

# PROMOTING MULTILINGUAL READER IN EFL CLASSROOMS: A PORTRAIT ON THE READING STRATEGIES

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## *Abstract*

*This paper reports on how English as a Foreign Language Learner (EFL learners) explored their reading strategies when dealing with L1 and L2 texts. The destination of reading, a notion called comprehension, is by no means is a complicated process. This complexity can only be simplified only if a reader can employ the available reading strategies. The capacity to employ and develop the 20 reading strategies, as suggested by Grabe and Stoller (2002), can be injected both in L1 and L2 context. In EFL reading context, comprehension must first take place in students' first language (L1), and eventually lead to comprehension in their second language (L2) (Alwasilah 2012; 2001). From this perspective, EFL classroom now serves as a 'sacred' site for promoting multilingual reader in which students are encouraged to demonstrate engagement dynamically both in their L1 and L2. From the 20 strategies employed by two selected respondents, four strategies seem to be a big puzzle for EFL learners: focus on generic structure, intertextuality, inferences, and discourse markers. This, however, should be seen as a milestone rather than as a weakness. The more strategies employed, the more strategic the readers will be. This is the phenomenon captured in EFL reading classroom presented in this study.*

**Keywords:** *L1 and L2 reading, strategic reading, comprehension.*

## **Introduction**

The issue raised in this study seems to be omnipresent in any English as a Foreign Language (henceforth EFL) setting as the notion of reading comprehension in both the first language (L1) and second language (L2) is not properly situated and understood. It seems that many EFL teachers (and lecturers) neglect the idea that L1 and L2 reading have different complexities and, therefore, needs to be addressed strategically. If teachers (and lecturers) fails to cope with the reading complexities in L1 and L2, a misconception of reading will come to the fore.

One of that mispercieved reading practice, for instance, that can be found in an EFL reading classroom is that teachers merely provide texts for students to read and everything was over: no direction on how to approach the difference types of texts; no scaffolding on how to reach different levels of comprehension; and no proper evaluation as how to assess different types of comprehension (literal, intepretive, creative, critical). In the worst case, EFL teachers seem no neglect the importance of reading comprehension in the students' L1, or, in other words, de-emphasize the power of L1. Therefore, there seems to be a biased teaching practice as students' L1 is neglected, de-emphasised, and marginalised especially at

the very same time, the L1 teachers also craft their reading class without informed consents. This phenomenon has, to a large extent, shape the dis-entanglement of L1 and L2 which eventually leads to low quality of teaching.

The idea of promoting multilingual reader (and writer-speaker-listener) was primarily triggered by the idea of linguistic imperialism popularised by Robert Phillipson in 1992. The basic idea behind this notion is simple: the massive spread of English has de-emphasised and de-activate the power of the-so called local wisdom (and the language) of the people who learn English. This kind of 'de-activation' and de-emphasis is evidenced in our daily teaching activities: the overuse of English, an overgeneralisation of the so-called 'native speaker', the prohibition of L1 use (and vernacular) in L2 setting (including EFL classrooms), more familiartiy with English-related 'artefacts' such as literatry works, books, and films, etc. All these daily practice have, in the perspective of multilingual education and, triggered the so-called language death (and culture death). The language right of EFL learners is also threatened, meaning that their capacity as the language user in their own language is no longer respected. To cope with this problem, the idea of multilingual education come to the fore bringing the idea of symmetricity in

teaching L1 and L2. The idea of multilingual reader is part of this big project.

This study is a small but significant culmination of my teaching experience in reading and writing course. These two course have taught me one thing: my students, who are all EFL learners with different ethnic background, never find it easy to read and write in Bahasa Indonesia, let alone in English. This seems to take place for years and it seems that it turns out to be a huge and challenging puzzle for teachers and lecturers. The only question I have been keeping up to this very moment is "How can we survive and thrive in English if we don't even know how to survive in Bahasa Indonesia?" There seems to be a line between of un-connectedness between the teaching of English and Indonesian, which eventually trigger poor language reportaires. Promoting multilingual reader is a strategic effort to enhance the connectedness between L1 and L2 (Indonesian and English).

### **Mapping Out the Differences between L1 and L2 Reading**

This section highlights the core differences between L1 and L2 reading in three major dimensions: linguistic and processing differences, individual and experiential differences, socio-cultural and institutional differences (Grabe and Stoller 2002: 40). These three major dimensions arise from areas of reading reasearch commonly carried out in L1 reading an L2 reading. Grabe and Stoller (2002) notes that L1 reading research is complex, but L2 reading research is even more complex, and it seems that both EFL teachers and lecturers must be fully aware of all complexities.

The research on reading comprehension in L1, as highlighted by Grabe and Stoller (2002), is typically mapped out in the following areas: reading comprehension of different age groups, comprehension affected by different purposes and tasks, skills needed and strategies used to reach certain level (s) of comprehension, vocabulary development, the role of discourse organisation and text structure, word recognition, and reading fluency. These wide research areas are

commonly found in L2 research as well. What makes L2 reading research different from its 'twins' (L1 reading research) is that it encompasses the issue of transfer at various levels with varying knowledge resources: general background knowledge, specific topical knowledge, and cultural knowledge.

A common question raised in addressing the issue of transer is "How does reading comprehension skill in L1 affects reading comprehension in L2?" This is a question that is not easy to deal with. It is difficult to reveal because, as highlighted by Grabe and Stoller (2002: 41), tracking down the literacy experiences of L2 learners (in this case EFL learners) can not be carried out in a short period of time. Furthermore, as Bell (1995) suggests, the issue of transer between L1 and L2 literacies is not as straightforward as we assume. The relaiton between the two should be explored deeply in a long period of time.

Apart from this, EFL teachers and lecturers are also challenged to explore specific issues commonly faced by EFL learners: comprehension levels in L2, exposure to L2 reading without de-emphasising L1, the broadening of L2 linguistic knowledge, transfer effects, and L2 specific resources (translation, glosses, bilingual dictionaries). In essence, as suggested by Grabe and Stoller (2002), "L2 reading must account for issues that are qualitatively different from L1 issues". This implies that there are more issues to tackle down, more efforts to make, and more new insight to acquire, and a deeper and a more sharpened paradigm needed to critically understand the issue of L2 reading thoroughly. The next section will explore this issue of L1 versus L2 reading comparisons.

### **Linguistic and Processing Differences**

One of the key principles underpinning this study lies in the fact that, particularly in EFL context, reading comprehension in L2 can only take place only if each learner has the capacity of comprehending the L2 texts in his/her L1 (Bumela 2014; Bumela 2012). Even though there is not a direct and straightforward link between literacy in L1 and literacy in L2, it seems sensible to say that the lack of repertoire in L2 will only lead learners to long confusion. The only repertoire available for a learner to use is his/

her mother tongue/L1. It is indeed important to investigate how the continuum of L1 to L2 normally takes shape in a learners' daily literacy routines.

There are seven major differences between L1 and L2 reading in terms of linguistic and processing differences as suggested by Grabe and Stoller (2002): vocabulary, grammar, discourse, orthography, and metalinguistic and metacognitive issues, and the amount of exposure that readers have to the L2. If broken into the details, those seven major differences are mapped out below.

1. Differing amounts of lexical, grammatical, and discourse knowledge at initial stages of L1 and L2 reading
  2. Greater metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness in L2 settings
  3. Differing amounts of exposure to L2 reading
  4. Varying linguistic differences across any two languages
  5. Varying L2 proficiencies as a foundation for L2 reading
  6. Varying language transfer influences
- Interacting influence of working with two languages

The list of differing features of L1 and L2 above can be traced back in our previous and current reading experiences. Most EFL learners learn how to read in English (L2) later in life i.e. when they start attending junior high school or even earlier when they go to elementary school (grade 4, 5, and 6). In contrast, EFL learners usually learn how to read much earlier and, therefore, they have the so-called tacit knowledge on their L2. In line with this, Grabe (1999; 2000), quoted as saying, "unlike the L1 students' initial linguistic resource base, many L2 students begin to read simple sentences and passages almost the same time that they learn the language orally". This implies that orality plays a significant role in students early reading experiences. For EFL learners, things are more complicated as they have to learn many things at the very same time. This bears a crucial stages for most of EFL learners.

The worst situation might arise especially when EFL learners are forced to plunge into academic reading milieu in which

higher requirements are not easily met. In reading for academic purposes, learners are challenged to deal with complicated stream of argument, multiple collection of facts and evidences, long chain of varying unknown text structures, and at the very end of reading, learners are challenged to put their own point of view. This reading complexity can never be met if learners have poor L2 repertoire. In line with this, Grabe and Stoller (2002: 43) notes that effective reading comprehension both in L1 and L2 is greatly influenced by the amount of grammatical knowledge and discourse knowledge.

Another big difference between L1 and L2 that needs to be addressed is that in L2 setting, there is a greater amount of metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness. Cohen (1998: 7) notes that the terms to metacognition commonly refers to five consecutive steps of reading: Pre-assessment and pre-planning, on-line planning and evaluation, and post-evaluation of language learning activities and of language use events. Cohen further argues that these strategies help learners in taking control over their respective cognition as they use the triadic process simultaneously: planning, organising, and evaluating the learning process they engage with. Put simply, according to Grabe and Stoller (2002), metalinguistic knowledge is "our knowledge of how language works". This definition lies in the consecutive process - planning, organising, and evaluating - , which serve as the foundation of any learning process. Meanwhile, metacognitive knowledge commonly refers to the knowledge of what we already know. This serves as the essence of understanding learning strategies, particularly our so-called explicit and conscious use of reading strategies. Again and again, the term started with 'meta' is not superficial and it requires higher level of thinking in order to be tracked down. In sum, based on this explanation, EFL readers are required to activate their metacognitive knowledge both in L1 and L2

### **Individual and Experiential Differences**

Another big difference between L1 and L2 reading should be focused on resource and experiences that influence reading L2 comprehension. Other 'agendas' included in these two terms - resources and experience - will eventually lead to learners' reading

motivations both in L1 and L2, proficiency levels in L1, attitudes towards authentic texts, and L2 reading comprehension (Grabe and Stoller 2002: 55). What matters in this discussion is that, as suggested by Grabe and Stoller (2002), learners who are poor in L1 literacy abilities cannot be expected to transfer varying supporting resources in L2 context. In other words, if analogously perceived in English as Foreign Language context (EFL), learners who are poor reader will not survive in L2 – in this case English – context. In this very sense, EFL reading class means less for students. Orchestrating a meaningful EFL reading class, to the very least, is simply a dream without a plot and without a goal

In terms of motivations for reading in the second (including foreign language), EFL teachers need to be aware that factors such as differing sense of self-esteem, interest, involvement with reading and emotional responses to reading have a massive influence on successful reading comprehension. Grabe and Stoller (2002) argue that these factors have been neglected by almost every reading teacher in the world. Therefore, creating a symmetrical balance to promote comprehension in L1 and L2 is clearly evidenced in our EFL classrooms.

The difficulty of promoting comprehension in L1 and L2 seems to get bigger and bigger when learners are challenged to read the context (s) when reading texts written in different language. Contexts are, according to Lehtonen (2000) and Bumela (2014) vital resources for comprehension. In addition, EFL learners tend to have different previous literacy experiences, meaning that they have different familiarity with various text genres. This type of genre familiarity is, according to Christie (1994) and Mathiessen (2000), a milestone for readers to unlock the so-called contexts. Only strategic readers – readers who can employ the proper reading strategies suited with the types of texts being dealt with – that can read purposefully by addressing contexts.

### **Socio-Cultural and Institutional Differences**

Sociocultural differences, as suggested by Grabe and Stoller (2002), needs to be well addressed for two reasons. Firstly, in certain cultures literacy – communication mediated through reading and writing activities – is not

something common especially when the members of the society still preserve orality – communication mediated through spoken interaction – (Alwasilah 2001; 2012). This sets up the reason why EFL learners especially in Indonesian context rarely survive as powerful readers. Sociocultural background is not easily broken into pieces as it records learners' beliefs and attitudes on many things i.e. how life should be perceived, how marriage should be celebrated, how kids should be raised, and so on and so forth.

Institutional differences, as noted by Grabe and Stoller (2002), specifically refers to the expectations set out by different academic institutions. Learners' entire reading skills portrait are shaped and reshaped by previous L1 institutional experiences: national exams, national curricula, teacher behaviour, classroom management, teacher inspectors and district and regional mandates. Learners usually find reading much even more difficult as these factors are different in L2 setting. Different academic requirements in L2 settings, for instance in international school which places a great emphasis on literacy – usually becomes a new big challenge for learners.

Based on the above explanation, it is obvious that promoting comprehension in L1 and L2, again, is such a complicated business. EFL teachers, lecturers, and stakeholders must be aware of these differences – sociocultural and institution – are implicitly constructed. There are more strategic efforts required to reveal how an EFL reading classroom should be enacted and orchestrated. A strong team of researchers should be built and a continuous research on L1 and L2 reading should be amalgamated so that a framework of multilingual language skills can be crafted for the goodness of the learners.

### **Research Method**

The nature of this study was qualitative in nature, a case study in particular, implying that it seeks to investigate an individual case i.e. a learner. A qualitative paradigm was chosen in this study for the very reason that numbers and statistical procedures can never deeply explore what happens (or what happened) behind what is superficially seen in the classroom. The spirit of the study case generated here is intended to investigate what strategies employed by an EFL learner when dealing with L1 and L2 text. The selected

learner was taken from an academic writing course – writing 4 class – in the Department of English Education of IAIN Syekh Nurjati Cirebon.

As a preliminary study in the area of multilingual reading as part of multilingual education celebrated in the last one decade, this study attempted to portray the possibilities of promoting multilingual reader in EFL classroom, 'a sacred site' where ideologies are involved in a race to win. Languages are inherently competitive with each other. So do the language users around the globe. The idea behind multilingual education is to boost a symmetrical view on how language should be perceived, used, and taught in a multilingual community.

As the title of this paper suggests, this study was focused on the reading strategies used by an EFL learner when dealing with two different texts with two different languages: L1 (Indonesian) and L2 (English). A strategic reader, as suggested by Grabe and Stoller (2002), can employ different reading strategies when dealing with different text types. The more strategic a reader is, the more powerful he is (Alwasilah 2012). A 'questionnaire' containing 22 questions was delivered to the selected respondents and she was asked to write down her true opinions on separate pieces of paper. The use of such 'questionnaire' – or written interview – was used to minimise the nervousness of the respondent. The 22 questions used here was adopted from Grabe and Stoller (2002):

#### **Guide for Reader: Sample Reading Strategies**

1. How did you specify purpose for reading the text written by Howard Zinn?
2. What plans you make/steps to take for this reading?
3. How did you preview the text?
4. How did you predict the contents of the text or sections of the text?
5. How did you check predictions?
6. Did you posing questions about the text?  
What are the questions?
7. How did you find answers to the posed questions?
8. How did you connect text to background knowledge
9. How did you summarise information from the text?
10. How did you make inferences?

11. How did you connect one part of the text to another?
12. How did you pay attention to **text structure**?
13. How did you organise **rereading**?
14. How did you guess the meaning from context?
15. How did you use **discourse markers** to see relationships?
16. How did you check comprehensions?
17. How did you critique the author?
18. How did you critique the text?
19. How did you judge on how well objectives were met?
20. How did you reflect on what has been learned from the text?

The list of questions above was used twice by the selected for respondents: one for English reading text, and the other one for Indonesian reading text. The English text was entitled "Speaking Truth to Power with Books" written by Howard Zinn, the most phenomenal American Anthropologist who questioned the heroism of Christopher Columbus. Meanwhile, the Indonesian text was entitled "(Bukan) Bangsa Penulis" authored by Prof. Chaedar Alwasilah. The point that became the focus in this study was that whether the selected respondent used the very same strategies to reach the expected comprehension – literal, interpretive, critical – .How the data collected in this study was intended as a pre-ethnographic study in the future. Therefore, the final result generated from this study was used as a 'prototype' for the similar and relevant study in the future. The following sections elaborate how the selected respondent engaged with different text written in two different languages.

#### **Discussion: Comprehension in L1 does matter**

This section provides a discussion on how an EFL learner 'experienced' the text written in English and Bahasa Indonesia. The strategies employed by the learner in the context of this study represents how the notion of reading comprehension is mapped out. Without an effort to investigate the reading strategies employed by a reader, it is hardly possible to track down the roadmap to comprehension. Table 1 below maps out how the learner employed her reading strategies.

Table 1: comparisons of reading strategies employed by the learner

Questions	Reading in L2	Reading in L1
1	Reading to re-write with my own perspective supported with reliable evidences	Reading to critiquing and analysing the text; focusing on figurative language and my own viewpoint
2	Translating first; reading over and over again; highlighting things I will critique; collecting evidences	No translating as I am familiar with the key words
3	Focusing on the message (the truth on Columbus)	Setting up the focus on the message of the author
4	Understanding the first sentences in each paragraph is crucial	Exploring deeply the first paragraphs and first sentence in the remaining paragraphs
5	First paragraph is the focus. It tells everything	Focusing more on the first paragraph
6	Yes: why Zinn beating around the bush in presenting one evidence; Zinn provided incomplete information	Why some of of Alwasilah's argument sound too "strong"?

7	Reading other relevant texts esp A People's History of the United States by ; Zinn and the colour of Purple by Alice Walker looking for Zinn's proponents and opponents	Reading other sources is a great help
	First finding the core idea presented in Zinn's article; finding a bigger relevance	Connecting reality to the book as well as to the truth of history
9	Collecting main ideas in the texts and connected them into the conclusion	When global understanding is completed, I summarised it by making pointers (main ideas) and put them as unity in a conclusion
10	First exploring Zinn's arguments I will critique; Second, connecting it to the data I gathered already; thirdly, considering the rationality	Understanding main ideas is the point
11	Trying to understand the meaning and connecting it to other parts of the text	Translating, understanding, focusing on conjunction that connects one part of the text with other parts
12	No attention to text structure, only focusing on first paragraph and made attempts to connect it to other remaining paragraphs	No specific focus on the text structure; more focus on the content and information or message

13	Writing down main points from each paragraph; if one par is not understood I will go back again and again; I read my notes again before writing up	Translating the whole texts; reading each par over and over again; and read again the whole text once again
14	Guessing the lexical meaning of familiar words; opening up dictionaries when necessary	Finding who the author is; focus on the message and how it is elaborated
15	Focusing on conjunction	By focusing on word choices- p h r a s e s - conjunctions
16	Reading notes I made; elaborating the points I made before critiquing the text	Reading again the points I made and made a big connection with the text
17	By critiquing unreasonable ideas and unreliable facts	The critique is focused on the figurative language and author's point of view; and focus on less explicit ideas presented
18	Focusing on the explanation found in the text	Ideas clearly delivered
19	By checking out relevant sources and footnotes	No implicit statement made by the author, which help me a lot in understanding the text
20	By finding interesting points first and relating them to my background knowledge on Islam and Indonesia	Collecting and connecting the main points from each paragraph is crucial

Table one above basically portrays the similarities and differences: what similar strategies were used and what differences the reader makes when dealing with L1/L2 text. The discussion provided here will be very much focused on those similarities and differences. From this discussion, we can then feel challenged to draw a conclusion whether promoting multilingual reader in an EFL classroom is possible, or it is merely a myth.

Based on the 'confession' made by the selected respondent, she used the similar strategies when reading both L1 and L2 texts: the focus on the main ideas, the focus on the first sentence of each paragraph, intertextuality, awareness on purposeful reading, checking her own comprehension by rereading, and lack of metacognitive skills. These strategies show that there is no need to distinguish comprehension in L1 or L2. What matters most is how we get there, not what we drive.

From this type of 'confession', it seems that the selected respondent - the fourth semester student majoring in English Education Department - possesses a high awareness that reading, no matter in what language the text is written, is a number one requirement for a successful reading. In the context of academic writing, for example, the purpose of writing always goes hand in hand with the purpose of reading: to critique the text, to construct a point of view, to set up the focus of argument, to structure the arguments in a logical manner, etc. In contrast, in a literary class, the focus of reading will be different: to reveal the aesthetic value of the text, to unlock the hidden values of the literary works, to discover spiritual enlightenment, and so on and so forth. Therefore, once a reader knows the purpose of reading he/she will direct himself/herself to go into the available roadmap to reach the peak called comprehension.

A good reader also knows that reaching the peak 'comprehension' is not as easy as it may seem. In the context of this study, the selected respondent carried out two strategic efforts in making attempts to comprehend the texts: setting up the focus on the first sentence in each paragraph and giving emphasis on the first paragraph as the bridging areas of the texts. These two strategic efforts helped the reader in three ways.

Firstly, it allowed her to locate the foundation of ideas of the texts. English text normally puts the main points in the beginning of paragraphs. Secondly, it enabled the reader to taste the stream of ideas in the text. Just like a good swimmer, a good reader must also recognise the 'flow of water' of the text. Thirdly, it helps the reader to discover the gist of the text. The gist of the text can be tracked down only if a reader already has a comprehensive reading experiences – preplanning, whilst, and post reading activities –.

Another big similarity found from the 'confession' of the reader in table 1 centers around the idea of intertextuality – the ability to search, discover, and synthesize different but relevant sources before formulating and setting up a relatively new point of view –. A good reader will realise from the very outset that every single text has a strong connection with the previous texts. This kind of awareness is vital in locating the basic context of an issue being delivered. A firm point of view is always based on a strong intertextuality, and a strong intertextuality creates an informed decision. By creating informed decision, a reader can ascend his/her reading comprehension level from lexical-interpretive to a higher level called 'critical reading'. Reaching out critically in reading is, therefore, a staged activity, and not a single handed destination.

Finally, the similarity found in table one is concerned with metacognitive awareness – a skill requiring reader to take recursive stages called pre-planning, using proper strategies when reading and encouraging himself/herself to evaluate his/her level of reading comprehension –. A strategic reader realises that reading needs a proper preparation. The preparation can be in many forms: searching who the author is, in what year the text published, guessing the genres of the text, etc. A strategic reader also knows that the strategies he/she will use during reading must be determined from the very beginning. A literary text, for example, must be read in an aesthetic way, while non-literary text (factual text) must be approached by using efferent fashion. Unfortunately, this study have not investigated this issue further. However, from the first sight, it seems that the selected respondent in this study has at least made attempts to do so.

Apart from the similarities explained above, a differing feature of L1 and L2 reading must be addressed properly. A significant difference that can be located from table 1 centers around the issue of levels of reading process. In reading L1 text the selected respondents did not seem to find difficulty in understanding the lexical definition of every single word used in the text, but she found a huge difficulty in doing so when reading L2 text. This phenomenon reveals a very common assumption: the repertoire in L1 is better than the repertoire in L2. This assumption leads to another strong assumption: L1 text is relatively easy to comprehend rather than L2 text. This also implies that dealing with L2 text is more complicated than dealing with L1 text.

The two assumptions delivered here eventually lead to one single question: "How can we expect our learners to be powerful reader if they have not developed their L2 repertoire?" This question is the foundation of the idea of promoting multilingual reader in EFL classroom, which challenges commonly held assumptions about how should English class be orchestrated. If our students – the ever so called EFL learners – have a better language repertoire in his/her L1, whatever it is, why then we do not allow them to comprehend English text in their Bahasa Indonesia. Comprehension always starts from the closest language we have in mind. "The closest" here refers to the most prepared, the most frequently used, and the most complete resources that can help us comprehend the text.

In sum, this study suggests that we need to change the status of EFL classroom into multilingual classroom in which our students have the capacity to use the most available language to succeed in school. Using multiple languages in the classroom should be allowed to foster cultural respect to people with different ethnics. This simply means that our language classrooms must also foster the idea of promoting multilingual reader, multilingual writer, multilingual speaker and listener. In the case of reading, for instance, what matters is how our students employ and develop their comprehension skills, not in what language they must reach out that comprehension.

The idea of promoting multilingual reader seems insane at first, but this is a strategic effort to revitalise our language – Bahasa Indonesia and the vernaculars found along the archipelago –. Revitalising language is another word for preserving and putting a spectrum of languages in harmony.

### Conclusion

This study has revealed that promoting multilingual reader is a strategic option that aims to promote effective reading in more than one language. Comprehension, as this paper argues, is always influenced by how strong is our language repertoire. It is completely fine to comprehend English texts by using our L1 as long as we can use the available resources properly. Poor language repertoire will always lead to poor performance in reading (also in writing, listening, and speaking). EFL classroom now should function as a medium to foster comprehension in multilingual society, not as the weapon of mass destruction for other existing languages.

Promoting multilingual reader also means requiring teachers to equip students with the skills needed to comprehend texts written in different languages. This implies that a language teacher should enhance his/her reading skills in many different language before she/he teaches in front of the students. Besides that, it seems that this big business will require a global change in terms of curriculum, research, budgeting, teachers' profile, etc. These are the things that have not been investigated in this paper.

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