

# The Impact of Consciousness-raising Strategies on Improving the Reading Comprehension Ability of Iranian Pre-university High School Students

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to investigate whether there is any relationship between the consciousness-raising strategies and reading ability or not. Considering reading problem versus language problem, the results showed that reading ability and reading strategies instruction are related. At low levels of reading ability, this relationship is negative. On the contrary, at high levels of reading ability, the successful readers could use reading strategies. The present study relies on Casanave's (1988) expanded view of schema theory, the strategy schema, as well as on Clarke's (1980) idea of short-circuit or language ceiling hypothesis in ESL or EFL reading.

**KEYWORDS:** short-circuit hypothesis, reading strategies, successful readers, unsuccessful readers, schema theory, pre-university level.

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## INTRODUCTION

Learners of a second or foreign language may rarely find chances to communicate with native speakers orally, but they can read different texts in different subjects with varying degrees of detail and difficulty. In the contemporary world, scientific findings are written in the form of printed pages. So, the need for reading and extracting information from these texts seems to be vital. Reading is probably the most commonly needed skill in EAP worldwide, not only to obtain information but also as an enjoyable activity. Of course, reading should lead to comprehension; otherwise, it will not result in obtaining information. According to Rivers (1981) "reading is the most important activity in any language class, not only as a source of information and a pleasure activity but also as a means of consolidating and extending one's knowledge of language". In many parts of the world a reading knowledge of a foreign language is often important for academic studies and personal development. The overwhelming majority of societies and countries around the world are multilingual, and educated citizens are expected to function well in more than one language. L2 reading ability, particularly in English language, which is a global language and also the language of science, technology and advanced research, is considered very important in the area of academic studies. In modern life, learning depends largely on one's ability to interpret the printed page precisely and fully. In day-to-day life people encounter material for reading either in their first language or a foreign language. In such a scenario, knowledge of the language in which the material is written is imperative. Hence the ability to read for various purposes at different times in one's life is paramount for every individual. Yet despite this significance, it is common experience that most students fail to learn to read adequately in a foreign language, and very frequently they seem to read with less understanding than we expect them to have. Researchers have tried to find out the causes of poor reading. In doing so, they have faced many questions: Is it a reading problem or a language problem? Does a limited control over language short-circuit the ability to read better? Should we develop students' reading strategies or skills? Is poor reading a matter of linguistic complexity, or does it relate to content unfamiliarity?

### Background to the Study

In this section, some of the key concepts and theories underlying the present study are presented based on the existing literature.

#### A. Reading Purposes

When people read, they read for a purpose. How we read and the strategies we use while reading are also determined by the purpose of reading. Reading purposes can be classified as follows:

- **Reading for survival:** Reading is necessary to perform daily tasks. For example, reading instructions in order to learn how an appliance works, or how to fill out a form; reading the dosage given on the label for medicines or signs on a road while driving.
- **Reading for pleasure:** We read a novel, a short story, or a newspaper article for entertainment; we also often need to read in order to solve a puzzle, or carry out some other activity which is pleasant and amusing.
- **Reading for learning:** Reading to learn typically occurs in academic and professional contexts in which a person needs to learn considerable amount of information from a text.

The focus of this thesis was on reading for learning since pre-university students usually read material for a learning purpose.

**B. Reading Theories**

The type of reading activity will vary in relation to the purpose of reading. According to Aebersold, and Field (2000, p. 18), there are three main reading models.

**1. Bottom-up theory** states that the readers construct the text from the smallest units, for example from letters to words and from words to phrases and finally from phrases to sentences and so on. The process of constructing the text from these small units becomes so automatic that readers are not aware of how it operates.

**1. Top-down theory** argues that readers bring a great deal of prior acquired knowledge, assumptions, beliefs, and questions to the text. They read the given text and continue to read until the text confirms their expectations. The top-down school of reading theory argues that readers fit the text knowledge (cultural, syntactic, linguistic, and historical) to the knowledge they already possess, and then check back when new or unexpected information appears. So, these models start with hypotheses and predictions and attempt to verify them by working down to the printed stimuli.

**3. The interactive school of theorists:** These researchers believe that both bottom-up and top-down processes occur either alternately or at the same time. These theorists describe a process that moves both bottom-up and top-down, depending on the type of text as well as on the reader’s background knowledge, language proficiency level, motivation, strategy use, and culturally shaped beliefs about reading.

**C. Strategy Training**

Training in the use of learning strategies in order to improve a learner's effectiveness. A number of approaches to strategy training are used including as follows:

**Explicit training:** Learners are given information about the value and purpose of particular strategies, taught how to use them, and how to monitor their own use of the strategies.

**Embedded Strategy Training:** The strategies to be taught are not taught explicitly but are embedded in the regular content of an academic subject area such as reading, maths or science.

**Combination Strategy Training:** Explicit strategy training is followed by embedded training.

**Research Questions and Hypotheses**

The following research questions provide the focus for the study:

- I. Is there a statistically significant difference between the reading comprehension ability of the students who receive reading strategies instruction beforehand and those who do not?
- II. Is there any relationship between consciousness-raising strategies and the improvement of reading comprehension ability of good readers?
- III. Is there any relationship between consciousness-raising strategies and the improvement of reading comprehension ability of poor (unsuccessful) readers?

Based on the above research questions the following three null hypotheses were presented.

- I. The reading strategies of consciousness-raising have no significant impact on improving the reading ability of Iranian pre-university high school students.
- II. Teaching reading strategies to good readers has no significant impact on their reading comprehension ability.
- III. Teaching reading strategies to poor readers has no significant impact on their reading comprehension ability.

**MATERIALS AND METHOD**

**A. Subjects**

The subjects were all Iranian male Turkish-speaking pre-university high school students at Taleghani and Rezvan High Schools in Nir city, Ardebil province. The sample was randomly selected from among different classes. The age range of subjects was 18-20.

**B. Instrumentation**

To carry out the present research two types of tests were administered to subjects .

- 1. Nelson Standard Test (version 200 A) for 286 intermediate students to check the homogeneity of the subjects
- 2. Six reading comprehension passages as pre-test and post-test

**C. Design**

The present study is within the framework of experimental design of research, namely, pretest-posttest equivalent groups design. The schematic presentation of the above mentioned design is as follows:

<b>R</b>	<b>O1</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>O2</b>
<b>R</b>	<b>O3</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>O4</b>

There were four groups in this study, two experimental groups and two control groups, the experimental groups, i.e., successful and unsuccessful reader groups received instruction on reading strategies while the control groups did not receive any instruction.

**D. Procedure**

The following procedures were followed to carry out the present study.

1. The Nelson Standard Test (version 200A) was administered to 286 pre-university high school students in order to homogenize the subjects in terms of their general knowledge of basic grammar and vocabulary. Then 208 students, whose scores fell within one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected. The proficiency test consisted of two parts. The first part consisted of 14 vocabulary items and the other part consisted of 36 multiple-choice grammar items.
2. The six reading comprehension test with 40 multiple-choice items were administered to 208 students as a pretest in order to verify that the same level of reading comprehension ability, that is to homogenize of the subjects in terms of their reading comprehension ability. Here again 68 subjects were excluded because their scores fell within half standard deviation above and below the mean. Finally 140 subjects were selected. Seventy subjects were considered good or successful readers because their scores were half standard deviation above the mean (19-35). The remaining, namely 70 subjects, were considered poor or unsuccessful readers because their scores were half standard deviation below the mean (2-11). Each of the good or poor reader groups were assigned into two equally-numbered groups, i.e., A and B & A1 and B1 each with 35 students. Group A and A1 were called experimental groups and groups B and B1 were called the control groups. Thus, in this study the researcher had two experimental and two control groups.
3. The subjects in experimental groups (one good-readers group and one poor-readers group) attended two one hour sessions a week for two months. In this period they were taught several appropriate reading strategies such as skimming and scanning, note taking, skipping unknown words, etc. It should be mentioned that the subjects in the first and second control groups did not receive any instruction.
4. Finally, the six reading passages which were used in the pre-test, were administered as a post-test to the subjects in all four groups. These six passages were administered after the end of treatment period, that is, after sixteen sessions, in order to investigate the effect of treatment. These passages were administered as a post-test to the subjects in all four groups. The experimental groups used the knowledge of reading strategies during the treatment period, whereas the two control groups did not. Exactly like the pre-test, the subjects were asked to read the passages very carefully during the allocated time (40 minutes) and to answer to 40 multiple-choice questions.

In order to guarantee the homogeneity of the groups more, an F-test was used. The results indicated that the four groups were at the same level of proficiency.

**RESULTS**

The obtained results were subjected to a test of statistical significance, i.e. an analysis of variance (ANOVA), which indicates a significant difference among the four means to determine whether the reading comprehension ability of the subjects had been improved by strategies instruction or not. It should be mentioned that one point was allocated for each correct answer and the subjects were not penalized for wrong answers. At the end, the obtained data were analyzed by performing an ANOVA, which indicated significant differences among the four means.

Then a Scheffe test was used to find out where the difference lay.

Now the results of ANOVA and Scheffe test are explained here with respect to tables 1 and 2.

Table 1- displays the results of ANOVA in the following page.

**Table 1- Descriptive Statistics of ANOVA**

Source of variance	SS	D.F	M.S	F <sub>obs</sub>	0.05	F.critical .01
Between groups	5601.34	3	1868.11	10.96	2.68	3.95
Within groups	23329.11	136	170.28			
Total	28930.45	139				
	<b>p &lt; 0.01</b>		<b>p &lt; 0.05</b>			

SS= sum of square  
 D.F = degree of freedom  
 MA = mean square  
 F<sub>obs</sub> = F-observed

As the table 1 indicates, the observed F (10.96) was much greater than F-critical (2.68), so it was concluded that there was a statistically significant difference between the means.

The MSB (mean square between) and MSW (mean square within) are two estimates of population. The MSB is an estimate biased for treatment and belongs to a distribution with 3 degrees of freedom. The second estimate which is unbiased for treatment belongs to a distribution of 136 degrees of freedom. The F distribution for the interaction of 3/136 is 2.68 at 0.05 alpha level of probability and a ratio of 3.95 at 0.01 level of significance. The F-observed, i.e., 10.96 was very much greater than the critical value of F, i.e., 2.68 at 0.05 alpha level of significance and 3.95 at 0.01 level of significance, so it could be concluded that there was a statistically significant difference between the performance of four groups on doing reading comprehension tasks and such different rating could not be due to chance. As a result the first null hypothesis was rejected by the researcher. Table 2- displays the results of Scheffe test.

Table 2- The Scheffe Test for Comparing of Four Means

Comparison	Mean 1	Mean 2	$t_{obs}$	D.F	$t_{cri}$
G <sub>1</sub> VS. G <sub>2</sub>	39.32	32.27	* 9.79	72	4
G <sub>1</sub> VS. G <sub>3</sub>	39.32	12.70	* 33.27	72	4
G <sub>1</sub> VS. G <sub>4</sub>	39.32	12.16	* 31.95	72	4
G <sub>3</sub> VS. G <sub>4</sub>	12.70	12.16	.65	72	4

G<sub>1</sub> = Experimental group (successful readers)

G<sub>2</sub> = Control group (successful readers)

G<sub>3</sub> = Experimental group (unsuccessful readers)

G<sub>4</sub> = Control group (unsuccessful readers)

\* = Indicative of significant differences

The final step was to compare each of t-observed values. The results of table 2 show that the  $t_{obs}$  for group 1 and 2 is 3.5. This amount of t exceeds 4 (t-critical), so the second null hypothesis was rejected at 0.05 level of significance and 68 degrees of freedom. So the researcher concluded that reading strategies instruction has a significant impact on improving the reading ability of good readers. Furthermore, the comparison of group 1 and 3 and also group 1 and 4 performance confirmed the rejection of second null hypothesis too.

The t-observed value for the comparison of group 3 and 4 is .39. This amount of t is lower than the critical value, i.e. 4 at 68 degrees of freedom. Thus the third null hypothesis concerning poor reading and reading strategies instruction was not rejected. Therefore, it is concluded that strategies instruction to unsuccessful readers has no significant impact on their reading ability.

## CONCLUSION

The findings lent support to already familiar question of reading problem versus language problem first raised by Alderson (1984) and then followed by Carrell (1991). It was found that both were significant factors but the difference is that for lower level of language competence it is mostly a matter of language problem. Conversely, at high levels of language competence it is a reading problem that is If the good readers are taught reading strategies, they will be better readers. Thus, teaching reading strategies has a positive effect on improving their reading ability. But according to Clarke's short-circuit hypothesis (1980) the poor readers should pass a certain threshold level if they want to make use of readings strategies.

The finding of the present study suggested a number of implications for the classroom. Reading strategies appear to play a basic role in foreign language reading comprehension processes. The importance of reading strategies with respect to good and poor readers is manifested in the study. The study suggests that first we should help the poor readers with their L2, i.e. language competence, and then with reading strategies.

What is clearly recommended here to teachers or those directly responsible for preparing reading strategies, specially for high school students, is to attach paramount importance to the reading strategies which help students to improve their reading comprehension ability. The finding of the present study can help teachers to have a closer look at reading strategies, and develop their understanding of the selection of effective reading strategies which lead to efficient reading. On the other hand, students can use the reading strategies and appreciate their usefulness. Finally, the awareness of reading strategies and practicing them greatly increase the positive outcome of instruction.

Also the importance of the content of texts is emphasized. Students should be encouraged to conceptualize the content of their reading texts and, at the same time, to monitor their own reading comprehension. It is the teachers' duty to enhance the students' interest. Students will not learn well and will not activate their schemata if the reading materials are not to their interest.

Finally, the present study brings to light the complexity and the importance of the reading process, urging the teachers and the students both, to look more critically at reading comprehension issue. It is crystal clear that

the reading passages form the sections of nearly all the text books, regardless of the approach the designers have. Considering the importance of the reading process, the designers should remember to use authentic texts. Teachers should make the students familiar with the reading process; the students also should understand the importance of the reading process if they want to improve in this skill.

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