

An Assessment of The English Reading Comprehension Strategies Utilized by Level-One Students at A South African University

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Abstract

The researchers examined the approaches employed by first-year students at a university in South Africa to comprehend English reading material. The study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, involving 309 first-year students from various departments who were taking the English Communication Skills course. Data was gathered using a self-administered questionnaire, the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) developed by Mokhtari and Sheorey. The researchers used descriptive statistics, such as frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, and usage level, to analyze the frequency of each reading strategy. The findings underscore the significance of offering guidance on reading comprehension strategies to assist first-year students in managing the rigorous academic demands of university and to teachers and lecturers in helping their students learn to become constructively responsive and thoughtful readers, which will promote academic reading skills and ultimately enhance academic achievement.

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding written content is a fundamental capability that higher education students are anticipated to develop. It serves as a tangible demonstration of how thoroughly certain ideas have been grasped. Consequently, the ability to comprehend written material will consistently be a vital factor in the academic and career advancement of students. Klipwijk (2015) highlights comprehension as a pivotal element in the process of reading. The distinctive nature

of comprehension and the intricacies associated with its formal instruction render it a key aspect of the academic preparation for first-year students.

Mastering the skill of reading comprehension is crucial for students' academic advancement, offering the potential for improved opportunities (Grabe & Stoller, 2020; Ntekere & Ramoroka, 2015). According to Smith, Snow, Serry, and Hammond (2021:214-215), the ability to comprehend written material is essential for academic development as it forms the basis for learning in various subjects. However, it is important to recognize that texts vary in their intended purpose, cohesiveness, linguistic features, and overall structure (Halliday & Hasan, 2014). Consequently, students' proficiency in language plays a significant role in their understanding and interpretation of information from diverse sources.

Without diminishing the importance of language in assisting pupils in understanding and interpreting information from multiple sources, it appears that several other minor elements may require further attention. With this perspective, determining why specific reading techniques are preferred over others should be an intriguing question for language practitioners. Could it be due to a lack of awareness of other viable solutions? Could it be due to the nature of the text that readers are examining? Or is it possible that readers perceive one method as more useful than others due to the intricacy of the textual content? These are essential questions that further characterise the intricacy behind the assessment of reading.

Anderson (2004) suggests that the application of various strategies could enhance the comprehension of written material. Assessing the efficacy of these strategies is crucial. This approach not only deepens students' grasp of academic texts but also creates avenues for their academic advancement (Clarke, Truelove, Hulme & Snowling, 2014). Pimsaru (2009) shares this view, emphasizing that employing reading strategies can furnish students with the essential tools to proficiently engage with their reading materials. These skills include comprehending textual structures, reading for diverse purposes, and reflecting on their reading experiences. Recent research has underscored the significance of understanding the practices of proficient readers, both in their primary language and second language, such as identifying the types of strategies used, their applications, and the circumstances in which they are employed (Cook, 2016; Silva & Cain, 2015; Li, 2010). Education developers are advised to carefully consider the reading theories for implementation by first evaluating the students' language proficiency.

More significantly, the enhancement of students' reading comprehension abilities leads to an improved capacity for analyzing and amalgamating information obtained from various sources. According to Cotter (2012), the procedure of reading comprehension is intricate, involving the integration of information and encouraging students to engage actively with the text through making inferences and constructing significance. Additionally, this process fosters the development of critical readers, thereby ultimately enhancing their academic performance. Wilson (2016) emphasizes that the foundation of all university study is critical reading, cautioning against institutions that neglect the teaching of reading in favor of an excessive focus on writing. It is important to note that tertiary students often lack well-developed comprehension and critical reading skills, owing to the predominant emphasis on writing (Abbott, 2013). Reading comprehension entails not only acquiring new vocabulary but also delving into the meanings of unfamiliar words and analyzing the structure of sentences crafted by proficient writers.

ESL learners often face difficulties comprehending academic texts because their language skills are limited and they have little access to English reading materials beyond class. Furthermore, providing support to students transitioning from secondary school to university is crucial, especially for beginners. According to Par and Woloshyn (2013), this support is particularly important for level one students. Van Rooy and Coetzee-van Rooy (2015) emphasize that inadequate language proficiency is the primary reason behind the unsatisfactory academic routine of ESL students in South African universities.

The objective of this research is to assess the construing techniques employed by first-year students at a university in South Africa, aiming to enhance their reading skills and boost their academic achievements.

Impact of teaching reading strategies to English second language students

Various approaches have been suggested to assist those learning English as a second language (ESL) in enhancing their reading comprehension and overall academic routine. Among the commonly acknowledged theories are the bottom-up, top-down, collaborating, and schema-theoretic models. The bottom-up style entails a mechanical reading process devoid of mental assimilation of data from the text (Grabe & Stoller, 2011), while the top-down model entails handing out higher-level acquaintance at a lower level (Liu, 2010). On the other hand, the collaborating model combines bottom-up and top-down handing out to create meaning and

grasp new data. This study opted for the collaborating model of reading. According to Anderson (2000: 218), proficient reading "requires the fusion of bottom-up and top-down skills" that students employ to comprehend information. Additionally, the fusion of these two skills aids students in better understanding information.

According to Howard, Gorzycki, Desa, and Allen (2018), the primary goal of undergraduate education is to equip students with strong reading skills, as proficiency in reading is crucial for their academic success. Therefore, it is vital to implement effective strategies that can foster students' reading abilities. A significant obstacle is that many universities worldwide do not prioritize the teaching of reading, assuming that students will naturally adapt to the required reading level. In educational settings that prioritize reading comprehension, certain skills tend to receive more attention while others are overlooked, leading to a limited grasp of the fundamental elements of written language (Kalbfleish, Schmitt, & Zipoli, 2021). Bosley (2018) proposed that combining reading and writing could serve as a strategy to bolster the writing proficiency of freshman students. Consequently, it is essential to offer explicit guidance on active reading to students in order to advance their comprehension skills and improve their ability to process information effectively.

Understanding successful reading, as per the interactive model of L2 reading, heavily relies on the implementation of effective reading strategies. Grabe and Stoller (2019) define these strategies as tools that students can utilize to enhance their reading skills. They encompass specific actions, behaviors, steps, and procedures employed by students to advance their grasp of language in an educational setting (Tercanioglu, 2004). Therefore, it becomes imperative for educational institutions to prioritize the instruction of reading comprehension strategies. In a study carried out by Akarsu and Harputlu (2014) on the perspectives of EFL students regarding academic reading, it was revealed that these students were familiar with a wide range of effective reading approaches. Consequently, teaching these approaches should not only be perceived as implied alterations to goals and texts, but rather explicit methods aimed at bolstering understanding (Perfetti & Adolf, 2012:8-9). A comprehensive appreciation of these reading strategies has the possible to significantly enhance students' comprehension of academic texts.

Strategies for comprehending text effectively, crucial in aiding students to tackle intricate materials, encompass various approaches. These encompass

establishing connections, actively interacting with the text, constructing meaning actively, monitoring comprehension, and performing investigation and fusion (Ntereke & Ramoroka, 2017: 1). Students are anticipated to grasp these policies and apply them for diverse purposes, demonstrating their comprehension to their instructors. According to Jamieson and Howard (2013), students may resort to plagiarism due to their deficiency in some essential reading strategies required for their academic tasks. To reduce instances of plagiarism among students, educational institutions should equip them with the necessary reading strategies and motivate them to approach their reading material critically.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The term "research design" is commonly used to describe the strategic blueprint for a research project, outlining its main structure and essential elements, including the approach to gathering and analyzing data, as well as addressing the study's goals and objectives (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Therefore, a mixed method style was adopted to obtain numerical data through a questionnaire, which was subsequently subjected to statistical analysis to assess the writing proficiency of the respondents.

A mixed methods research design focuses on the collection, analysis and mixing of both qualitative and quantitative data in a single study or series of studies to provide a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone (Creswell, 2018).

The study population consisted of first-year students enrolled in ECS in 2020. A total of 350 participants were selected using simple random sampling from a larger population of 3,486 students. 350 participants constituted at least 10% of the study population. Further, a cross-sectional study of this nature paved ample space for future correlational studies to conform to or debunk the findings.

All the participants completed the questionnaire adapted from the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002), which was developed to measure the metacognitive awareness and perceived use of reading strategies of adolescent and adult learners of English as a second language (ESL) while reading academic texts. SORS is used as a standard instrument because it was field-tested extensively using large and diverse sample population representing students with equivalent reading abilities ranging from middle school to college by Mokhtari and

Reichard (2008). The internal consistency reliability coefficient for its subscales (metacognitive, cognitive and support strategies) ranged from 0.89 to 0.93 and was found to have well-established validity and reliability data (Alpha = .93) (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2008). In addition, factor analysis of the strategy is confirmed by many studies (Hsiao & Oxford, 2002; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995).

Before commencing data collection, ethical clearance was sought from the university's Ethical Clearance Committee, which was granted. To ensure confidentiality, participants were instructed not to comprise any personal data that could link them to their responses. Lastly, all respondents signed a consent form confirming their voluntary participation in the study.

The findings were computed to investigate and analyse their frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation. In addition, the average scores were interpreted using the interpretation key suggested by Oxford and Burrystock (as cited in Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002: 4) for general learning strategy usage: high (mean of 3.5 or higher), moderate (mean of 2.5 to 3.4), and low (mean of 2.4 and lower). To find the average score of the participants' perceived use of reading strategies, the researcher summarised the scores from individual strategies and transferred all of them to the scoring sheet. The scores were then added up in each column to obtain a total score for the entire instrument as well as for each strategy subscale (for example, global reading, problem-solving, and support reading strategies).

RESULT

Data obtained via a survey were scrutinized to ensure that the participants had completed the questionnaire in its entirety. Out of the 350 questionnaires that were distributed and returned, 309 were thoroughly filled out and included in the analysis of the participants' perspectives. The remaining 41 questionnaires were not considered in the analysis due to incomplete responses.

The results were calculated to assess the frequencies, ratios, means, and standard deviations. Furthermore, the mean scores were reported using the key for interpreting general erudition approach usage recommended by Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995). The scores were classified as follows: high (3.5 and above), moderate (2.5 to 3.4), and low (2.4 and below).

Table 1: Summary of English Reading Strategies Questionnaire Answers

English reading strategy	Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Usually,		Always		M	SD	Usage level
	NO	%	NO	%	NO	%	NO	%	NO	%			
1. I read with a specific goal in my thoughts.	3	1.0	3	1.0	73	23.6	83	36.9	147	47.6	4.19	.897	High
2. I jot down important points while reading to enhance my comprehension.	5	1.6	12	3.9	84	27.2	72	23.3	136	44.0	4.04	1.007	High
3. I reflect on my existing knowledge to aid my comprehension of the material I am reading.	5	1.6	18	5.8	70	22.7	96	31.1	120	38.8	4.00	.998	High
4. I examine the text as a whole to understand its main idea before delving into the details.	15	4.9	36	11.7	122	39.5	73	23.6	63	20.4	4.04	1.007	High
5. When the content of the textbook becomes challenging, I resort to reading aloud as a strategy to enhance my comprehension of the material.	64	20.7	61	19.7	77	24.9	31	10.0	76	24.6	2.98	1.455	Moderate
6. I contemplate if the information in the text aligns with my intended reading goal.	44	12.2	55	17.8	90	29.1	63	20.4	57	18.4	3.11	1.297	Moderate
7. I carefully go through the text at a slow pace to ensure that I comprehend the content.	4	1.3	10	3.2	44	14.2	61	19.7	190	61.5	4.37	.933	High
8. I initially examine the text by observing its attributes such as its length and structure.	31	10.0	44	14.2	114	36.9	66	21.4	54	17.5	3.22	1.188	Moderate
9. I attempt to regain focus when my concentration wavers.	2	0.6	7	2.3	60	19.4	72	23.3	168	54.4	4.28	.899	High
10. I highlight or mark specific details within the text to aid in my recall.	4	1.3	19	6.1	42	13.6	63	20.4	181	58.6	4.29	1.002	High
11. I adjust how fast I read based on the material I'm reading.	9	2.9	19	6.1	72	23.3	86	27.8	123	39.8	3.95	1.068	High
12. While I'm reading, I make choices about what I should examine carefully and what I can overlook.	25	8.1	40	12.9	101	32.7	75	24.3	68	22.0	3.39	1.195	Moderate
13. I utilize resources like a dictionary to aid my comprehension of the text I'm reading.	19	6.1	33	10.7	81	26.2	67	21.7	109	35.3	3.69	1.227	High

14. When the text becomes challenging, I become more focused on the content I'm reading.	4	1.3	10	3.2	54	17.5	81	26.2	160	51.8	4.24	.940	High
15. I employ tables, diagrams, and images within the text to enhance my comprehension..	33	10.7	61	19.7	96	31.1	51	16.5	68	22.0	3.19	1.280	Moderate
16. I pause occasionally to reflect on the content I'm reading..	15	4.9	44	14.2	101	32.7	74	23.9	75	24.3	3.49	1.147	Moderate
17. I employ contextual hints to enhance my comprehension of the text..	15	4.9	38	12.3	87	28.2	91	29.4	78	25.2	3.58	1.136	High
18. I rephrase (express concepts using my own language) in order to gain a clearer comprehension of the text I read.	13	4.2	22	7.1	75	24.3	68	22.0	131	42.4	3.91	1.152	High
19. I attempt to mentally depict or imagine details to aid in recalling what I have read.	17	5.5	18	5.8	78	25.2	90	29.1	106	34.3	3.81	1.136	High
20. I utilize typographic elements such as boldface and italics for the purpose of highlighting important details.	56	18.1	50	16.2	90	29.1	66	21.4	47	15.2	2.99	1.309	Moderate
21. I assess and carefully examine the data provided in the text.	12	3.9	43	13.9	101	32.7	89	28.8	64	20.7	3.49	1.086	Moderate
22. I move back and forth within the text to discover connections between the concepts presented in it.	19	6.1	33	10.7	100	32.4	83	26.9	74	23.9	3.52	1.147	High
23. I verify my comprehension when I encounter fresh data.	7	2.3	19	6.1	66	21.4	103	33.3	114	36.9	3.96	1.017	High
24. I attempt to infer the subject matter of the text as I go through it.	23	7.4	18	5.8	77	24.9	10	33.3	88	28.5	3.70	1.161	High
25. "When the content becomes challenging, I go through it again to enhance my comprehension..	3	1.0	13	4.2	34	11.0	86	27.8	173	56.0	4.34	.903	High
26. I pose inquiries that I prefer to find addressed within the written content.	23	7.4	23	7.4	73	23.6	87	28.2	103	33.3	3.72	1.211	High
27. I verify whether my assumptions	29	9.4	30	9.7	76	24.6	85	27.5	89	28.8	3.57	1.259	High

about the text are accurate or incorrect.													
28. When I engage in reading, I make educated assumptions about the significance of unfamiliar words or phrases.	31	10.0	38	12.3	90	29.1	70	22.7	80	25.0	3.42	1.271	Moderate
29. While I read, I convert English text into my native language.	14	4.5	18	5.8	70	22.7	69	22.3	138	44.7	3.97	1.147	High
30. While I'm reading, I consider the data in both English and my native language.	9	2.9	21	6.8	67	21.7	68	22.0	144	46.6	4.03	1.105	High

The information in the above table is appreciated as it highlights the construing approaches employed by level-one students and their respective usage levels. The findings demonstrate that respondents apply these strategies to varying degrees, as illustrated in the table. Notably, the occurrence and ratio values were determined based on a 5-point Likert scale: a score of 5 denotes consistent usage, 4 signifies frequent usage, 3 indicates occasional usage, 2 suggests infrequent usage, and 1 implies no usage. A thorough discussion of the results below helps to clarify the importance of teaching reading strategies to first-year students.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of the results reveals that the most prominent scores and percentages for each strategy correspond to the categories of occasional (3), frequent (4), and consistent (5) usage. This underscores the respondents' understanding of effective reading techniques and their potential to enhance students' reading skills. Conversely, the relatively lower percentages for strategies classified under infrequent (2) and nonexistent (1) usage suggest the necessity of instructing these strategies to underscore their significance for the students.

Regarding the data presented in the table, the predominant use is of item (5) when compared to the other 30 items. Item 7 stands out with the highest percentage (61.5%), succeeded by item 10 (58.6%) and then item 9 (54.4%). This pattern aligns with the research by Arkusi and Harputlu (2014), suggesting that students possess an awareness of effective reading approaches crucial for their academic success. Notably, a significant 61.5% of participants acknowledged reading slowly and attentively, underscoring the necessity for comprehensive understanding in academic reading. In contrast, only 1.3% specified that they never

read slowly and cautiously to ensure comprehension. Additionally, item 7 stands out with the uppermost mean value of 4.37 when likened to other approaches listed in the table.

Another commonly utilized approach that followed was method number 10. This indicated that 58.6% of the participants consistently highlighted or encircled information in the text to aid their memory, while only 1.3% stated that they never employed this tactic. Notably, this strategy holds an average value of 4.29, marking it as the highest among all the strategies. Intriguingly, two strategies, namely numbers 2 and 4, share an identical mean value of 4.04. This occurrence is rare in a survey utilizing a 5-point Likert scale and serves to illustrate likenesses in the cognitive processes of students.

While the top three inquiries with the greatest usage ratios, as indicated in the survey (4), were question 23 (33.3%), followed by question 3 (31.1%), and question 17 (29.4%), the drop between items 4 and 5 implies a gradual decrease in percentages. Consequently, the first question, question 1, was found to have the lowest usage percentage, suggesting it is never employed.

According to the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002:4), the 30 items on the list are categorized into global construing approaches (13 items), problem-handling policies (8 items), and support reading approaches (9 items). Within the global construing approaches category, 7 out of 13 policies were classified as highly utilized, while the remaining 6 were considered to have a moderate usage level. Of the 13 policies, the highest mean value was assigned to strategy 1, at 4.19, whereas the lowest mean value was assigned to strategy 20, at 2.99.

In the realm of solving problems, 6 out of 8 methods were noted for their extensive use, while the remaining 2 were considered to be moderately utilized. The top-ranking mean value was 4.37, attributed to strategy 7, whereas the lowest mean value was 3.42, associated with strategy 28. Concerning the support reading techniques, 8 out of 9 were classified as highly utilized, while one was regarded as moderately used. Strategy 10 obtained the highest score, with a mean value of 4.29, while Strategy 5 obtained the lowest score, with a mean value of 2.98.

In terms of associating the collective mean values across the three groups, problem-solving methods emerged with the uppermost mean value of 3.98, followed

by support construing approaches with a mean value of 3.79, and finally, global construing approaches with a mean value of 3.57. Furthermore, when examining the five most commonly employed strategies by students, it was observed that 4 out of the 5 were derived from the problem-solving group, while 1 originated from the support reading group, with no approaches falling under the global reading group. This serves to reaffirm that a majority of participants prioritize problem-solving approaches as a fundamental approach to enhancing their reading proficiency. Additionally, it indicates that respondents possess a clear understanding of these approaches and have been employing them since their secondary school days.

Table 2: Problem-solving reading strategies

Category	Strategy	Mean	Standard Deviation	Usage level
Problem solving	I take my time and read attentively to ensure that I comprehend the material.	4.37	.933	High
Problem Solving	"When I encounter complex text, I make a point of reading it again to enhance my comprehension.	4.34	.903	High
Problem Solving	I highlight or encircle details within the text to aid my recollection.	4.29	1002	High
Problem Solving	I make an effort to refocus when my concentration wavers.	4.28	.899	High
Problem Solving	When the text becomes challenging, I focus more on the content that I'm reading.	4.24	.940	High

The research uncovered four fresh discoveries concerning additional techniques for reading in English that students employed. These consisted of: Firstly, the utilization of alternative reference materials aside from dictionaries, such as probing for more data on the internet, participating in group deliberations, and seeking clarification from peers or instructors when encountering challenging or unfamiliar words or content that was hard to grasp; secondly, reading only when they were fully focused; thirdly, reading texts with straightforward vocabulary or engaging actions; and fourthly, reading selectively according to their personal preferences.

Furthermore, it is evident that the participants in this study were largely conscious of their reading practices, as they described using English reading approaches with varying occurrences and at both high and moderate levels. They adeptly amalgamated a range of reading strategies, a critical element in comprehending written material. Among the three types of approaches, problem-handling approaches were the most commonly employed, as the actions and

techniques employed during reading were specific and focused methods crucial for comprehending textual information.

CONCLUSION

The research brought attention to the common approaches employed by freshman university students when engaging with various assigned texts. While most participants reported using strategies at a high or moderate frequency, it is crucial for educators to support students in utilizing all available reading techniques to gain substantial comprehension. Additionally, students should engage with diverse texts that demand a variety of interpretative skills in accordance with rigorous academic standards. These skills encompass paraphrasing content, evaluating information, and summarizing key points from the texts. The results emphasize that viewing reading strategies as a means to equip students with knowledge and confidence is essential for fostering self-directed learning and cultivating a curious and enthusiastic academic approach. Moreover, these findings offer insights for university administrators and instructors to assess students' reading proficiency. Developing effective reading comprehension strategies remains pivotal at the college level, warranting further investigations to bridge existing gaps in this domain.

Further research should use a reading test to test the reading comprehension strategies used by students rather than depending only on the reading strategies questionnaire. There is a need to investigate the role of teaching essential reading strategies and assessing their impact on reading comprehension in ESL/EFL learners. Because simply knowing what reading strategy to use is not sufficient, additional studies should be conducted to investigate the actual use of such strategies to shed light on the issues investigated, thereby revealing new aspects of what EFL/ESL learners do when they become actively involved in the reading process.

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