

PHILOLOGICAL SCIENCES

INTEGRATING READING STRATEGY INSTRUCTION INTO THE EFL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

The present study aims to examine the awareness and use of reading strategies among high school seniors and first-year undergraduate students, as well as their attitudes toward reading in general and in pursuing academic goals. For this purpose, data were collected through surveys and observations, which provided actionable insights for improving reading competency and outcomes. The research findings demonstrate that integrating targeted strategies-based instruction into the curriculum contributes to the development of reading skills and students' ability to deal critically and meaningfully with academic texts.

Keywords: reading habits and preferences, EFL students, reading strategies

Introduction

Reading is fundamental for academic success across disciplines. As one of the four basic language learning skills, it plays a crucial role in EFL learning. Students read English texts for various reasons – academic and professional purposes, or for leisure. At first sight, it may seem that reading is the easiest of the four skills and is taken for granted: if the learners are familiar with language structure and vocabulary, they can overcome the challenges it imposes. Academic education and research have long placed a strong emphasis on reading behaviours. Reading habits in conventional academic environments are frequently centred on the passive approach and assimilation of information, where students' interaction with material is superficial. Such a widely practiced traditional method usually results in limited comprehension, poor retention rates, and a lack of critical engagement with the material. The excessive use of high-tech devices and new media platforms in many aspects of students' lives, is another significant factor, which reshapes and changes reading practices and behaviour, thus transforming the whole educational landscape.

This paper aims to identify the reading habits and preferences of Armenian high school and undergraduate first-year students, their overall familiarity with reading strategies, and to what extent they exploit them to cope with assignments. The data collected through observation and surveys in this study shed light on instructional adjustments to be made in teaching reading strategies on the way to transitioning from high school to university, enabling learners to overcome the extensive reading materials that they eventually face at the university level.

As EFL instructors at the tertiary level, over time, we have observed that many students struggle with reading: not only do they display a lack of motivation, reluctance to read, but they are also unaware of relevant

strategies that may help them tackle academic texts successfully. Frequently, students read through the texts without making sense of the content, as they lack strategies for processing information. They usually translate the unknown vocabulary, work on language structures, and focus on irrelevant details, missing the main idea of the reading passage.

A remarkable experiment was conducted by Dr. Perry, Director of the Harvard Reading-Study Center, who assigned a lengthy passage (a thirty-page chapter from a history book) to 1500 first-year students to be read in twenty minutes and subsequently asked them to write an essay on what they had read. Only fifteen students could identify the main idea, while others did well on a multiple-choice test.

(https://students.dartmouth.edu/academic-skills/sites/students_academic_skills.prod/files/students_academic_skills/wysiwyg/harvard_report_on_reading.pdf)

The Harvard Report aligns with many teacher observations around the world and evidences the fact that study skills, and most importantly, reading strategies are to be taught and learned consistently. An important contribution to the approach to reading in English for Specific Purposes was made by Johns and Davies (Johns and Davies, 1983, as cited in Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998) to emphasize the shift from Text as a Linguistic Object (TALO) to Text as a Vehicle for Information (TAVI). In TALO approach, working with the text, among many other features, involves focusing on language and what is unknown, focusing on detail and understanding all the sentences and words, grammar and lexis exercises, while TAVI approach is concerned with focusing on information and what is known, guessing unknown words, transfer, application or extension of information. Texts in TALO approach are short and graded, they are of general interest: in TAVI approach texts are lengthier and selected to tailor students' needs (p. 97). The TAVI approach should be

practiced in reading classes across university disciplines to teach the students to find information quickly and accurately.

Literature Review

Though reading strategies are well-explored in ESL/EFL research literature, there is no consensus on defining them. The term *strategy* is frequently referred to as a learning technique, behaviour or skill. According to scholars, there is a need to differentiate the two terms - *strategies* and *skills*, which are sometimes used synonymously. The term *reading strategies* gained momentum in the 1970s to emphasize the cognitive aspects of information processing. Paris et al. define reading strategies as actions selected deliberately and controlled by readers to achieve goals or objectives (Paris et al., 1998, as cited in Nguyen, 2022). Afflerbach et al. (2008) suggest that reading strategies are “deliberate, goal-directed attempts to control and modify the reader’s efforts to decode text, understand words, and construct meanings of the text” (p.368).

Each of the above-mentioned definitions emphasizes the deliberate, conscious action on behalf of the reader, whereas skills are unintentional and autonomous. The difference is well illustrated by Afflerbach et al.:

Suppose a student determines he or she has only a vague understanding of a paragraph as he or she reaches the end of it. The student wants to do something to clarify his or her comprehension so the student slows down and asks, “Does that make sense?” after every sentence. This is a reading strategy – a deliberate, conscious, metacognitive act. The strategy is prompted by the student’s vague feeling of poor comprehension, and it is characterized by a slower rate of reading and a deliberate act of self-questioning that serves the student’s goal of monitoring and building better comprehension. Now imagine that the strategy works and the student continues to use it throughout the school year. With months of practice, the strategy requires less deliberate attention, and the student uses it more quickly and more efficiently. When it becomes effortless and automatic (i.e., the student is in the habit of asking, “Does that make sense?” automatically), the reading strategy has become a reading skill. In this developmental example, skill and strategy differ in their intentionality and their automatic and nonautomatic status (p.368).

There is a plethora of classifications of reading strategies that may seem overwhelming for both researchers and practitioners. In a recent study, Nguyen (2022) provides an overview of reading strategy taxonomies, noting that it might be useful for scholars when choosing a theoretical framework. Depending on how the reading strategies are categorized, researchers offer a varying number of the latter, that can reach up to fifty (Oxford, 1990; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990), stating that all of them fall into three broad categories, namely, *cognitive*, *metacognitive*, and *socio-affective*. Cognitive strategies are used to strengthen the relationship between new and already existing information. They include guessing from context, analyzing, taking notes, reasoning, and summarizing. Metacognitive strategies pertain to managing the learning process in

general and involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating. Socio-affective strategies help the learners interact with other people in the learning process and include identifying one’s feelings, creating positive attitudes toward learning (Oxford & Crookall, 1989; Brown, 2001; Oxford, 2001).

Method

To identify patterns in students’ reading habits, preferences, challenges, and motivation to read attentively, a survey was designed for Yerevan State University (YSU) first-year undergraduate students and YSU STEM School seniors. A total of 31 undergraduates majoring in Actuarial and Financial Mathematics working with different academic materials, and 14 high school seniors, who have been reading Y.N. Harari’s *Sapiens, Brief History of Humankind* as an extracurricular reading activity, participated in a two-stage experiment carried out in two different sessions.

During the data-collection stage, students were first asked to respond to survey questions about their reading preferences, basic knowledge, and implementation of reading strategies, the main problems encountered while reading lengthier and more complex texts. The goal was to explore the types of texts they enjoy, the reading format they prefer, any obstacles they encounter while reading, and strategies that might encourage deeper interaction with more intricate materials.

Next, the participants were instructed to:

(1) read an excerpt from a book (for high school seniors) or an academic text (for first-year students), drawing solely on their background knowledge of language and reading,

(2) complete a questionnaire aimed at assessing the reading comprehension and analytical skills of the participants.

In the course of the second stage, students were introduced to various active reading strategies including skimming, scanning, detailed reading, questioning, annotating, paraphrasing, and summarizing, which they practiced for nearly a month. Subsequently, they were asked to re-read the same text and complete the same questionnaire comprising ‘short- and long- answer’, ‘multiple-choice’, and ‘write a summary’ items, this time utilizing the strategies they had learned. The data collected from both sessions of the experiment were then quantitatively analyzed and compared. To ensure consistency and accurate tracking of individual progress, only the responses of the students who participated in both sessions were considered. The results of the study highlighted a steady improvement in students’ reading skills, after they had consciously applied reading strategies to their tasks. This suggests that reading techniques have the potential to enhance the quality of the answers, learning outcomes, and student engagement.

Results and Discussion

The findings of the survey provided genuine insights into students’ current approaches to reading, offering an overview of the following questions:

- What do they like to read?
- What format of reading do they prefer?
- What motivates them while reading in English?

- What challenges and problems do they face concerning focus and comprehension?
- How familiar are they, and how often do they use specific reading strategies?

To gain a broader and more elaborate understanding of students' preferences and interests, several of the survey items, particularly those using checkbox-style responses, allowed participants to select multiple options. Thus, the total percentages for these answers may

exceed 100%. Based on the responses of a total of 41 students, the survey yielded the following results.

Q1. What type of reading do you enjoy most?

Around 79% of the participants selected *historical fiction* and *science fiction/fantasy* as their favourite reading genres. *Detective fiction* and *thriller* came next (57.9%). *Non-fiction* (21.1%), *romance/drama* (31.6%), and *biography/memoirs* (26.3%) were also frequently selected, though with somewhat lower percentages.

Option	Count	Percentage
Science fiction / Fantasy	15	78.9%
Historical fiction	13	68.4%
Detective fiction / Thriller	11	57.9%
Romance / Drama	6	31.6%
Biography / Memoirs	5	26.3%
Non-fiction	4	21.1%

Q2. Do you prefer reading print or digital?

Approximately 63% of the participants said they preferred reading in *print*. Roughly 26% stated they

loved *both media* equally, while a minority (10.5%) preferred *digital* reading.

Option	Count	Percentage
Print	12	63.2%
Both formats	5	26.3%
Digital device	2	10.5%

Q3. How often do you read outside of school assignments?

Around 47.4% of the students read *a few times a week*, 21% of the respondents said they read *daily*, compared to 31.6% who said they read *infrequently*.

Option	Count	Percentage
A few times a week	9	47.4%
Seldom	6	31.6%
Every day	4	21.0%

Q4. What Internet materials do you read?
(Multiple answers allowed)

The majority of the students reported reading *Internet news* (almost 90%), about 63% opted for *Internet*

fiction and *Internet non-fiction* (58%). *Blogs* were also popular, read by 42% of students.

Option	Count	Percentage
Internet news	17	89.5%
Internet fiction	12	63.2%
Internet non-fiction	11	57.9%
Blogs	8	42.1%

Q5. What motivates you to read more attentively?
(Multiple answers allowed)

Nearly 95% of the respondents stated they read more intently when *interested in* the subject matter.

About 63% of the students cited *career goals* as a source of motivation. A few mentioned *assignments* (5.3%) or *exams* (10.5%) as their primary source of inspiration.

Option	Count	Percentage
Interest in the topic	18	94.7%
Career goals	12	63.2%
Upcoming exams	2	10.5%
School assignments	1	5.3%

Q6. Do you struggle to stay focused when reading long, complex texts?

About 37% of the students said they *often* struggled with focus, while an equal number reported they

rarely did (36.8%). *Almost never* was selected by 21%, and only 5% said *always*.

Option	Count	Percentage
Often	7	36.8%
Rarely	7	36.8%
Almost never	4	21.1%
Always	1	5.3%

Q7. What is most challenging when reading in English?

(Multiple answers allowed)

63.2% of the respondents mentioned *staying focused* and *vocabulary* as their biggest challenge. Many also struggle with *understanding the main ideas* (31.6%) and *remembering details* (26.3%).

Option	Count	Percentage
Staying focused	12	63.2%
Vocabulary	11	57.9%
Understanding the main ideas	6	31.6%
Remembering details	5	26.3%

Q8. How much of school reading do you fully understand?

A majority of the students (63.2%) said they *understand most* of the reading material, while 31.6% felt

they understand *almost everything*. Only 5.3% said they understand *only some* of it.

Option	Count	Percentage
Most of it	12	63.2%
Almost everything	6	31.6%
Only some of it	1	5.3%

Q9. Are you familiar with reading strategies?

Around 37% of the students said they are *not familiar* with reading strategies, 32% reported they use

them *sometimes*, and 26% *rarely* use them. Only 5% said they use them *often*.

Option	Count	Percentage
Not familiar	7	36.8%
Yes, sometimes	6	31.6%
Yes, but I use them rarely	5	26.3%
Yes, and I use them often	1	5.3%

Q10. Would learning reading strategies help you understand better?

Half of the respondents (52.6%) believed learning more about reading strategies would help, while 42.1%

were unsure. Only one student (5.3%) said it wouldn't help.

Option	Count	Percentage
Yes	10	52.6%
Maybe	8	42.1%
No	1	5.3%

The data analysis indicates a slight shift in scores (multiple-choice questions 1-12) following the strategies-based instruction, which suggests that more guided learning, extended and consistent practice might be needed to help students decode dense and challenging texts. Teachers could also think about incorporating metacognitive reflection, in which students systematically review the impact of the reading techniques on the

comprehension and the quality of their answers. For instance, students could consider what helps or hinders their cognition in a follow-up discussion, reflection or a post-experiment survey.

With regard to the open-ended questions, the responses (questions 13–20) were reviewed to understand how the quality and depth of perception changed after implementing strategies-based instruction. The survey data revealed the following observations:

- more refined and confidently-shaped answers, with some students explaining or elaborating on the concepts. Clearer articulation shows improved understanding and recall of key terms,
 - shift from surface-level impressions to deeper reasoning, e.g.,
 - before: vague, sometimes fragmented answers, “*brain gets tired*”, “*can’t take unlimited information...*”,
 - after: more technical, cause-effect responses, “*reduces the brain’s ability to concentrate*”, “*switching is hard for the brain*”,
 - enhanced comprehension of the text’s content, e.g.,
 - before: major benefits of staying focused included statements “*you’ll be successful*” or “*understand others*”,
 - after: more detailed and diverse benefits listed: “*productivity*,” “*better decision-making*,” “*emotional intelligence*”,
 - more personalized and reflective statements showing higher engagement with the message,
 - well-organized summaries, better structuring, and synthesis of the passage,
 -
- improved post-instruction reflection and metacognitive awareness.

The survey analysis indicates that students typically struggle with understanding and concentration when reading complicated academic materials, whereas most of them enjoy reading imaginative genres and engaging with digital content. Personal interest, not academic requirements, is what motivates them most, which highlights the importance of linking the assigned materials to students' interests. Most significantly, the results reveal little familiarity with active reading techniques and emphasize the need for a systematic approach to reading in the classroom. Students' interest, comprehension, and confidence in academic reading could all be considerably improved by teaching and promoting well-designed, structured procedures.

Conclusion

The findings of the study point to the following conclusions. The Armenian students who participated in the experiment, faced multiple obstacles regarding reading in EFL class, which were mainly caused by a lack of prior knowledge, instruction, and practice of efficient reading techniques. Such factors result in low motivation and reluctance to make efforts towards the task fulfilment. Additionally, the frequency, consistency, and length of reading instruction played a critical role in the experiment results. Implementing the entire cycle of reading strategy training and assessment was unfavourably impacted by the insufficient weekly instructional hours. It became more challenging to see steady improvement or establish a regular practice of strategic reading skills under the above-mentioned circumstances. These limitations highlight how crucial ample teaching time and subject relevance are to creating effective reading comprehension programmes.

Through introducing students to active reading techniques, such as previewing, annotating, summarizing, and questioning, the study revealed improvements in both comprehension and engagement.

Furthermore, using multimodal teaching resources, including discussions, conversations, visual aids (pictures, videos, and photographs) relating to the topic boosted interest, motivation, and active engagement, helping students connect with the material more deeply. Not only did such extra resources facilitate comprehension, promote critical thinking and cognitive growth, but they also contributed to memory retention and reinforced recently acquired material. In addition, multiple exposures to the same text demonstrated enhanced reading outcomes for students.

Students' interest in the subject matter was another important factor affecting their reading success. Learners tended to deal with the reading assignment with enthusiasm and persistence when they felt that the information was relevant or in line with their tastes, which eventually led to more tangible results. The findings emphasize the importance of incorporating structured reading instruction into EFL curricula, particularly when dealing with academic and cognitively demanding texts. Future research could expand on these results by developing strategies-based reading programmes across diverse educational contexts and assessing their long-term impact on students' reading autonomy and academic success.

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