

*Delving into the Realm of Metacognitive
Reading Strategies: A Crucial Step towards
the Improvement of Undergraduate English
Reading Comprehension in the Kingdom of
Saudi Arabia (KSA)*

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Abstract

This study examines some studies of the existing literature on metacognitive strategies to support reading comprehension among undergraduate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Considering the experimental studies, the impact of such strategies has mainly been

measured by testing changes in students' reading abilities and the development of their psychological well-being. The rationale for this current review is to understand the benefits of conducting these studies in terms of actual changes in learning and teaching of reading skills. Hence, these studies recommended that teaching learners practical strategies for mastering such complex skills is essential. Moreover, the results of these studies gave recommendations to improve the practice of teaching foreign languages, consequently fulfilling aspects of the Saudi Vision 2030 national development plan for the education sector. However, it has been noticed that EFL learners still face reading difficulties.

Key words: Reading strategies, cognitive strategies- metacognitive strategies, EFL, undergraduate level

1. Introduction:

Reading skills require more than merely understanding language structure and vocabulary; they include multiple factors contributing to understanding a reading passage adequately. Each writer will have a specific cultural background and way of expressing his or her thoughts, which the reader must be aware of. For example, the reader should be able to comprehend what a writer is trying to convey by understanding his culture, perspective, situation, and intentions. However, this complex task can be difficult for any language learner, especially in a foreign context where exposure to the writer's background may be limited.

Reading comprehension difficulties in a foreign language have formed the subject of several studies wherein the researchers have sought solutions. Standardized language tests can be used to determine the level of language proficiency. In Saudi Arabia, learners still need to improve in them like in IELTS, where reading is one of the tested skills. This is despite Saudi learners studying English for an extended period throughout their compulsory schooling and even at the undergraduate level. In a recent study, Alzahrani (2019) investigated the poor reading skills of Saudi

students taking the IELTS test in the USA. The aim was to discover the possible reasons behind this phenomenon even though English was taught as a second language. In the research interviews with undergraduate and postgraduate applicants at the USA universities for the above study, the participants mentioned that how reading skills were taught to them previously and the time spent practicing these skills in class were two of the main reasons.

Reading is a skill that needs to be taught in an interactive and motivating way. In this regard, several studies in KSA have examined the most frequently used strategies in teaching it to understand the possible reasons for learners' success or failure, and multiple recommendations have subsequently been made based on these results. However, the improvement has yet to be considered in the context of EFL students' reading ability. This study consequently looks at experimental studies that have examined the use of a certain reading strategy known to be a meta-cognitive type. The research aims to check the possible advantages of this strategy and build additional recommendations for use in the field. Therefore, this study attempts to answer the following question:

How have the results of experimental studies testing metacognitive reading strategy among Saudi undergraduate learners affected current practice and learners' achievement in Saudi Arabia?

2. Literature Review:

This section concentrates on cognitive strategy and examines existing experimental studies relating to its implementation.

2.1 Major Reading Difficulties among Saudi EFL Learners:

Even though national studies in KSA have yielded several recommendations to improve the current state of teaching and learning, specifically regarding EFL reading skills in higher education, significant improvements have yet to be observed in learners' abilities. Most studies in the literature in the context of this study in Saudi Arabia have investigated this low ability by gathering the opinions of learners and teachers. In a study by Alenizi (2019), aspects of the learning environment that could hinder the development of reading comprehension were examined. A survey was therefore conducted among 60 instructors and 146 Saudi undergraduate students, revealing that teachers have poor awareness of the teaching strategies that lead to poor learning

outcomes. The results also showed that these teachers were unaware of the significant difficulties faced by learners, which they could otherwise have helped their students overcome and helped teach them suitable reading strategies. Moreover, cultural and contextual knowledge play a significant role in building robust strategies for teaching reading.

The findings outlined above are compatible with those of a more recent study by Alenezi (2021), who surveyed 203 Saudi EFL students enrolled on the Preparatory Year Program at Northern Border University in Saudi Arabia—the above study aimed to understand the learners' ability to apply reading strategies. Specifically, the results revealed that the participants had excellent foundational knowledge of pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading strategies but were not fully acquainted with applying them in practice. In this regard, Alenezi (2021) recommended improving teaching practices in this area. Furthermore, Altalhab (2019) obtained similar results, such as EFL undergraduates being aware of various reading strategies, with no significant differences found between male and female students. However, the issue was the appropriateness of using these strategies and the time the learners

spent practicing reading in English during the day, which was found to be less than 15 minutes.

In an early study by Alzubi and Singh (2017) conducted on the Preparatory Year program at Najran University in Saudi Arabia, the researchers examined the use of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) to understand its possible impact on EFL learners' reading abilities and autonomy. The above researchers also checked the most commonly used strategies in this learning environment, using Oxford's (1990) SILL, administered to 32 students to measure their application of a reading strategy mediated by smartphones in an EFL reading context. The findings indicated that the participants were moderate in their use of essential cognitive strategies. On this basis, the researchers reflected that learners need these strategies to help them control and manage their language learning in more or less independent settings, with the freedom to do so anywhere and at any time and with access to resources and material choices. It is recommended that learners' abilities be improved via an instructional strategy mediated by smartphones in the context of EFL reading.

In another review conducted by Alharbi (2022) to examine the current situation regarding the teaching and learning of reading skills, similar results and recommendations were found in the study. The above paper searched for the potential issues that limit EFL learners' reading abilities in Saudi Arabia. The main aim of this investigation was to understand the possible challenges and their solutions in the teaching and development of reading from the perspective of both the teacher and the student. Based on the study's findings, the main challenges included a need for sufficient knowledge of the language, limited vocabulary, curriculum issues, and low interest among the students. Meanwhile, possible solutions could be appropriate, such as teacher training, diversifying methods of teaching reading, recognizing students' learning styles, motivating students, and conducting extra classes.

Mohammed (2022) also investigated the most common reading strategies adopted among Saudi EFL learners and the relationship of these strategies with self-efficacy and reading comprehension. Thus, a questionnaire was administered, and students' score profiles were used. For this purpose, the researcher formulated a questionnaire to explore three sub-categories of

strategy: (a) cognitive strategies (5 items), global reading strategies (12 items), and memory strategies (6 items). The items exploring self-efficacy were also divided into three sub-categories: confidence (8 items), self-regulation (8 items), and task difficulty (8 items). The results revealed that the respondents moderately preferred meta-cognitive strategies, while global strategies were the most popular, with a positive correlation between all the study variables. The researcher consequently made the following recommendations: EFL teachers in KSA and other Arab countries should guide their students in using additional reading strategies, which could contribute to learners' self-efficacy and enhance their overall reading ability, especially their reading comprehension.

To summarize the above, a reading teacher must identify suitable strategies and train his or her students to use them practically in order to gain the maximum possible benefit. A metacognitive strategy may be applied in traditional face-to-face, online, or blended environments, as discussed further in section 2.2 below.

2.2 Metacognitive Strategy to Support Reading Comprehension:

To understand what is meant by "strategy" in language teaching and learning, Çakıcı (2017) cites Oxford (1990, p.8) as the best definition of a language learning strategy, thus: " operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information." Furthermore, these strategies may be direct or indirect. One indirect strategy is metacognitive in nature, defined by Oxford (2003, p.12) as allowing "learners to control their cognition and to coordinate the learning process through using functions such as centring, arranging and planning, and evaluating". These strategies involve understanding one's style preferences and needs, self-learning, collecting and managing materials, planning for an L2 task, preparing a study schedule and space, controlling mistakes, and evaluating the suitability of the learning strategy and success of the task. These strategies may all be used to shape the learning process (ibid.), with learners adopting a more autonomous approach, as they will have control over what they learn. In relation to reading skills, Al-Qahtani (2020) clarifies

that through metacognitive strategies, learners can be more conscious of what constitutes effective reading.

Moreover, readers who are metacognitively aware will be able to deal with texts that are difficult to comprehend since they can find ways to overcome their obstacles. Meanwhile, deploying metacognitive stimuli for thoughts can lead to deeper learning and better achievement (Al-Qahtani, 2020). This has been tested throughout the EFL literature, and metacognitive strategies have been found to be useful (Ahmadi et al., 2013; Rastegar et al., 2017; Muhid et al., 2020).

In the coming section, a more detailed description will be provided of the studies conducted on implementing metacognitive strategies to support foreign language reading comprehension in the context of this review.

2.3 A Collection of Studies that have examined the Metacognitive Strategy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA):

In this part of the review, only experimental and quasi-experimental studies were included to understand the possible impact of applying cognitive strategy to teach and learn reading

skills within the EFL context in KSA. For example, Ismail and Tawalbeh's (2015) quasi-experimental study examined the usefulness of metacognitive reading strategies instruction (MRSI) at Taif University among 21 female university students with low reading scores. The sample was divided into two groups: an experimental group that included ten girls and a control group comprised of 11 girls. The main objectives of the above study were stated as to test whether there were significant differences between the experimental and control groups in terms of using metacognitive reading strategies and reading comprehension post-tests in order to identify whether there were significant differences between the mean scores of pre-and post-English Language reading tests and to look for significant differences between the mean post-test scores after implementing metacognitive strategies. The results revealed statistically significant differences between both groups in the post-test reading comprehension test, which was indicated in the reading strategies questionnaire. The experimental group showed a significant improvement in their reading ability. The results also showed statistically significant differences between the experimental group's pre- and post-test reading comprehension results. On this basis, recommendations were made

by the researchers to teach learners the proper use of metacognitive strategies for reading and to focus on constructing a remedial program to help learners with poor reading ability. The latter would be achieved by training learners to use metacognitive strategies effectively.

In a similar study design conducted by Alzubi et al. (2019), the researchers implemented smartphone use to improve students' reading abilities in a sample of 70 students, divided equally into an experimental (n=35) and control (n=35) group. These two groups shared similar features in terms of age, demography, education level, and gender, and all were studying in the Deanship of Preparatory Year (PYP) at Najran University in Saudi Arabia. The intervention began with training delivered by a qualified teacher who instructed the two groups in essential reading strategies, including cognitive, compensation, memory, affective, and metacognitive strategies. However, the experimental group used smartphones, whereas the control group did not. Questionnaires were collected from the participants prior to and after the intervention. The study's findings indicated that the intervention for reading strategies was effective for both groups. However, the

experimental group showed higher levels of autonomous learning in that the participants in this group were able to store and retrieve new information by perceiving and producing information on their own. They were also capable of overcoming any language difficulty and continuing the task.

Furthermore, the participants in the experimental group were able to determine their objectives beyond the reading practice by monitoring and evaluating their progress. Through their enjoyment of using smartphones to apply reading strategies, the learners kept practicing reading outside and inside the classroom to improve their reading. This study established a basis for further actions to be taken in EFL practice by allowing the use of smartphones in language classes and teaching learners the strategies required to improve various language skills. Hence, using technology like smartphones could further develop learners' autonomy, motivation, self-efficacy, responsibility, agency, positive attitudes, and the desire to seek knowledge to enhance their achievement.

More recently, Al-Qahtani (2020) conducted a study in a secondary school, making significant recommendations after implementing a metacognitive think-aloud strategy to improve

Saudi EFL learners' reading comprehension and attitudes. However, before the main study and intervention, the above researcher conducted a pilot study to understand the reasons behind the EFL learners ' low achievement, finding that the students demonstrated poor use of prediction and poor ability to make connections, visualize, infer, question, and summarize. This indicated that the learners needed greater awareness of such learning strategies and how to utilize them. Through a quasi-experimental design, wherein a Skills Test and Attitude Scale were applied to measure EFL learning, a sample of 40 students was randomly but equally divided into experimental and control groups. The students in the experimental group were taught using a metacognitive think-aloud strategy, whereas the control group received traditional instruction in, for example, skimming and scanning techniques. The study's findings showed that the experimental group had developed their reading comprehension with a positive attitude toward their reading ability. Thus, the think-aloud strategy could be applied to teach reading comprehension in an EFL educational context. The study further recommended that EFL teachers develop the efficacy of their reading strategies by teaching them to students.

3. Current Recommendations to Improve EFL Reading Practices:

Several recommendations may be made nationally or internationally based on the previous discussion. In the Saudi context, it was found that studies on training in metacognitive strategies are limited. Additional empirical studies are therefore required to understand better the potential benefits of teaching reading based on metacognitive strategies. Based on the results, improvements could be initiated. However, to ensure the adequate application of these strategies, EFL teachers must be introduced to and trained to teach students in their practical use rather than merely teaching the theory. Hence, stakeholders in the education sector could take serious action through workshops.

Further to the above, if improvements are to be considered on an international level, this review reveals meta-cognitive strategies to be effective for enhancing EFL learners' reading skills, especially when applied using recent technologies like smart devices and in accordance with different online or blended teaching modes and designs.

4. Conclusion:

This review was conducted to understand the extent of the research already performed to find better solutions for improving the reading ability of Saudi EFL students. Even though a few experimental studies have shown that certain strategies, such as meta-cognitive strategies, are beneficial, actual application is still required. Case studies demonstrate that teachers and students possess suitable background knowledge. However, they need to be made aware of the importance of using this knowledge to enhance students' reading skills and thereby improve their reading comprehension.

To understand the importance of developing any FL skill, we should mention that all four language skills are integrated, each supporting progress in the others. In other words, to improve learners' productive language skills like speaking and writing, it is necessary to help them increase their language input through receptive skills like reading and listening. This implies a serious step to be considered by stakeholders in the education sector, adopting suitable methods of training EFL teachers to teach

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students what is required to develop each language skill, based on the recent research results at the local level.

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