The Effectiveness of EFL Learners Use of Reading Strategies in Text Comprehension

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Abstract

According to many researchers, reading is the most important skill in academic studies. For this reason, graduate and post graduate students in EFL settings are required to read a sizable number of textbooks to gain insights in their subject areas. Comprehending texts can be accomplished when students are equipped with a number of strategies that assist them in constructing meaning from those texts, which is the ultimate goal in reading in general and academic reading in particular.

Keywords: reading, strategies, comprehension, stages.

ملخَّـــص

فاعلية إستعمال إستراتيجيات القراءة في فهم النصوص

يعتبر العديد من المنظرين أن القراءة هي أهم كفاءة في الدراسات الأكاديمية و لهذا يطلب من طلبة التدرج وكذا ما بعد التدرج في برامج الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية الإطلاع وقراءة كم كبير من النصوص للإستفادة في ميدانهم. ويبقى في المقابل تحقيق فهم هذه النصوص مرهون بإستراتيجيات تساعد على بناء المعنى أي تحقيق الهدف الأسمى من القراءة سواء كان النص عاما بصفة عامة أم أكاديميا على الخصوص.

الكلمات الدالة: القراءة، الإستراتيجيات، الفهم، المراحل.

Introduction:

Fluent reading involves all the component skills such as the word identification during reading, the information drawn from syntactic parsing, and the like, which assists readers in generating main-idea comprehension (Grabe 2009). Nonetheless, informational texts and academic learning expectations require the readers to use some reading strategies for main-idea comprehension (ibid). These are called reading comprehension strategies. The aim of this article is twofold. First,we shall introduce reading strategies: their definition, classification, and examples of some reading strategies that support comprehension.Second,we shall introduce the strategic-based reading instruction which consists of teaching strategic reading and the pre-, during-, post-reading strategies framework.

1. Reading Strategies:

Before defining '*reading strategies*', giving examples of them and classifying them, it is necessary to define the term '*strategy*'.

1.1. Definition of the term 'Strategy':

Paris, Wasik and Turner (1991) define strategies (plural of strategy) as actions selected in a deliberate way to fulfill particular goals (cited in Koda, 2004).Likewise, Anderson (1991) describes strategies as intentional, cognitive steps used by learners to help them acquire, store, and retrieve information (ibid). Grabe (2009), in his turn, defines strategies as "*processes that are consciously controlled by readers to solve reading problems*".[1] In this essence, strategies are methods or plans made by learners to overcome problems occurring while they are learning.

1.2. Reading strategy definition:

Davies (1995) defines a reading strategy as '*a physical or mental action used consciously or unconsciously with the intention of facilitating text comprehension and / or learning*'.[2] In the same vein, Kletzien (1991) refers to a reading strategy as '*a deliberate means of constructing meaning from text when comprehension is interrupted*'.[3] So, from the above definitions, reading strategies are plans used for solving problems of text miscomprehension.

1.3. Reading Strategies Classification:

Chamot and O'Malley (1994) identified three interrelated, function -based strategies: cognitive, metacognitive, and social affective (cited in Koda, 2004). The first ones are used for accomplishing a certain cognitive task during reading, such as prediction, inference, etc (ibid). The second type, metacognitive strategies, is used to regulate cognitive processing, as in comprehension monitoring and repairs (ibid). Social and affective strategies are used in cooperative interaction with others during reading, as in looking for outside help (ibid). Paris et al. (1991) suggested another way of grouping strategies, based on time of use: before-, during-, and post- reading (ibid) (These are to be dealt with in the following section). Pre-reading strategies help readers activate their prior knowledge relevant to the text to be read; during reading strategies assist readers in detecting the main idea through cross-referencing and inferences; and post-reading include thinking about the content carefully and reviewing (cited in Koda, 2004).

1.4. Reading Strategies supporting Comprehension:

The reading strategies recognised in the literature and so often used are: identifying a purpose for reading, previewing, activating background knowledge, predicting, forming questions, skimming, scanning, recognising text organisation, repairing miscomprehension, inferencing and so on. Some of them are used in the three stages of reading, others are used at the first stage only, and some other ones during reading.

2. Reading Instruction Based on Strategies:

As mentioned earlier, the use of strategies on the part of the readers is very crucial in building main idea comprehension. To this end, teachers are required to teach and model those strategies so as to enable their students to improve their performance on tests of comprehension and recall (Carrell, 1985; Carrell, Pharis, &Liberto, 1989; Pearson & Fielding, 1991 cited in Janzen 2002). This could be better achieved through a strategic-based reading instruction (Erler & Finkbeiner, cited in Cohen & Macaro, 2007).

2.1. Reading Strategies Implementation:

Good readers are strategic readers, in that they know the goals of a

reading task, apply a number of well-practised reading strategies at hand in efficient combinations, monitor comprehension appropriately, recognise miscomprehension, and repair miscomprehension problems effectively (Grabe&Stoller, cited in Celce-Murcia, 2001). As mentioned above, reading comprehension strategies should be implemented in the three stages of a reading lesson, namely pre-, during-, and post-reading stages (Davies &Pearse, 2000).Each strategy plays an important role in text comprehension. Besides, these strategies should be taught and modelled by the teacher so as to enable the students to do the same. Moreover, Koda(2004) argues that modelling assists students in understanding what it means to comprehend a text and monitor comprehension. By thinking aloud, the teacher demonstrates how understanding '*materializes from the text*'.[4]

2.1.1. Janzen's Classroom Processes for an Effective Strategic Reading Instruction:

According to Janzen (2002), many classroom processes are involved in effective strategic reading instruction. Five of these are: general strategy discussion, teacher modelling, student reading, analysis of strategies used by the teacher or by students when thinking aloud, and explanation/discussion of individual strategies on a regular basis.

2.1.1.1. General Strategy Discussion:

In this classroom process, the teacher defines reading strategies and strategic reading (ibid). Moreover, discussion takes place on the part of both of the teacher and the students about the importance of learning and practicing strategies (ibid). Janzen (2002) mentions three advantages of using strategies: (1) Strategies assist in improving both reading comprehension and reading efficiency; (2) Students will read like expert readers by using strategies; (3) Strategies assist students in engaging actively in the text, in monitoring their comprehension, and in relating parts of the print to their prior knowledge and to other parts of the text (ibid). Through this discussion, students will regulate their reading behaviour and will find out that they use strategies in their L1.

2.1.1.2.Teacher Modelling:

Regular teacher modelling is a second important classroom process of

strategy instruction (ibid). The teacher thinks aloud as s/he reads the text as in the following short excerpt applied to Janzen's class (Words in italics represent the actual text.):

Okay, um, the chapter, the title of the chapter is Dreams and Screams-um, well, what does that mean? Um. I know the book is about special effects, but what, why is the chapter called *Dreams and Screams*? I don't know. *Movies have always had the power to make people believe that what they are seeing on screen is really happening*. Okay, so is this what the author means by special effects? I don't know. Um, okay. *Special effects add to that power*. Oh, so the author means that movies without special effects make people believe they're seeing what's on the screen, but special effects make those movies more surprising, more amazing. (Someone says ''um-hum''.) *By using special effects, filmmakers make ''impossible''scenes seen real*. Okay, so movies seem real when we watch them, and special effects can make impossible things seem real. So may be the author will say next what impossible things can seem real….*Through special effects, filmmakers have shown actors parting the waters of the Red Sea, flying to distant planets, and chopping off heads on Friday the 13th*.Okay, so I was right. The author is giving examples of special effects, impossible things that can seem real. [5]

It appears that Janzen (2002) has used several strategies such as asking questions, making predictions, checking those predictions, and summarising or paraphrasing (ibid).

2.1.1.3. Student Reading:

The teacher encourages the students to do the same; that is, to think aloud while reading though this process takes time (Janzen, 2002).

2.1.1.4. Analysis of Strategy Use:

A third important feature of strategy instruction is analysing the strategy use of the reader, after the teacher or the students have read a portion of the text, through full class discussion (ibid). The analysis can be in this way: What strategies the reader did, when he used them, etc (ibid).Students will benefit from the analysis of the teacher's reading, which helps them to incorporate '*effective strategy use into their own reading*'. [6] Discussing the stu-

dent's reading by the teacher consists of identification and analysis of strategy use intermixed with the teacher's feedback on the reader's behaviour (Janzen, 2002). The feedback can take a form of suggesting specific strategies to solve problems of miscomprehension (ibid).

2.1.1.5. Strategy Explanation and Discussion:

The process of strategy explanation can be achieved by using graphic organisers as follows: the teacher, from the first session, asks the students to write down the strategies that s/he or other readers used and when they used them after each part of reading is completed (ibid). Naming the strategy and discussing its value will be the next step (ibid). After some weeks, the class will be divided into small groups and will be asked to fill in tables such as the one (Table 2.1.) below, with three columns headed: What, When, and Why (ibid). These charts will be filled in each time and mounted on the chalkboard during class to be used as reference lists for strategies that may be used while reading (ibid).Table 2.1.comprises what strategies used, when and why. For instance, 'evaluating' is used while reading to judge the author's ideas, and after reading to make own opinion.

(See table at the end)

2.2. Pre-, During-, and Post- Reading Strategies:

At this level of research, we introduce the investigated strategies in the three stages of reading, namely pre-, during, and post-reading. This approach has been suggested by Paris et al. (1991) for the sake of assisting comprehension. These strategies are to be used by learners in academic contexts to better read and to attain their purposes before, during, and after reading.

2.2.1.The strategies used Before Reading:

The first phase includes '*previewing*', '*activating prior knowledge*', '*forming questions*', '*skimming*', and 'scanning'. By doing so, learners will be prepared for reading the text. [7] But, before they begin reading, L2/FL readers should come with a purpose in mind. So, the first pre-reading strategy is '*the reading purpose*'.

-The Reading Purpose:

A number of researchers have found out that the purpose of reading plays a major role in the process and control of reading. Research findings have demonstrated that different readers read with different purposes. So, the way of reading depends on the reason of reading. For instance, if a reader is reading for getting the text content, s/he will not pay attention to the text details.

-Previewing:

This strategy allows students to determine the general topic of the reading, relevant vocabulary (though not necessary for advanced learners), etc. by examining distinguishing features of the text such as the title, subheadings, drawings, and illustrations (Grabe & Stoller, 2001).

-Activating prior knowledge

It facilitates recall of information among students (Grabe, 2009). Moreover, it is an aid to better comprehension of the text, especially if students are provided with specific reading guides for texts (ibid). However, less background knowledge does not necessarily lead to miscomprehension, in that students with a high level of proficiency in L2/FL and with limited background knowledge can learn more from a text than less-skilled ones (ibid).

-Forming questions:

Grabe (ibid) argues that question-forming strategy, most of the time, requires training students in how to generate appropriate questions that relate to a text. This strategy improves 'memory for text information, the identification of main ideas, and accuracy in answering questions(8).

-Predicting:

After the background knowledge has been activated and questions have been formed, the reader, then, predicts the content of the text by forming hypotheses. This strategy is used even during reading to anticipate the next chunk of language.

-Skimming:

Skimming is a quick reading. The reader uses this strategy to identify

the main idea of the text by having a glance at the first and last paragraphs, and the topic sentences (Grabe & Stoller, ibid).

-Scanning:

Scanning is looking quickly through the text but for a specific piece of information (Aebersold& Field, 1997; Grellet, 1981).The reader starts reading and once s/he finds the needed information, s/he looks at the surrounding text. If s/he gets what s/he is looking for, s/he stops reading. If not, s/he continues scanning until s/he spots the needed information (Aebersold& Field, 1997). Scanning can be also used as a post-reading strategy whereby students can have a glance at the text to look for a specific piece of information, with students having already read the text (ibid).

2.2.2. The Strategies used During Reading:

During reading, the L2/FL reader is engaged with the text by using both bottom-up and top-down strategies to comprehend the text. Bottom-up strategies help in building sentence-by-sentence comprehension whereas top-down ones assist the reader in comprehending large pieces of text such as a paragraph. In other words, efficient reading involves both types of strategies whereby the reader moves from one to the other as s/he reads (Aebersold & Field, 1997). Some of the main during-reading strategies are: 'inferencing', 'comprehension monitoring', 'predicting' and 'using text structure awareness'.

-Inferencing:

It is a very important and useful strategy to comprehension in that it permits the reader to retrieve the intended information by using what is mentioned in the text such as syntax, logical and cultural clues, etc (Grellet, 1981). Referencing depends on the student's prior knowledge, reading strategies, vocabulary knowledge, text-structure awareness and so on (Grabe, 2009).

-Comprehension Monitoring:

It is a major reading strategy that improves comprehension (Grabe, ibid). More than that, it is viewed as an important metacognitive process (ibid). This strategy implies many other strategies such as relating text to

background knowledge, recognising text structure, etc (ibid).

-Predicting:

During reading, good readers anticipate the paragraph that follows and predict its main idea, before reading it, according to what is being said and dealt with in the present paragraph.

-Using Text Structure Awareness:

This is a very useful and important strategy for making text comprehension and recall of information better. Grabe (2009) states that many studies dealing with expository prose have demonstrated that students who are aware of text structure and who utilise the resources of text structure in their summaries such as discourse-signaling systems which include, for instance, rhetorical patterns of organisation , improve their reading comprehension.

• Other During-Reading Strategies:

There are other strategies used during reading such as checking predictions, forming questions about the text, finding answers to posed questions, taking notes, skipping words, distinguishing main ideas from supporting details, distinguishing fact from opinion, connecting one part of the text to another, rereading, guessing the meaning of words from contexts, highlighting /underlining difficult parts of a text, and checking comprehension (Grabe, 2009; Grellet, 1981; Jordan, 1997).

2.2.3.Post-Reading Strategies:

After reading and understanding a text, proficient L2/FL readers are supposed to be able to paraphrase the text, summarise it in a form of a paragraph or in graphic organisers, evaluate the author's point of view or make a personal response. The main post-reading strategies are '*summarising*' and '*using graphic organisers*'.

-Summarising:

According to Grabe (ibid), though there is scant research on the effect of this strategy on L2 reading, summarising leads students to better comprehension. In studies conducted by some researchers like Trabasso and Bouchard (2000), it has been found that summarisation training has led students

to better summarising of reading texts, which reflects better texts comprehension (ibid).

-Using Graphic Organisers:

The use of graphic organisers, in L2 contexts, such as Venn diagrams, KWL charts, matrices and the like assists readers in recognising text structure and focus on main points and ideas and their relations with supporting details (Grabe, ibid). These graphic organisers vary depending on the rhetorical patterns of organisation used in the text such as compare-contrast, problem-solution, cause-effect, etc.

The study:

The literature review shows in a clear way that reading strategies are very beneficial to reading comprehension. To this end, a number of students have been enrolled in three reading sessions preceded by a pre-test and followed by a post-test.

The main goal of this study is to investigate the impact of using reading strategies on comprehending texts. The focus in this methodology is to assist students in engaging in communicative activities that help them in comprehending texts using strategies. So the main question addressed in this study is:

To what extent do reading strategies within a pre-, during-, and post-reading framework impact reading comprehension?

1. Method:

For the hypothesis investigation, a descriptive analytical method has been selected to describe and analyse the pre-test and the post-test results and of course the reading sessions,.

2. Subjects:

Subjects in this study are 32 English-as-a-foreign-language students aged between 21 and 42 years old out of 52 in first-year-Master class at the University of Ouargla. The sample is representative to some extent. The subjects are supposed to be at an advanced level of proficiency. They have been studying English for about nine years. They have been taught through different approaches mainly the Communicative Approach. There are 27 girls and

5 boys. The subjects are pursuing a two-year Master's degree (MA) in ESP and AL.

3. Tools of Research:

These students were exposed to a pre-test, three training sessions (4 hours and a half), and a post-test. This experiment focused mainly and only on the relationship between the use of reading strategies and text comprehension.

Students had a questionnaire as a kind of assessment so as to get insights on how student engage in reading texts, and a pre-test and a post-test to compare their performance before and after the formal training in order to see the efficiency of the suggested approach. The pre-test session lasted one hour, before the beginning of the training. As for the post-test, it lasted one hour but was added a quarter of an hour due to the inclusion of other reading strategies (see Appendix C).

3.1. The Pre-test:

The pre-test constructed for the present consisted of an authentic text (an article) followed by 5 tasks. The test was about a topic that interests everybody, cancer. The pre-test was administered to test the students'use of reading strategies to comprehend the text, before the treatment. The subjects had to finish the test within 60 minutes.

The results of the pre-test are shown in table 1.1. below.

Pre-test Tasks	Correct Answers	Incorrect Answers
1. What the title suggests	56.25%	43.75%
2.a-The gist of the article b-The topic sentences	43.75% 62.5%	56.25% 37.5%
3.a-Scanning(T/F) b-Text organization	71.87% 56.25%	28.12% 43.75%

4.Synonyms/near synonyms	100%	0%
5. Article summary	40.62%	59.37%

Table 1. 1: Pre-test Tasks with Correct and Incorrect Answers

As for the first task (see table1.1 above) about predicting the content of the article, 56.25% of the subjects could predict the topic of the text. Task 2 consists of extracting the main idea of the text and the topic sentences. 43.75% of the students succeeded in getting the gist of the article and 56.25% extracted the topic sentences. Task 3 dealt with (T/F) sentences (scanning) and text organisation. 71.87% of the subjects got the correct answer for the former and 56.25% for the latter. Concerning task 4 (synonyms/near synonyms), all the students got the correct answer. As for the last task (the article summary), only 40.62% of the subjects could summarise the article in a good manner.

In short, the students are unaware of the importance of predicting, skimming, and how to extract the main idea of the text. Moreover, the inability to recognise the rhetorical (text) organisation leads the students not to comprehend the text, not to spot the important ideas and not to know how the text will be developed, which makes the students unable to summarise it, which, in turn, calls for emergent treatment to overcome these problems.

3.2. Describing the Reading Sessions:

ESP and AL students, mainly the subjects in this study, are required to read a great number of materials in their area of study, which involves them to be equipped with a variety of reading strategies if they are to comprehend texts and gain insights. Previewing, background activation, forming questions, prediction, skimming, scanning, and the like are very important strategies to aid text comprehension. To this end, teachers should teach and model these strategies. The framework selected for this tuition is pre-, during-, and post-reading strategies-based instruction, in that students will be exposed to three, at least, sessions of one hour and a half each.

The selected text (A world of water) is adapted from New headway Academic Skills-Level 3. The topic is of a great importance to everyone since it deals with the problem of water shortages and its solution which is desalination. The aim is not to select a text of the subjects 'area of study, but to assist students to be aware of the use of reading strategies if they are to comprehend texts.

Session one:

The students were involved in pre-reading activities and showed great interest in seeking for the best ways to read well. The strategies suggested in the first session (previewing, background knowledge activation, forming questions, predicting, skimming, and scanning) helped them in having an idea about the content of the text. We noticed that students had no idea about skimming, for example. Though very few students defined it, they did not know the steps of this strategy. In sum, at the end of the session, the students were satisfied and began.

Session two:

In this phase, students were supposed to use a number of during-reading strategies such as checking previous predictions, using text structure awareness, etc. One of the other investigated strategies is inferencing; in that, students were asked to decipher the message that is being transmitted to them as readers. The students at this moment tried to extract the intended message and agreed that the writer wants to tell them (readers) that water is precious and that we should not waste it. At the end of this session, the teacher asked the students to read the text at home.

The second session put the students in a real interaction with the text through the fourteen comprehension questions. There were many discussions between the teacher and the students and mainly between the students themselves. Their awareness raised and they became more curious.

Session three :

This phase was of a great importance; in that it was an opportunity to get students involved in the process of summarisation. And since the subjects are asked from time to time to summarise articles, chapters and even books,

they were more curious and motivated. We conducted some steps towards summarising the text, focusing on its main idea, and then on providing some details. We noticed that only very few of them had an idea about what is to summarise, but at the end, they showed some understanding and enjoyed the session, in that they became autonomous and tried to comment on the selected answers by suggesting other ones. It was really an interactive activity.

Three reading sessions have been very efficient; in that, they contributed to raising the students' awareness of the use of reading comprehension strategies. The subjects have been more motivated to comprehend the text. At this level, it has been wise to test them once again to check the impact of using reading strategies on text comprehension.

3.3. The post-test:

In order to prove the efficiency of the treatment, it was crucial to move to the following step which is testing the subjects again. For this reason, a post-test was designed and administered.

The text selected is from the same source; that is, New headway Academic Skills-Level 3. It is about the ancient city of Sabratha in Libya. The items in the post-test are the similar to the ones in the pre-test with an addition of inferencing, guessing meaning from contexts and the use of graphic organiser strategies. In fact, the latter strategies are of a great importance in reading comprehension and it was crucial to integrate this strategy and the two other ones in the post-test. The latter took place in the subjects 'classroom and lasted one hour and fifteen minutes.

After the correction, it has been noticed that the scores were higher than the ones of the pre-test (see Appendix D) in that the investigated strategies improved to a great extent taking into account the very short time of tuition. The following table summarises the correct and incorrect answers:

Post-test Items	Correct Answers	Incorrect Answers
Predicting	82.60%	17.40%
Skimming for the gist	82.60%	17.40%

Scanning	100%	0%
Text Organisation	100%	0%
Inferencing	84.78%	15.22%
Guessing meaning from context	86.95%	13.05%
Graphic Organiser	86.95%	13.05%
Summarising	60.86%	39.14%

Table 1.2: Post-test items with the correct and incorrect answers.

Data Analysis and discussion:

The data gathered showed a great improvement in the use of strategies, which had an impact on comprehending the text. The table above reveals that the strategies investigated in the pre-test were better tackled in the post-test as shown in the table below:

Investigated Reading Strategies	Pre-test	Post-test
Predicting	56.25%	82.60%
Skimming for the gist	43.75%	82.60%
Scanning	71.87%	100%
Text Organisation	56.25%	100%
Summarising	40.62%	60.86%

Table 1.3: Comparison of the common strategies in the pre-test and the post-test.

The results show that all the strategies witnessed a remarkable improvement though without an equal percentage. The training sessions were efficient in that they assisted the subjects in being aware of the use of reading strategies for comprehending texts. Figure1. 3. below shows the comparison of both tests in a form of a polygon.
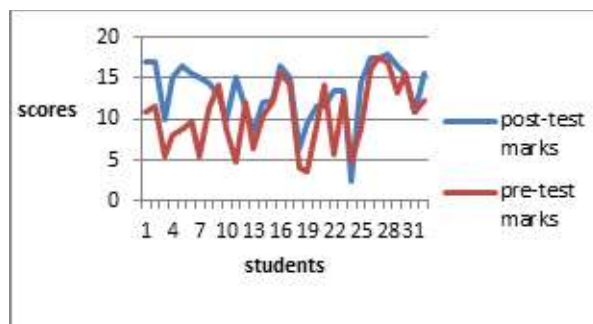
Figure 1.1. Polygon for pre-test and post-test scores comparison

The other investigated strategies such as inferencing, guessing meaning from context, and using graphic organisers proved successful in that their percentages were high. All in all, this success is proved by the calculation of both means and standard deviations (SD) as follows:

	Total score	Number of scores	Mean	SD
Pre-test	335.5	32	10.48	3.95
Post-test	433.5	32	13.54	3.52

Table 1.4: Total score, number of scores, mean, and standard deviation

As shown above, the mean of the post-test is higher than the one of the pre-test, which reflects the efficiency of the suggested strategic-based reading approach. As for the SD, it has been noticed that it has decreased in the post-test (3.52) rather than (3.95) in the pre-test, which strengthens our hypothesis set at the beginning of the thesis.

Conclusion:

In sum, decoding words is not sufficient for comprehending academic texts. Many other factors should be gathered to achieve comprehension involving. Besides recognising vocabulary, grammar, and other components of reading, L2/FL should use a number of reading strategies in combination. It has been empirically evidenced that teaching and modelling reading strate-

gies enhance the students' comprehension of academic texts. Janzen's (2002) model is very interesting and promising and reading teachers are invited to apply this model in their classrooms. Moreover, the reading literature shows that the pre-, during-, and post-reading strategies framework suggested by Grabe and Stoller (2001) has been very beneficial.

References:

(1) Grabe (2009), p. 221.
(2) Davies (1995), p. 50.
(3) Cited in Davies, 1995 p. 50.
(4) Koda, 2004 p. 268.
(5) Janzen, 2002 p. 290.
(6) Janzen, ibid p.290
(7) Rosenshine, Meister, & Chapman, 1996 cited in Grabe, ibid, p. 209-210.

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