Rajabi, Rezaei, & Afshari, 2013; Karbalaei, Azimi Amoli, & Tavakoli, 2012; Chavosh, & Davoudi, 2016, Chaury, 2015; Taylor, Stevens, & Asher, 2006; Kantarci, 2006)). All of the conclusions mentioned above suggest that there is a need for explicit teaching of multiple reading comprehension strategies programmes in Iran that train Iranian EFL intermediate learners.

1.4. Rationale

Comprehension is the most important aspect in reading. Research in ESL/EFL reading shows that reading comprehension instruction is highly beneficial for students at all levels. Perhaps the most widely cited recommendation for improving reading comprehension is explicit instruction of comprehension strategies. This study is a modest attempt to explore the impact of explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies to Iranian intermediate EFL learners. It seeks to find out if the application of cognitive strategies can help Iranian EFL learners read and comprehend English texts better.
Teaching students to use specific cognitive strategies can improve reading comprehension and help them reason strategically when they encounter barriers to comprehension. It is anticipated that students will gradually be able to use their cognitive strategies, activate these on their own, and learn to become autonomous readers. This will provide them a chance to understand different texts, and also relate and explore different aspects of a text such as message and conflict, on their own. This will also give them a chance to communicate what they have read about through their own ideas.

As stated in the previous section, in Iranian schools, less time is allotted as instructional time for comprehension strategies in classrooms. It is important to spend time teaching comprehension strategies because this will enable students to decode elements of a text in an easier way, and understand the meaning of new or unfamiliar vocabulary through contextual clues in the text. In addition, making use of reading comprehension strategies will help them to monitor their understanding of the text and be aware of barriers to comprehension. It will also help them to be aware of the nature of their reading problems and find ways to deal with them as they arise. Learning how to use meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies such as thinking aloud, planning, monitoring, skimming & scanning, summarization, note taking etc. will also boost their self-confidence, and make them more independent and autonomous in their reading.

1.5. Purpose of the study

This study aims to provide not only the dynamics of operation (change in reading behaviour of students), but also to bring about a possible and major change in orientation towards training learners in the EFL context to become better readers. It is hoped that this study will help teachers and learners in EFL contexts work towards accelerating the speed rate of students reading by making use of cognitive strategies, and also show them ways of finding their own personal strategies of handling texts. This programme would also hopefully add to students’ flexibility in strategy use (constructing and generating their own learning to cope with different texts, especially unfamiliar ones) by making use of different strategies and techniques in the process of reading. To bridge the gap between reading and comprehension, this study will focus on how a set of comprehension strategies can change
reading behaviour of intermediate EFL learners. The study will also examine the effects of explicit teaching of five prime strategies (inference, guessing meaning from the context, skimming, scanning, and summarization) to the EFL intermediate learners. It is believed that as a result the learners will be equipped with tools to perform an active and effective role in reading texts such as generation of awareness of cognitive strategies, which in turn will help them become more independent learners. The results of this study can then be considered an exemplar for teachers to adapt and incorporate into their reading skill teaching methodology of teaching reading skills.

1.6. Significance of the study

The objective of this study is to show, through an intervention programme, how Iranian students can be taught to use their cognitive abilities in becoming better readers. Further, the study intends to show how to help Iranian learners to form the habit of reading on their own. This study is expected to lead to significant findings that have a bearing on reading programmes in EFL contexts like Iran, and may in turn be extended to nationwide programming and language planning. The findings of the study are also expected to have an impact on school level pedagogy in response to learners’ national needs for education. Also, the findings of this study can help Iranian teachers to integrate explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies into their reading classes and have better results and efficiency in terms of timing, planning of reading classes and motivation of Iranian learners.

1.7. Research questions

The research hypotheses of this study are based on the following three research questions:

1) Will a cognitive–constructive approach to reading comprehension enhance autonomy in reading behaviour of Iranian EFL significantly in new reading activities?
2) Will explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies significantly improve learners reading comprehension ability?
3) Will explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies significantly improve the learners awareness of these reading strategies?
1.8. Hypothesis
For this study, the general research hypothesis may be summed up by the following statement:
The explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies to intermediate EFL learners will result in improved performance of reading comprehension ability and awareness of the reading comprehension strategies.

1.9. Research plan
The research plan designed for the present study includes the following steps:
- Reviewing literature on explicit teaching of reading strategies to ELF students
- Conducting a Needs Analysis (NA) to find out the English language and reading needs of intermediate EFL students in Iran
- Conducting a pilot study (PS) using an intervention programme with pre- and post-intervention data collection instruments
- Conducting an intervention with the target group as field study
- Consolidating findings and analyze the reading behaviour of intermediate EFL students
- Providing pedagogical suggestions if possible.

1.10. Limitations of the study
This study comprises an intervention programme conducted on a sample population of EFL learners in Iran. It does not control for gender or the influence of the learners’ home languages on the development of reading skills in English. Although the study investigates problems of reading comprehension of EFL learners, it is based only on the experience of one age group of learners, ranging from 13 to 18 years. Similar investigations with different age groups may yield different results, as will results with teachers who do use some kind of pedagogy that includes strategy instruction. What the study tries to do is to explore one context of reading that may resonate with other contexts, and yield similar results of investigations. The researcher decided to limit his study to one province of Iran because his
experience has shown that similar problems are faced by EFL readers in the other parts of the country, and that this study has scope for replication in these contexts as well.

1.11. Brief introduction to each subsequent chapter
This thesis contains six chapters. The first chapter introduces the study and provides the background and rationale to the research problem and hypotheses, and a brief introduction to the research plan. Chapter 2 contains a review of the available literature on teaching reading comprehension strategies in EFL and ESL contexts and presents the theoretical framework and foundation of the research. Chapter 3 discusses in detail the procedure of the Needs Analysis surveys. Chapter 4 reports on the pilot study and its implications for the intervention programme. Chapter 5 discusses the findings of the study and its outcomes. Chapter 6, the last chapter, sums up the study and discusses the pedagogical implications of the research. The thesis ends with a bibliography and the appendices.

1.12. Glossary of key terms
This study uses the following technical terms to refer to aspects of reading in English. These have been glossed in this chapter to provide a guide to their usage in the subsequent chapters.

Inference: a reader’s ability to predict about what is going to happen in the text.
Meta-cognition: a reader’s ability to think about one’s own thinking during reading a text.
Schema: a unit of abstract mental knowledge stored in memory, which represents readers understanding; schemata can grow and change as new information is acquired.
Summarize: the readers ability to recall the key information briefly from the text.
Think aloud protocol: students verbally state their thinking as they read and express the strategies they are using to make meaning with the text.
Top-down model: emphasis is placed on what the reader brings to the text.
Prior knowledge: the information a reader possesses relevant to the topic of a reading text
Interactive model of reading: a model of reading that explains the process of reading, reading is an interaction between the readers prior knowledge with the textual information.
Explicit teaching: an instructional procedure that a teacher uses to set a purpose for the learning, which states what students will do and demonstrates this by modeling, followed by guided practice.

Bottom-up view of reading: reading that is driven by the decoding of words, phrases and sentences in the text.

EFL: EFL is an acronym for English as a foreign language. It refers to the teaching or learning of English in non-English speaking countries.

Meta-cognitive strategy: Meta-cognitive strategies are defined as ‘thinking about thinking’

Reading strategies: learning techniques, behaviours, or study skills which make reading more effective and efficient

Cognitive strategy: strategies used by learners to understand or manipulate the language while reading.

Motivation: feelings that make a reader approach or avoid reading a text.

GIS: guessing meaning from the context, inference, summarization.

SK/SC: skimming / scanning.