

Effect of Teaching Reading Strategies on the Students' Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

Reading is an important tool for getting access to information which provides a base to the learning process. Comprehension is a basic pre-requisite for reading to be meaningful. Various reading strategies have been associated with better reading comprehension. The current experimental study conducted in the Pakistani context explored the effect of teaching reading strategies on reading comprehension of students in the subject of English at the higher secondary school level. The experimental pretest-posttest equivalent research design was adopted to conduct the study. The sample consisted of 60 higher secondary school students of a private girls' college in Mansehra, Pakistan. Findings indicate that teaching reading strategies have a positive impact on the reading comprehension of students at the higher secondary level. The study has important implications for teachers, students, curriculum planners, policymakers in the field of education and school leaders.

Key Words

Higher Secondary School,
Reading Comprehension,
Teaching of English,
Teaching strategies,
Pedagogy

Introduction

Reading is an essential academic skill needed in the formal learning of a language. Cline, Johnston, and King (2006) define reading as a process of decoding, understanding and deriving meaning from the written text. Some authors identify reading as a complex skill aimed at reading comprehension.

Reading comprehension is a meaning-making process that strengthens the ability to interpret written texts with understanding of vocabulary, sentence structure, and syntax (Flower, 2010). Effective reading comprehension can take place when readers actively interact with the text. Comprehension is a cognitive process, which refers to understanding of knowledge and information (Bloom & Krathwalh 1956). Understanding is the process that helps students change symbolic form of the text to interpret and extrapolate ideas, concepts, and information (Sadker & Sadker, 2003). According to Anderson and Pearson (1985), it is to form a mental image or replica for the information in the text.

To teach reading comprehension skills, teachers often teach different reading strategies. Reading strategies often help readers in building and maintaining meanings (Yang, 2006). Research indicates a range of strategies associated with better reading comprehension. These strategies include identification of key ideas, finding structural connections, questioning, rereading, recalling, revising and understanding. Besides, motivation, self-questioning, self-regulation, self-evaluation are other strategies associated with better reading comprehension (Sani, Wan & Raslee, 2011). Other important strategies include identifying main ideas, reading/backtracking, inferencing, self-questioning, and summarizing.

The main idea is defined as the most important thought expressed in a paragraph or passage (Harris & Sipay, 1980). To find and interpret the main idea is a cognitive reading strategy. The foremost purpose of a reading comprehension strategy is to find and interpret the main idea of a text (Aulls, 1978). Similarly, Johnston and Afflerbach (1985) argue that knowing/finding the main idea is the core objective of reading comprehension process.

Rereading or backtracking is almost synonymous and means that reading the text or some part of it again and again to reach a better understanding. Re-reading is one of the most effective

types of reading strategies. Paris, Lipson, and Wixson (1983) argue that rereading is not easy for those learners who have no exposure or who are not used to the text structure.

The inference is a metacognitive phenomenon and it includes various faculties used to arrive at inference making (McEwan, 2004). It is a combination of context with existing knowledge to draw a personal conclusion about something that is hidden in the text.

Self-questioning refers to critical reading and post-reading activities. When readers learn to develop different questions for the text, their overall comprehension may improve. Good readers monitor and regulate their comprehension as they read (Paris, Lipson & Wixson, 1983).

Summarizing has been identified as a reading strategy that leads to cognitive text processing (Kintsch & Van Dijk, 1983). It usually is in the form of shorter texts or passages and focuses on the most important ideas in text (Denton, et al 2007). Summarizing is important for learning and remembering information. It helps the reader in knowing what the structure of text is and how ideas are linked with each other and it helps in recognizing and emphasizing central ideas, generalizing it and memorizing important details (Trabasso & Bouchard, 2002).

Although there has been substantial research related to reading and teaching of reading in the international context, the concept does not seem to have been adequately explored in the Pakistani context. The current study, therefore, aimed to explore the impact of teaching reading strategies on students' level of comprehension at the higher secondary school level. The main objective of the current study was to find out the impact of the teaching of reading strategies on the reading comprehension of the students at the higher secondary school level in Pakistani context. In order to achieve this objective, the study had the following hypothesis: 'There is no significant difference in reading comprehension of higher secondary school students taught through traditional method and those taught using explicit reading comprehension strategies'.

Research Methodology

The quantitative, experimental research design was adopted for this study. Gay and Airasian (2003) argue that experimental research is useful for analyzing relationships between variables. In the current study experimental design (Broota, 2006) was opted to explore the effect of teaching reading strategies on reading comprehension of students at higher secondary school levels in the subject of English. Pre-tests were conducted before the intervention and post-tests were conducted after intervention.

Sample of the Study

Sixty higher secondary school female students from a college were selected as a sample for this study. Based on their result of English in secondary school certificate examination, two groups were formed i.e. control and experimental groups using matched random sampling technique. The number of participants in each group was 30.

Tools

A Reading Comprehension Test (RCT) was used to explore the effect of teaching reading strategies on comprehension of the students of higher secondary level in English. For the purpose of testing the reading comprehension of the students, a test lesson titled 'His First Flight' by Liamó, Flaherty from the prescribed textbook of 1st year English, of the textbook board of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, containing approximately 1000 words, was selected. The lesson had seven paragraphs of about hundred words each. The participants were assumed to be able to read this lesson and answer given comprehension questions (McNair, 2009), as this lesson was taken from their prescribed textbook and was in accordance with their mental level. Items included in the comprehension test were related to one or another reading strategy considered in this study. The comprehension test had 36 items, comprising MCQs, contextual meanings from the given passages, one or two lines short answers, three-line summaries and a ten to fifteen lines summary. The test had a total mark of 40. Each of the 35 items carried 1 mark except Question No. 36 (which was 10 to 15 lines summary) and carried 5 marks, 1 mark for each of the following five criteria:

- Inclusion of essential ideas
- Exclusion of inessential ideas
- The logical development of thought
- Accuracy in grammatical structures
- Accuracy in spellings and punctuations

Procedure

To select students for the experimental and control group, two groups A and B were formed using matched random sampling based on their scores of English in their SSC Exams. Group A was termed as experimental while group B

as Control group. Both the groups were given comprehension test for reading before treatment as pre-test. No significant difference was found in the reading comprehension score of these two groups before treatment.

After placing students in experimental and control groups, the experiment started on 23rd September 2016 and stopped on 15th November 2016. Traditional methods were used to teach the control group whereas experimental group was taught using explicit reading strategies. The experiment lasted for approximately eight weeks. Seven lessons of 1st-year English textbooks were divided into 42 lesson plans. One day in the beginning and one day, in the end, was scheduled for administration of the research tools and six working days of each of the seven weeks were scheduled for teaching one reading strategy a week. At the end of the experiment, both groups were post-tested. The texts used for treatment included narrative and descriptive texts from the 1st year English textbook prescribed by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa textbook board.

Reading strategies were taught in the following sequence to the experimental group:

- Using previous knowledge
- Self-Questioning
- Drawing Inferences
- Drawing Conclusions
- Determining the key Ideas
- Summarizing

One of the reading strategies i.e. re-reading was taught as part of all other strategies. These strategies were taught in a sequence and in accordance with a given text to make students know when they would need to use a particular strategy in a given text. Reading comprehension required previous knowledge so the strategy to use previous knowledge was taught first. Readers need to question themselves about what the writer is saying, so, self-questioning was taught at the second stage. After that, a reader has to infer some meaning before drawing the final conclusion about the meanings inherent in a text. So drawing inference and then drawing conclusions were taught in third and fourth place. The students were then taught how to determine the most important ideas presented by a writer. This was done to provide base to the next step of summarization as an effective summarization often requires a combination of all other reading strategies.

Four steps were followed to teach each of these strategies. The first step involved an introduction to the given passage and the specific strategy to be learned and used for better reading comprehension.

In the second stage, a specific strategy was modeled by the first author through thinking aloud. This step aimed at teaching students how expert readers think while reading. The third step involved group discussion on the part of the students. Each group had four students and the first author provided them the necessary guidance during their discussion. The fourth step involved the students to discuss and practice each of these strategies independently. For example, the use of previous knowledge was presented in the following order: it was described as to what is meant by previous knowledge and how it is connected with reading. The students were told that previous knowledge consists of their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. The positive role of previous knowledge in understanding the current reading material was emphasized. Then a text from the prescribed book of 1st Year English was readout. The title of their text was 'His First Flight' written by Liam O'Flaherty. The first paragraph was read aloud to the students. During this reading a model was given as to how to link previous knowledge to the passage being read currently by thinking aloud. In the next stage the students were asked to share their previous knowledge about the given passage in the group of four and then to further share the ideas related to their previous ideas in this current passage. During this process continuous feedback was provided to students. After that they were asked to write down some of their own memories about the event presented in this current passage. In this particular passage it was about the fear of doing something for the first time. The students were then asked to lead this discussion one by one by sharing their own memories about fear of doing something for the first time and relating those to the given story at hand.

In the next lesson, the self-questioning strategy was introduced and the same procedure was used. A passage (First Year at Harrow by Sir Winston Churchill) was used to model this strategy. The students also practiced with the poem 'September, the First Day of School' by Edward Nemerov, 1970. The students were instructed to note down any questions about the writer, the text, any of the ideas or events presented in that text. These texts were selected from the prescribed English textbook of the students.

An essay, 'Its country for me' by Patrician Demith was used for model inferencing and providing students practice with inferring ideas from a given text. Through this practice, they were supposed to get to the implicit meanings, not directly stated in the text. The students were also asked to explain how they inferred the overall meanings in such cases where they did not know the literal meanings of some individual words.

For drawing conclusions, another essay 'Our Environment' by Frank S. Skarpitti was used. The students were asked to underline the main ideas. They were also asked to write the marginalia in their own words. They were to

note down in the margins anything important which the writer wanted to convey. After each paragraph, they were asked to write the main ideas presented in that paragraph in their own words.

Another story, 'The Blanket' by Floyd Dell was selected for modeling summarization. The students were instructed to understand and utilize the topic sentence to make a summary. Then they were asked to produce the sum total of all the key ideas included in a passage. In the beginning they were asked to write these summaries in a group of these students. The summaries produced by different groups were discussed with the whole class by the researcher for their reflection and further guidance. Then they were asked to individually write the summary of the text lesson, 'The Way It was and is', by Bill Cosby. Their individual summaries were later discussed in the whole class.

The traditional, Grammar Translation Method was used to teach the control group for the same duration. Factors such as the textbook used, time duration and the teacher were the same for both the groups.

After treatment, a post-test was conducted to compare the effect of teaching reading strategies on the comprehension of both control and experimental group. For data collection reading comprehension tests were used.

For analysis and interpretation, the obtained data were analyzed through inferential statistics including standard deviation, mean and t-test using SPSS.

Results

Table 1. Identification of Main Ideas

Mean score comparison regarding Identification of Main Ideas of control and experimental groups on the pre-test

S. No.	Comparison-groups	N	Mean scores	S.D	T	P
1	Experimental-group	30	2.86	0.77	0.34	0.88
2	Control-group	30	2.93	0.73		

Table 1 shows that the students of experimental and control groups had no significant difference ($t = 0.34$, $p = 0.88 > 0.05$) regarding Identification of Main Ideas on pre-test. Hence both the groups were at the same level in terms of the Identification of Main Ideas before intervention.

Table 2. Mean Score Comparison Regarding Identification of Main Ideas of Control and Experimental Groups on Post-Test

S. No.	Comparison-groups	N	Mean scores	S.D	T	P
1	Experimental-group	30	5.03	0.98	4.55	0.00
2	Control-group	30	3.40	1.67		

Above given values in Table 2 ($t = 4.55$, $p = 0.00 < 0.05$) show a significant difference in mean scores of experimental and control groups in connection with *identification of main ideas* on posttest. Hence the experimental group students performed better than the control group students after treatment.

Table 3. Inference

Mean Score of the Two Groups on Pre-Test Regarding Inference

S. No.	Comparison-groups	N	Mean-scores	S.D	T	P
1	Experimental-group	30	2.40	0.67	0.00	0.86
2	Control-group	30	2.40	0.67		

Table 3 indicates that students of experimental and control had no significant difference ($t = 0.00$, $p = 0.86 > 0.05$) regarding Inference on pre-test. Students of both the control and experimental groups were at the same Inference level in the pre-test.

Table 4. Mean score Comparison of the two Groups on Post-Test Regarding Inference

S. No.	Comparison-groups	N	Mean-scores	S.D	T	P
1	Experimental-group	30	3.68	0.89	3.41	0.001
2	Control-group	30	2.76	1.16		

Table 4 ($t = 3.41$, $p = 0.001 < 0.05$) indicates a significant difference in mean scores of experimental and control groups in term of *inference* making on posttest. Students of the experimental group were found to perform better than the students of control group after treatment.

Table 5. Use of Background Knowledge

Mean scores Comparison of the two Groups on Pre-Test Regarding the use of Background Knowledge

S. No.	Comparison-groups	N	Mean-scores	S.D	T	P
1	Experimental-group	30	2.36	0.66	-2.01	0.86
2	Control-group	30	2.73	0.73		

Table 5 indicates that students from the experimental and control groups had no significant difference ($t = -2.01$, $p = 0.86 > 0.05$) regarding the use of Background Knowledge factor of reading comprehension on pre-test. Students of both the control and experimental groups were at same level of using Background Knowledge factor of reading comprehension on pre-test.

Table 6. Mean Score Comparison of Control and Experimental Groups on Post-Test Regarding Use of Background Knowledge

S. No.	Comparison-groups	N	Mean-scores	S.D	T	P
1	Experimental-group	30	3.41	0.90	2.88	0.005
2	Control-group	30	2.70	0.98		

Table 6 ($t = 2.88$, $p = 0.005 < 0.05$) shows a significant difference in mean scores of the two groups in connection with Background Knowledge on posttest. Students of the experimental group were found to perform better than the students of control group after treatment.

Table 7. Drawing Conclusion

Mean score Comparison of the two groups Regarding Drawing Conclusion of on Pre-Test

S. No.	Comparison-groups	N	Mean-scores	S.D	T	P
1	Experimental-group	30	2.46	1.00	0.13	0.90
2	Control-group	30	2.43	0.93		

Table 7 indicates that students of the control and experimental groups had no significant difference ($t = 0.13$, $p = 0.90 > 0.05$) regarding the Drawing Conclusion factor of reading comprehension on pre-test. Students of both were at same level of Drawing Conclusion factor of reading comprehension before treatment.

Table 8. Mean score Comparison of the two Groups on Post-Test Regarding Drawing Conclusion

S. No.	Comparison-groups	N	Mean-scores	S.D	T	P
1	Experimental-group	30	3.91	1.18	2.47	0.016
2	Control-group	30	3.11	1.28		

Table 8 ($t = 2.47$, $p = 0.016 < 0.05$) shows a significant difference in mean scores of the two groups in connection with *Drawing conclusion* on posttest. Students of the experimental group were found to perform much better than the students of control group after treatment.

Table 9. Self-Questioning

Mean Score Comparison of The Two Groups Regarding Self-Questioning On Pre-Test

S. No.	Comparison-groups	N	Mean-scores	S.D	T	P
1	Experimental-group	30	2.56	0.89	-0.43	0.90
2	Control-group	30	2.66	0.87		

Table 9 ($t = -0.43$, $p = 0.90 > 0.05$) indicates no significant mean score difference in terms of Self-questioning scores of students belonging to the control and experimental groups on pre-test. It implies that the students of both groups were at the same level of posing Self-Questioning before treatment.

Table 10. Mean Score Comparison of the Two Groups Regarding Self-Questioning on Post-Test

S. No.	Comparison-groups	N	Mean-scores	S.D	T	P
1	Experimental-group	30	3.96	0.94	5.12	0.000
2	Control-group	30	2.60	1.09		

Table 10 ($t = 4.55, p = 0.00 < 0.05$) shows a significant difference in mean scores of control and experimental groups in terms of *self-questioning* on posttest. Students of the experimental group were found to perform better than the students of control group after treatment.

Table 11. Summarization

Mean score comparison of Students Belonging to the Two groups on Pre-Test Regarding Summarization

S. No.	Comparison-groups	N	Mean-scores	S.D	T	P
1	Experimental-group	30	2.08	0.88	0.55	0.86
2	Control-group	30	1.85	0.86		

Table 11 ($t = 0.55, p = 0.86 > 0.05$) indicates no significant difference between the mean Summarization scores of students belonging to the two groups on pre-test. It implies that both the groups were at the same level of Summarization before experimentation.

Table 12. Mean Score Comparison of the Two Groups on Post-Test Regarding Summarization

S. No.	Comparison-groups	N	Mean-scores	S.D	T	P
1	Experimental-group	30	3.96	1.34	4.43	0.000
2	Control-group	30	2.50	1.19		

Table 12 ($t = 4.43, p = 0.000 < 0.05$) shows a significant difference in mean scores of the two groups in connection with Summarization on posttest. Students of the experimental group performed much better than the students of control group after treatment.

Summary of the Whole Lesson

Writing a summary of the lesson helps in strengthening the reading comprehension skill of students. In the coming tables, a comparison between control and experimental groups, in writing summaries, has been given.

Table 13. Mean score Comparison of Students from the Two Groups on Pre-Test Regarding Summary of Whole Lesson

S. No.	Comparison-groups	N	Mean-scores	S.D	T	P
1	Experimental-group	30	1.95	0.72	0.55	1.86
2	Control-group	30	1.85	0.68		

Table 13 ($t = 0.55, p = 1.86 > 0.05$) reveals that no significant difference was found between the mean scores of students belonging to the two groups on the pre-test. It implies that both the groups were at the same level of writing summaries of the whole lesson before treatment.

Table 14. Mean score Comparison of the two Groups on Pre-Test Regarding Summary of the Whole Lesson

S. No.	Comparison-groups	N	Mean-scores	S.D	t	P
1	Experimental-group	30	3.15	0.66	5.41	0.000
2	Control-group		2.03	0.89		

Table 14 ($t = 5.41, p = 0.000 < 0.05$) shows a significant difference in mean scores of the two groups in connection with Summary of Lesson on posttest. Students of the experimental group were found to perform much better than the students of control group after treatment.

Overall Reading Comprehension Test

Table 15. Mean Score Comparison of Students Belonging to the Experimental and Control Groups on Pre-Test Regarding Overall Reading Comprehension Test

S. No.	Comparison-groups	N	Mean-scores	S.D	T	P
1	Experimental-group	30	16.76	4.33	-0.15	0.61
2	Control-group	30	16.93	4.10		

Table 15 ($t = -0.15, p = 0.61 > 0.05$) indicates that there was no significant difference between the mean Total Reading Comprehension Test scores of students belonging to the two groups on the pre-test. It implies that both the groups were at the same Total Reading Comprehension Test factor of reading comprehension level before intervention.

Table 16. Mean score Comparison of the two Groups on Post-Test Regarding Overall Reading Comprehension Test

S. No.	Comparison-groups	N	Mean-scores	S.D	T	P
1	Experimental-group		27.13	5.31	5.43	0.000
2	Control-group		19.11	5.99		

Table 16 ($t = 5.31, p = 0.000 < 0.05$) shows a significant difference in mean scores of the two groups in connection with Total Reading Comprehension Test on posttest. Students of the experimental group were found to perform much better after treatment.

Discussion

The pretest scores of the experimental and control groups indicated that both the groups were at a similar level. However, post-test score showed that the experimental group had better scores in reading comprehension. The calculated p-value ($t = 5.31, p = 0.000 < 0.05$) was less than the tabulated p-value at 0.05 indicating a significant mean score difference of both groups. Besides, the reading comprehension means a score of experimental group was significantly better than that of the control group on post-test. In the view of these findings the hypothesis "There is no significant difference in reading comprehension between the control and experimental groups on post-test" was rejected. This implies that the intervention (teaching reading strategies) raised the reading comprehension level of

the experimental group. The findings are in line with those of Antunez (2002) who argue that reading comprehension improves with the teaching of reading strategies. Lack of reading comprehension skills may also reflect deficiency in application of reading strategies.

Conclusion and Implications of the Study

This study found that the students who were taught the use of explicit reading instructional strategies performed considerably better in reading comprehension than the students who were not taught using these strategies. Hence, it is concluded that the teaching of reading strategies improves the reading comprehension of students at higher secondary school level significantly. The study, therefore, has the following implications:

Educational policymakers and curriculum developers may make teaching of reading strategies a part of curriculum and teacher training. Administrations at the school and college level may arrange workshops and professional development courses, aimed at the development of language teachers to enable them to learn, use, and make their students learn and use reading strategies. Language teachers may learn, use and teach reading strategies for their own professional development and for improvement of their students. Implications of the use of reading comprehension strategies may also be seen in the context of teaching other languages. Besides, students may be exposed to an environment in the school where they may learn and use teaching-learning strategies for improving their language comprehension and academic achievement.

The school libraries may be provided with adequate reading materials. Students may be encouraged to read books of their interest besides their course books. This may develop their use of reading strategies as well as provide them an opportunity to read books of their interest.

Further studies may explore the effect of teaching reading strategies on the language learning, comprehension and academic achievement of students at other levels of education. The effect of teaching reading strategies may also be explored in a variety of texts (texts besides narrative and descriptive types). This was a small scale experimental study conducted in one institution. Survey studies on a larger scale may be conducted to explore the phenomenon in more detail. In-depth qualitative case studies may also be conducted to explore perceptions of teachers, students and language teachers regarding the impact of teaching reading strategies on students' language learning and academic achievement.

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