

CHAPTER-24

Impact of explicit reading instruction on undergraduates' reading comprehension: A qualitative analysis

Ananda K.D¹ and Dr. Sridhar Maisa²

¹Research Scholar, GITAM Deemed to be University, Bengaluru
anandgunn@gmail.com

² Assistant Professor, GITAM Deemed to be University, Hyderabad
smaisa@gitam.edu

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ABSTRACT

The study examines how explicit reading strategies impact ESL students' reading comprehension at a government degree college in Channapatna, Karnataka, guided by socio-constructivist principles. A structured lesson plan on reading instruction was developed to be utilized for an experimental group of students (N=63) over two and a half months using reciprocal teaching, scaffolding, and collaborative learning. An introspective (qualitative) method of data collection was used through verbal reports and observation from participants. Thematic analysis was employed, focusing on learners' response patterns to the verbal reports. Progress was evaluated through transitions from declarative to conditional knowledge, strategy integration, and cognitive to metacognitive monitoring. It was revealed that using learners' L1 (i.e. Kannada) and contextual cues helped them understand complex English texts (L2). Strategies included activating background knowledge, inferencing, summarizing, questioning, predicting, and visualizing. Analysis showed significant improvements in comprehension, with explicit reading instruction enhancing ESL learners' academic success.

KEYWORDS: Explicit reading strategies, Collaborative learning, reciprocal teaching, thematic analysis, conditional knowledge, meta-cognitive strategies.

1 Introduction

Reading is regarded as a vital language skill because it enhances language proficiency and promotes effective communication (Snow et al. 2002). As a result, it is a fundamental part of the academic curriculum. At the higher education level, this skill often receives inadequate attention. Teaching reading is essential for improving students' ability to understand texts. Reading involves comprehending the message, a text communicates within its linguistic context and articulating it in one's own words, both verbally and in writing. The purpose of reading is to derive meaning from the text (Hattie, J., & Anderman, E. M., 2013). Comprehension skills reflect the application of reading strategies during the reading process (Emanuel, K.B., 2024). To read effectively, one must grasp the literal meaning of words and interpret the author's intent, mood, tone, and attitude. As Smith & Robinson (1980) point out, reading is an interactive process where the reader engages with the information presented through the text. The reader seeks to understand, evaluate, and apply the ideas provided. Reading is a deliberate cognitive activity where readers employ strategies to grasp the author's intended message. Alderson (2000) asserts that mastering reading skills is crucial for students learning English, as significant academic, technological, and scientific literature is produced in English. Dole et al. (1991) contend that readers develop subskills hierarchically, which enhance comprehension ability. Successful reading requires cognitive and language skills to interpret

text. A deficiency in these skills can lead to poor reading comprehension. Perfetti et al. (2001) offer a framework for understanding the processes necessary for reading comprehension. They highlight that comprehension difficulties arise from decoding issues, including challenges in understanding narrative structure, generating inferences, monitoring comprehension, processing syntax, managing verbal working memory, and developing spoken language skills. Therefore, research based on learning theories and strategies is crucial in experimental studies to enhance learners' reading comprehension abilities.

2 Review of Literature

Davis (1995) highlights the need for teachers to inform students about learning strategy benefits that help students improve reading habits. Donato (1994) proposes that collaboration among learners during group activities can improve learning outcomes. Socio-cultural theory emphasizes the importance of social and collaborative learning techniques. According to Donato (2000), second language learners develop language skills through interaction and teamwork. Donato (2000) also argues that language learning is social, with collaboration crucial in creating meaning during learning. Richards & Rogers (2016) encourage language teachers to develop methods that involve learners, taking into account their varied motivations and interests. They suggest strategies promoting group cohesion and a supportive learning environment. As noted by Klinger & Vaughn (1999), collaborative strategic reading is an instructional framework for L2 learners that combines cooperative principles with literacy instruction to improve content learning, language skills, and reading comprehension. Collaborative learning, which includes cooperative learning, emphasizes peer support and guidance, involving collaborative activities among pairs and small groups. The collaborative learning approach outlines four stages in reading comprehension: preview, click and clunk, and wrap-up (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). In the initial stage, readers preview text using predictions and prior knowledge. If the text is understood, it is termed a click; if not, it is a clunk. The next step involves using strategies to resolve misunderstandings, leading to a wrap-up. This approach encourages engagement, dialogue, problem-solving, and task-oriented learning. Long (1996) proposes that strategies such as repeating, confirming, reformulating, checking comprehension, clarifying, and making requests can be used in cooperative learning. Learners can overcome communication issues by requesting repetition, slower speech, louder volume, and explanations of words (Richards & Rodgers, 2016, p. 248). This method differs from competitive learning, in which students compete to achieve objectives. Kagan (1992) endorses this approach as it enhances learners' motivation and critical thinking. Cooperative learning requires organized group work to foster interaction and motivation, improving learning outcomes. This method teaches students to plan, monitor, and assess their learning, developing lifelong skills. Kagan (1992) highlights elements for effective cooperative learning: positive interdependence, group interaction, individual accountability, and social skills. In cooperative learning, teachers facilitate and adapt lessons to encourage collaboration. Helou & Newsome (2018) support collaborative classroom learning, which introduces informal peer learning and brainstorming, enabling group discussions and presentations. Lantolf & Thorne (2007) assert that collaborative learning, discourse, modelling, and scaffolding enhance learners' capabilities while fostering purposeful learning. Similarly, Moreillon, J. (2007) argues that a collaborative environment for book discussions enables readers to share interpretations.

Kintsch (1998) suggests that reading comprehension strategies require readers' focus and resources for constructing meaning. These strategies are developmental, initially demanding full attention for effective adaptation, but later requiring less focus as learners practice them.

Afflerbach, et al. (2009) emphasize that strategies are crucial in both traditional and contemporary literacy settings, with their success tied to reading task complexity. The effectiveness of selecting and using reading strategies depends on content domain knowledge and instructional context. Moje (2006) argues that reading instruction should provide students opportunities to engage in discipline-specific reading practices within disciplinary tasks. This method creates an activity system that enhances their ability to derive meaning and critically analyse texts. Research on reading comprehension strategies provides groundwork for implementing effective instructional programs. Raphael et al. (2009) highlighted the necessity of reading comprehension strategies, as educational institutions today comprise diverse student groups who must navigate new approaches to understanding texts. They advised exploring innovative teaching strategies to equip students with comprehension tools for success in a global society. Pearson (2009) emphasized scaffolding students' learning initially, gradually transferring responsibility to learners to apply and manage strategic activities. Contextual factors like reading ability, task requirements, resources, and human interaction influence strategy choice and success. Pressley & Afflerbach (1995) argued that skilled readers adaptively use multiple strategies to interpret text meaning. Paris et al. (1983) asserted that readers need declarative knowledge (awareness of strategies), procedural knowledge (how to use strategies), and conditional knowledge (when and why to use different actions) to become strategic readers who apply these strategies in specific situations. The literature suggests explicit reading strategies would enhance the comprehension abilities of struggling learners. These strategies were employed in the present study to ascertain their efficacy in the rural degree college context where the samples were chosen from.

2.1 Research Questions

- 1 Whether the explicit instruction on reading strategies aids better comprehension?
- 2 Can metacognitive reading skills foster comprehension of the learners?

3 Methodology

The researchers employed an introspective method of data collection through verbal reports on reading comprehension strategy use during teaching intervention over a period of two and a half months. The six verbal reports were collected in the regular intervals during teaching intervention period. A sample of five verbal reports from each group, i.e., advanced, intermediate, and struggling learners, has been considered for analysis as the representative of the sample N=63. The tailored teaching intervention was provided to the experimental group. Specific selected materials from university textbooks and other academic books were used, and selected strategies were incorporated in teaching and learning reading comprehension. The thematic analysis was employed for analysing the participants' verbal reports.

3.1 Data Analysis

3.1.1 Developmental patterns in the use of reading comprehension strategies

Qualitative analysis of the entries from the verbal reports revealed that participants in the teaching intervention had developed their use of strategies in the following areas.

- Transition from declarative statements to statements based on conditional knowledge.
- Transition from employing individual strategy towards integrating related strategies.
- Development towards the use of metacognitive strategies from cognitive strategies.
- Progress from stating general to particular statements.

3.2 Thematic Analysis

3.2.1 Transition from expressing declarative statements to statements based on the conditional knowledge

Jacobs & Paris (1987) suggest that understanding meta-cognitive strategies equips learners with three types of knowledge. The first, declarative knowledge, involves understanding

information in a propositional form, gained through prior experiences or familiarity with the topic. Procedural knowledge involves awareness of cognitive processes, such as skimming, using contextual cues, highlighting important points, and summarizing. Conditional knowledge involves recognizing the circumstances that affect learning, including why strategies work, when to apply them, and their appropriateness.

During the intervention, participants demonstrated progress in their use of reading strategies, as evidenced by self-reflections collected through verbal reports, based on prompts provided on reading comprehension development and strategy use. Initially, participants were familiar with skimming and scanning techniques, which are typically used in traditional reading comprehension classes. However, throughout the intervention, they were introduced to seven key reading comprehension strategies and several sub-strategies, which had been effectively utilized in the earlier research on reading, and those strategies were taught through explicit instruction. In the initial stage of the study, participants could identify which strategies were useful and when to apply them based on their declarative knowledge. Over time, they learned to articulate 'why' these strategies were beneficial by employing their conditional knowledge. For instance, they could explain why they observed the title of a passage, such as "*Mind over body*," and how they traced points to understand its significance. Participants initially found it challenging to grasp new information when reading expository passages due to domain-specific terminology. However, with the instructor's guidance and peer collaborative learning, they could comprehend certain expressions used in passages like "*AI Effect*" and "*Soft Power*." The participants transitioned from declarative statements to statements of conditional knowledge over a period of time. For instance, Participant 4 (P4) stated that I narrated the importance of the Mona-Lisa painting to my peer (declarative). I narrated the importance of the painting to my friend to make him compare and contrast similar paintings in the Indian context.

3.2.2 Transition from employing an individual strategy towards integrating related strategies.

The study employed seven major reading comprehension strategies proposed in the earlier significant studies on reading by Mereillon, J. (2007). The seven main strategies proposed are activating background knowledge, questioning, using Sensory Images/Visualising, predicting and inferencing, determining main ideas, using the fix-up option, and synthesizing/summarising, which cover sub-skills that were part of reading comprehension instruction. According to Macaro (2006), for a strategy to effectively enhance learning or performance, it must be used alongside other strategies, either simultaneously or in sequence, creating what are known as strategy clusters. Successful learners apply these clusters of strategies in ways that suit the specific context and task.

In line with the above proposition, a cluster of strategies was employed in the intervention depending on the context and tasks, and the strategies were adapted to impart the strategy. In the initial phase, basic strategies were taught individually, such as previewing and activating background knowledge. As the intervention progressed, a few more strategies were implemented, such as determining the key point and developing inference skills. The participants easily picked up the text preview from the clues in the title and keywords. However, they took a little more time to use inferencing and fixing up strategies to improve comprehension through collaborative learning with peers. In the beginning, the students expressed 'I can preview', and 'I can predict' what the passage is all about from the title, and the main idea expressed. In the later stages, they attempted to integrate a few more strategies, as determining the main idea, conceptually linking the ideas or narrative cues, and synthesizing them into a coherent paragraph. Participants' responses varied when the strategies were

integrated. As I predicted, the theme and message were activated through my background knowledge, inferred from contextual cues, and synthesized into connected ideas.

3.2.3 Development from using cognitive strategies to employing meta-cognitive strategies.

Achieving a more profound understanding is the primary aim of reading. In the present study, participants could track their comprehension by employing reading comprehension strategies. To become a strategic reader, it is essential to recognize when and which strategies to apply, as well as understand the rationale behind choosing a specific strategy. According to Paris and Jacobs (1984), proficient readers are frequently involved in intentional actions that involve extensive thought, adaptable strategies, and regular self-assessment. They contemplate the subject matter, anticipate and review sections of the text, and verify their understanding as they proceed with reading.

In this context, it was found that participants used cognitive strategies more in the initial phase of the intervention, such as recollection, recall, and identification of the main idea from the title. However, in the later part, participants could use metacognitive strategies, such as fixing up options: rereading, reading ahead, using contextual cues, and clarifying through pair share. These meta-cognitive skills were helpful in monitoring their understanding and interpretation of the text. Meta-cognitive reading strategies enabled readers to reflect on their reading process, considering their actions before, during, and after reading. This meta-cognitive awareness helped readers in managing and overseeing their cognitive abilities. Initially, the explicit instruction was designed to help learners at different levels become more mindful of reading comprehension strategies, and later, they could monitor their reading process with meta-cognitive abilities (knowledge of why a strategy is useful at a particular point), which enabled them to become strategic readers. As a part of the teaching intervention, participants were introduced to various fix-up strategies: reading ahead, rereading, scanning for specific details, using contextual clues, discussing with peers, consulting dictionaries, use of L1, and receiving guidance from the instructor. Consequently, the participants transitioned from mere cognitive strategies to meta-cognitive strategies.

Participants	Cognitive Strategies (first three verbal reports)	Meta-cognitive strategies (last three verbal reports)
P1	I recalled the story	I summarized the story in my own words
P2	I recollected my past experience	Asked a question for clarity
P3	I tried to remember an old story	Connected the old story with the incident in this paragraph.
P5	I tried to connect important points	Noted down the important points to remember the ideas to write a summary
P6	Trying to remember the main ideas	Linked the main ideas to form a summary
P8	I imagined the similar images presented in the story	I recalled the images and connected them with the theme of the passage.
P9	Trying to understand the important idea	Reread the passage to find the main idea and connect them based on the key words.
P13	Tried to recall the summary	Summarized the story with the key points

Table-01: Transition from using cognitive to development towards employing meta-cognitive strategies

3.2.4 Progress from stating general statements to particular statements.

Reading strategies of the participants during the initial period of the teaching intervention were general and unfocused, but in the later stage, they developed greater specificity and focus. In other words, reading strategies became more particular during the intervention as a consequence of critical self-reflection on the strategy use. Strategic actions, which were general and unspecific earlier, developed into particular and focused methods over time. For instance, there was a progress in response in P4 ‘underlined key points’ (general) to ‘underlined the main

features of Brazil nut tree' (particular) exemplified the participant's development from being general in the initial phase to being specific and clear in the later stage. More such patterns are shown in Table- 02

Participants	Stating general statements (first three verbal reports)	Stating particular statements (last three verbal reports)
P2	I recollected my past experience	I got the memory of a big banyan tree
P4	I underlined the key ideas	I underlined the main features of the Brazil nut tree
P5	I imagined the tree	I imagined the picture given in the paragraph. It helps me to know how big a tree will be.
P6	I tried to recall my previous knowledge	I recalled my past experience of watching big trees on TV.
P8	I underlined difficult vocabulary.	I underlined the vocabulary, which makes it difficult to understand the main idea expressed.
P10	I imagined the information.	I imagined the information about the big trees that I watched on the National Geographic Channel
P12	I recalled the ideas again	I recalled the main points underlined to remember the text
P13	I underlined words	I underlined words from other fields of study to better understand the text.

Table-02: Progress from stating general statements to particular statements

4 Findings

The current research demonstrated that explicit instruction in reading comprehension yielded marked improvement in participants' reading comprehension skills. The participants were taught using strategies such as reciprocal teaching, collaborative learning, and scaffolding. Pearson (2009) suggested that reciprocal teaching gained prominence during the 1980s and 1990s as it was adopted by researchers for various teaching settings. Klingner & Vaughn (1999) noted that collaborative reading fosters an environment where students, with guidance from teachers and peers, gradually become adept at employing comprehension techniques while reading subject-specific texts. According to Mitchell & Myles (2004), learners may find it challenging to tackle tasks alone in specific situations. However, scaffolding can enable them to realize their potential. Interaction with peers and instructors serves as scaffolding, helping learners reach their learning potential. As learners become proficient, they gain the ability to manage learning independently. In this study, participants engaged in discussion as part of a collaborative reading strategy during various stages of the reading process. The participants were involved in pair-share, jigsaw tasks, think-alouds, and mind-mapping activities during teaching intervention sessions. Strategies like activating previous knowledge and connecting to reading content made their task more manageable. Contextual cues, predicting, and inferencing skills were consciously learnt as these require reading between the lines. Summarizing is a higher-order skill that needs practice by linking important lines with the topic sentence and theme. The participants followed McEwan's (2004) five Cs: comprehend, chunk, compact, conceptualize, and connect in summarizing. These steps helped learners materialize the summarizing process. The success of explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies depends on learners' motivation to adopt and employ these strategies while reading privately. According to Guthrie et al. (2004), intrinsically motivated students employ more comprehension strategies, leading to improved understanding. The

materials and educational settings mediate as major factors in motivating pupils. Hence, teachers must instruct new reading comprehension strategies as needed by learners based on context, enabling them to utilize their awareness and experience with various strategies when reading privately.

The research shows that explicit reading comprehension strategy instruction can be an effective pedagogical approach that surpasses the traditional approach, which limits discussion and collaborative learning due to class size or time constraints, where students answer comprehension questions without awareness of strategies and monitoring. These reading comprehension strategies impacted learners' language skills, including vocabulary and accurate usage. The meta-cognitive strategies were found to be very useful as the learners monitor the process of reading and comprehending the text effectively by thinking about their reading process and tactfully using the fixing-up strategies to overcome the hindrances in comprehension. The study also highlighted the importance of exposing learners to varied texts with different cultural backgrounds and reading extensively to improve comprehension and fluency. The participants learned to identify text structure types and features, which helped them adapt their reading strategies. As Farell (2009) argues, ESL and EFL students' awareness of text organization improves their reading comprehension and proficiency. The study contributed to teaching reading literature by providing insights into learning-teaching comprehension through explicit reading strategies, as shown by verbal report analysis.

5 Conclusion

The study aimed to evaluate the effects of scaffolding, reciprocal teaching, and collaborative learning as elements of explicit reading strategy instruction. An intervention was designed to teach reading comprehension strategies by incorporating scaffolding, reciprocal teaching, and collaborative strategic reading. Analysis of participants' verbal reports revealed the strategies they used. During the pre-reading phase, participants engaged in previewing and activating their prior knowledge. For strategies used while reading, they focused on identifying main ideas, linking them to create a coherent understanding, and re-reading the text to address comprehension issues. In the post-reading phase, participants frequently discussed with peers, sought clarification from the instructor, and used dictionaries and their first language. The study's findings clearly showed that effective strategy use, awareness of meta-cognitive strategies, and suitable reading materials significantly improved the participants' reading comprehension. The research demonstrates that strategies such as reciprocal teaching, collaborative learning, and scaffolding can significantly enhance readers' awareness of reading strategies and help them monitor their reading process (Emanuel, 2024). It also highlights the effectiveness of the socio-constructivist approach in teaching reading, thereby improving learners' comprehension skills. Therefore, the strategies used in this study are not just ends in themselves but serve as tools for developing robust reading comprehension abilities.

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