



EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Practice of Reading Strategy

Instruction in Secondary Schools in China

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Abstract

Reading literacy has become a powerful tool for academic success and an essential goal of education (Kilpatrick, Joshi, & Wagner, 2019; Koda & Zehler, 2008; Oyetunji, 2013). The ability to read is not only fundamental for pupils' academic success, but also prerequisite for successful participation in today's vastly expanding multi-literate textual environment. Nowadays, in many educational settings, students are expected to learn a foreign/second language for successful participation in the increasingly globalized world. Therefore, it is crucial to help learners become skilled foreign-language readers. Research indicates that students' reading comprehension can be significantly improved through explicit instruction of multiple reading strategies. Despite a wealth of research identifying numerous reading strategies for assisting students in understanding specific texts, there has been little that has shone light on whether these reading comprehension strategies are used in classrooms, especially in Chinese academic settings. Given the central role of 'the teacher' in reading instruction, the study investigates EFL teachers' attitudes towards reading comprehension strategies and their classroom employment of those strategies in secondary schools in China. It also explores the efficiency of reading strategy instruction on pupils' reading comprehension performance. As a mixed-method study, the analysis drew on data from a quantitative survey and interviews with seven teachers in three different schools. The study revealed that the EFL teachers had positive attitudes toward the use of cognitive strategies, despite their insufficient knowledge about and limited attention to metacognitive strategies and supporting strategies. Regarding the selection of reading strategies for instruction, the mandated curriculum and high-stakes examinations, text features and demands, teaching preparation programmes and their own EFL reading experiences were the major criteria in their responses, while few teachers took into account the learner needs in their choice of reading strategies. Although many teachers agreed upon the efficiency of reading strategy instruction in developing students' reading comprehension competence, three challenges were identified in their implementation of the strategy instruction. The study provides some insights into reading strategy instruction in the Chinese context, and proposes implications for curriculum innovation, teacher professional development, and for reading instruction research.

Keywords: *EFL reading instruction; language teacher cognition; reading comprehension strategies; teacher education*



1. Introduction

Reading comprehension, as a fundamental goal of reading literacy, has become the foundation for active participation in today's expanding multi-literate textual environment and increasingly digital society (Concannon-Gibney & Murphy, 2012; Grabe, 2009; PISA, 2019). It is also important to recognize that, in many educational settings, students are expected to learn a foreign/second language for successful participation in the increasingly globalized world (Grabe, 2009). Therefore, it is vital to help learners become strategic L2 readers.

As an ultimate goal of reading process, comprehension became a recognized field of study with the burgeoning interest in understanding what good readers do when they read (Dole, 2000). The studies of proficient readers have established that good readers use strategies and comprehension is a strategic process, and that instruction can result in improved strategy use and reading comprehension (Block & Duffy, 2018). Therefore, many researchers made the strategic nature of reading comprehension the focus of their efforts, examining what reading strategies to teach and how to provide effective strategy instruction (McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009; Oxford, 1990; Pressley et al., 1989). The more recent research advocates the teaching of multiple strategies and the flexible coordination of them.

From the sociocultural view of reading, researchers argue that comprehension involve three dimensions: "the reader, the text and the activity/context" (Snow, 2002, p.11), which are influenced by, and in some cases determined by a larger sociocultural context (i.e., classroom). Ruddell and Unrau (2013) suggest that the sociocultural contexts, specifically in social contexts of the classroom, involve "the reader, the text and classroom context, and the teacher" (p.1015). They emphasize the need to value the perspective of "the teacher" in conceptualizing the reading process, with the view that "it is the teacher who frequently assumes major responsibility for facilitating meaning negotiation within the social settings of the classroom" (Ruddell & Unrau, 2013, p.1015). Indeed, the teacher orchestrates reading instruction and the meaning-construction process. Given the central role that "the teacher" plays in the reading classroom, the present study aims to explore the EFL teachers' views and classroom employment of reading comprehension strategies in secondary schools and also the effectiveness of reading strategy instruction on students' reading comprehension achievement, in the belief that the enhanced knowledge in this vein will be of great value and interest to EFL senior high school reading instructors, policymakers and those involved in EFL teacher development programs in China.

The research questions are as follows:

1. How important do EFL teachers consider reading comprehension strategies to be taught in reading classes?
2. What is EFL teachers' frequency of use of reading comprehension strategies in senior high schools in a town in south of China?
3. How effective is reading strategy instruction on students' reading comprehension performance?

2. Research design

2.1 Participants

The study involved a sample of 30 EFL teachers from three public senior high public schools in a common district in the south of China. All participants taught EFL students in mixed-abilities classes from various grades. Table 1 summarizes demographic information of the surveyed teachers.

Table 1. Demographics of the participants

Category	Level	N	%
Gender	Male	11	36.67
	Female	19	63.33
Years of English Teaching Experience	Less than a year	1	3.33
	1 year – less than 5 years	9	30.00
	6 years – less than 10 years	2	6.67
	More than 10 years	18	60.00
Degree of Education	Bachelor	29	96.67
	Master	1	3.33

N = 30



2.2 Instruments

A mixed-method approach was employed to address the ‘what’ (quantitative data) and “how and why” (qualitative) types of the research questions (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 25). The instruments consisted of a questionnaire-based survey and a semi-structured interview. In the questionnaire, 13 reading comprehension strategies, derived from a wealth of research pertinent to reading comprehension strategies were examined. An online survey software was used to gather data from participants to yield responses to the first two research questions regarding the importance and frequency of use. The participants were given a week to complete the questionnaire. Upon the completion of quantitative data gathering, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 7 teachers.

2.3 Data analysis

2.3.1 Analysis of questionnaire findings

The quantitative data analysis involved using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to calculate means and standard deviations of each item of reading strategies in both Importance Survey and Frequency Survey. The 13 reading strategies were divided into four categories (see Table 2) for deeper analysis, for example, testing the impact of variables including gender and years of teaching experience.

Table 2: Categories of the reading strategies

Category	Items
Cognitive strategies	Scanning text for specific information; Skimming for main ideas; Handling unfamiliar words using context clues; Summarizing what they read; Making predictions before and during reading
Metacognitive strategies	Monitoring reading comprehension constantly; Asking questions to check comprehension; Think-aloud
Conceptually-driven basis	Activating background knowledge about the reading content; Using text structure to support comprehension
Supporting strategies	Using reading schemes; Using visual support; Using efficient silent reading techniques for relatively rapid comprehension

2.3.2 Analysis of qualitative data

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken following the analysis of the quantitative data. The qualitative data were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by the researcher. Additionally, thematic analysis was undertaken to make meaning of the interviewees’ accounts before generating the categories.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Perceived importance of reading comprehension strategies

The study manifested general acknowledgement of the importance of teaching reading strategies in order to facilitate students’ reading comprehension. The results revealed that the participating teachers gave prominence to teaching ‘strategies such as skimming and scanning, using text structure and summarizing’ in EFL reading classes. The findings also exhibited that the surveyed teachers had positive attitudes towards the instruction of cognitive strategies (Mean 4.28), conceptually-driven basis (Mean 4.14) and metacognitive strategies (Mean 4.00), while the supporting strategies (Mean 3.97) were the least important strategies in the survey. These results are aligned with Chou’s study (2008) with EFL teachers in Taiwan.

3.2 Frequency of classroom implementation of reading strategies

The results of the Frequency Survey demonstrated the underutilization of reading strategies (Total mean 3.93), compared with the results of the Importance Survey (Total mean 4.10). This could result from the fact that the majority of the teachers focused on helping students achieve better reading scores in exams rather than helping them become strategic learners. Moreover, the participating



reading instructors relied much on the implementation of cognitive strategies (Mean 4.13), while the other categories of strategies, namely, metacognitive strategies, conceptually-driven basis and aided strategies revealed lower utilization in reading classes (Mean<4). The high classroom implementation of cognitive strategies is in line with the findings in Cabaroglu and Yurdaisik's research (2008) in Saudi reading classes.

Although further analyses of both surveys were conducted across variables including gender or years of teaching experience, no significant differences were exposed in the data. Additionally, the most frequently overlooked reading comprehension strategies in both surveys were "activating background knowledge", "using visual support" and "thinking aloud". The participants indicated that they tended not to hold great importance to or teach them frequently in class. The underutilization of these strategies was mainly a result of the teachers' inadequate knowledge of the crucial role of these strategies play in facilitating students' reading comprehension, which is consistent with the results from Morsy's study (2017) in Qatar government schools.

3.3 The efficiency of strategy instruction on learners' reading comprehension performance

Most participants identified positive outcomes of strategy instruction in terms of students' improved comprehension, increased reading scores in examinations and more quality classroom response to the questions they asked related to text. They noted that these outcomes were evident among proficient readers. The efficiency of strategy instruction, however, was temporary in general. The respondents also pointed out the challenges of implementing efficient strategy instruction, including students' lack of fluency and motivation, inability to decode words because of inadequate L2 vocabulary knowledge, the scarcity of authentic reading materials in the prescribed textbooks and the constraints of their institutional environments (i.e., high-stakes exams, large class size and heavy workload).

4. Conclusion

A number of implications can arise from the findings of the research. However, in the study, teachers' insufficient knowledge of reading strategies and neglect of strategy instruction are obvious obstacles. Therefore, teacher training programmes should be revisited, re-evaluated and redefined to ensure that due attention is paid to equip teachers with adequate knowledge of reading strategies and develop their competence of reading strategy instruction. The study provided ample evidence that the surveyed teachers focused much on the confines of mandated curriculum and public examinations in strategy selection, while paying little attention to learner variables, for instance, the individual learner's strengths and needs, motivation toward reading and their English language proficiency. Thus, they should adjust instruction to fit the needs of individual learners at various points in their development. They are encouraged to identify their students' strengths and weaknesses in reading through efficient comprehension assessment. Additionally, it is clear in the study that the high-stakes exams strongly influenced the teachers' attitudes towards reading strategy instruction and the learners' motivation of reading process. There was much evidence that teachers tended to be obsessed with excessive coaching for reading assessments and purposively ignore the strategies and activities that did not contribute directly to increased reading scores of students, which calls for the urgent attention of the policy makers and the Ministry of Education regarding the washback of national examinations.

Drawing on the current study, future researchers can conduct further examinations of the reading comprehension strategy instruction in similar contexts in China. The majority of participating teachers had a bachelor's degree and only one teacher held a masters' degree. Therefore, it was hard to identify the influence of teachers' education levels on their strategy instruction. Studies are welcomed to determine the relationship between EFL teachers' educational backgrounds and their attitudes towards and practice of reading strategy instruction. It should be noted that, to be fully effective, future research must account for the adaptations of strategy instruction appropriate to the target classroom settings and institutional and sociocultural constraints and integrate those adaptations with knowledge of how teachers and learners make sense of strategic reading.



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