ISSN 3060-4567

THE IMPACT OF METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES ON READING COMPREHENSION IN FRENCH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract: *This study examines the impact of metacognitive strategies on reading comprehension among beginner-level learners of French as a Foreign Language (FLE). Metacognitive strategies, including planning, monitoring, and evaluating, enable learners to regulate their cognitive processes and enhance understanding of complex texts. Through a mixed-methods approach, this research investigates how explicit instruction in these strategies influences learners' ability to comprehend and analyze authentic French reading materials. The findings reveal a significant improvement in reading comprehension scores and increased learner awareness of effective reading techniques. This study underscores the pedagogical importance of integrating metacognitive strategy training into FLE curricula to foster autonomous and proficient language learners.*

Keywords: *Idiomatic expressions, French as a Foreign Language (FLE), language learning, cognitive regulation, beginner learners, authentic materials.*

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is widely recognized as a critical skill in foreign language acquisition, enabling learners to access, interpret, and critically evaluate written texts. In the context of French as a Foreign Language (FLE), reading proficiency is essential not only for academic success but also for effective communication and cultural understanding. However, developing strong reading comprehension skills remains a challenge for many learners, particularly those at the beginner level, due to the inherent complexity of French syntax, vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions.

ISSN 3060-4567

Recent research in second language acquisition has emphasized the importance of metacognitive strategies learners' ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own cognitive processes as vital tools in enhancing reading comprehension (Flavell, 1979; Baker & Brown, 1984). Metacognition refers to "thinking about thinking" and encompasses a range of self-regulatory practices that help learners become more aware of how they process information and how to adjust their reading approaches to optimize understanding (Veenman, Van Hout-Wolters, & Afflerbach, 2006).

Several scholars have explored the relationship between metacognitive strategy use and language comprehension. For instance, Vandergrift and Goh (2012) highlighted that explicit instruction in metacognitive strategies leads to improved comprehension outcomes and greater learner autonomy. Similarly, Carrell (1989) demonstrated that metacognitive awareness enables learners to better predict text content, recognize comprehension failures, and employ corrective techniques. These findings have been supported by research in various languages, including English, Spanish, and Mandarin, but studies focusing specifically on French language learners remain limited.

In the context of FLE, it is crucial to investigate how metacognitive strategies can be effectively integrated into reading instruction to assist learners in overcoming difficulties posed by unfamiliar lexical items, complex grammatical structures, and cultural references. Authors such as Koda (2005) and Anderson (2008) argue that metacognitive strategy training can significantly reduce cognitive load, allowing learners to allocate mental resources efficiently during reading tasks.

Despite the recognized benefits, research on the application of metacognitive strategies among beginner French learners is sparse, particularly in non-immersion educational settings. This gap underscores the need for empirical studies examining the impact of explicit metacognitive strategy instruction on reading comprehension performance in FLE classrooms.

METHODS

The study involved 40 beginner-level learners of French as a Foreign Language (FLE) enrolled in a university language program. The participants, aged between 18 and 22, had completed basic introductory French courses but had limited experience with metacognitive strategy instruction. They were randomly divided into two groups: an experimental group (n=20), which received explicit training in metacognitive reading strategies, and a control group (n=20), which followed the regular curriculum without such instruction.

The intervention lasted for eight weeks, with two 90-minute sessions per week. The experimental group participated in metacognitive strategy training integrated into their reading lessons, while the control group engaged in traditional reading activities without explicit focus on metacognition.

The metacognitive training focused on three key strategies:

1. **Planning**: Activating prior knowledge and setting reading goals before engaging with the text.

- Example exercise: Before reading the passage, learners answered questions such as: *"Que sais-tu déjà sur ce sujet?"* (What do you already know about this topic?) and *"Quels sont tes objectifs en lisant ce texte?"* (What are your goals when reading this text?).

2. **Monitoring**: Encouraging learners to self-assess their understanding during reading.

- Sample task: While reading, learners highlighted or underlined unfamiliar words or phrases, e.g., *"Le développement durable"*, and noted comprehension difficulties in the margins. They answered prompts such as: *"Est-ce que je comprends ce paragraphe?"* (Do I understand this paragraph?).

3. **Evaluating**: Reflecting on comprehension after reading to identify successful strategies and areas for improvement.

- Post-reading activity: Learners completed a checklist with items like *"Ai-je compris le message principal?"* (Did I understand the main message?) and *"Quelles stratégies m'ont aidé?"* (Which strategies helped me?).

Authentic and level-appropriate French texts were selected to ensure cultural relevance and linguistic challenge. Examples included short articles from *Le Petit Journal*, adapted narratives, and simple expository texts on topics such as environment, daily life, and French culture. Sample reading passage extract: *"Le recyclage est une pratique essentielle pour protéger notre planète. En triant les déchets, nous réduisons la pollution et économisons les ressources naturelles."*

Following the text, learners completed exercises aimed at applying metacognitive strategies:

- **Vocabulary Matching**
- Match the French words with their English equivalents:
  - *Le recyclage* — a) Recycling
  - *La pollution* — b) Pollution
  - *Les ressources naturelles* — c) Natural resources
- **Comprehension Questions**
  - *Quel est le but du recyclage selon le texte?* (What is the purpose of recycling according to the text?)
  - *Comment le recyclage aide-t-il à protéger la planète?* (How does recycling help protect the planet?)
- **Self-Monitoring Checklist**
- Learners tick off statements such as: *"J'ai compris chaque phrase."* (I understood every sentence.) and *"J'ai utilisé un dictionnaire pour les mots inconnus."* (I used a dictionary for unknown words.)

Pre- and post-tests measured participants' reading comprehension through multiple choice and open ended questions based on new French texts. Additionally, learners' reflective journals were collected weekly to analyze the use and awareness of metacognitive strategies qualitatively.

Quantitative data were analyzed using paired t-tests to compare pre- and post-test scores within and between groups. Qualitative data from journals were coded thematically to identify patterns in strategy use and learner perceptions.

RESULTS

ISSN 3060-4567

The results of the study revealed a statistically significant improvement in the reading comprehension abilities of the experimental group who received metacognitive strategy training, compared to the control group.

The pre-test mean score of the experimental group was 56.2%, while the post-test score increased to 78.6%. In contrast, the control group showed only a marginal increase from 55.4% to 60.3%. A paired sample t-test confirmed that the improvement in the experimental group was statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), indicating that the use of metacognitive strategies had a positive effect on reading comprehension.

Learner journals and post-lesson reflections from the experimental group indicated an increased awareness of their reading processes and a higher level of engagement with texts. Students reported that planning and monitoring helped reduce anxiety when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary or structures:

- *"Quand j'ai activé mes connaissances avant de lire, j'ai mieux compris le texte."*("When I activated my prior knowledge before reading, I understood the text better.")
- *"Pendant la lecture, j'ai utilisé une stratégie pour deviner le sens des mots inconnus, comme 'ressources naturelles'."*("During reading, I used a strategy to guess the meaning of unknown words, such as 'ressources naturelles'.")

The experimental group also outperformed the control group on in-class comprehension tasks based on authentic French materials. For example, after reading the passage: *"La biodiversité est essentielle pour maintenir l'équilibre des écosystèmes. Chaque espèce joue un rôle dans la chaîne alimentaire."*

They answered the following questions with greater accuracy:

- Qu'est-ce que la biodiversité permet de faire ? (What does biodiversity help to do?) 90% of the experimental group answered correctly and 60% in the control group.
- Pourquoi chaque espèce est-elle importante ? (Why is each species important?) 85% correct (experimental) and 55% (control)

In vocabulary recognition tasks, the experimental group showed improved lexical retention due to pre-reading strategy use. For instance, after completing a

vocabulary-matching activity with terms like “chaîne alimentaire, équilibre, espèce”, students in the experimental group retained 70% of the new terms in a follow up quiz, compared to 42% in the control group.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that metacognitive strategy instruction significantly enhances reading comprehension among beginner-level learners of French as a Foreign Language. The notable improvement in the experimental group's post-test scores, as well as their superior performance in comprehension exercises and vocabulary retention, supports the assertion that metacognitive awareness plays a critical role in foreign language reading.

These results align with previous research conducted by Vandergrift and Goh (2012), who emphasized that metacognitive strategies promote learner autonomy and deeper textual engagement. Similarly, Carrell (1989) found that learners trained in such strategies were better able to identify the main ideas and monitor their own understanding skills that were echoed in our participants’ self-reports.

One of the most effective components observed in the current study was **pre-reading planning**, where learners activated prior knowledge and set reading goals. This not only improved comprehension but also increased learner confidence. For example, before reading a passage about environmental issues, students in the experimental group responded to prompts such as *“Qu’est-ce que tu sais sur le changement climatique?”* (What do you know about climate change?), which helped them engage with the text more meaningfully.

Furthermore, **monitoring strategies**, such as identifying comprehension gaps and guessing word meanings in context, proved to be instrumental. Students’ journals revealed that they used contextual clues to infer meanings of expressions like *“chaîne alimentaire”* or *“effet de serre”*, rather than relying solely on dictionaries. This kind of active engagement aligns with what Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris (2008) describe as “strategic reading behavior,” wherein learners dynamically interact with the text rather than passively decode it.

Post-reading **evaluation strategies** encouraged learners to reflect on their understanding and the strategies that helped them succeed. By answering reflective questions such as *"Quelle stratégie m'a aidé aujourd'hui ?"* (Which strategy helped me today?), learners became more conscious of their learning process, a metacognitive shift essential for long-term language development.

The control group, which did not receive metacognitive training, showed minimal progress, likely due to a lack of self-regulatory reading techniques. This supports Koda's (2005) claim that strategy poor learners are often overwhelmed by foreign texts and struggle with comprehension unless taught how to approach reading systematically.

It is also worth noting that the use of **authentic French materials** played a vital role. The incorporation of real world texts not only increased learner motivation but also contextualized vocabulary and structures in a meaningful way. This is consistent with the findings of Gilmore (2007), who advocates for authentic input as a catalyst for both linguistic and cognitive development.

In summary, the study confirms that metacognitive strategies when explicitly taught and systematically applied enhance reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and learner confidence in FLE contexts. These findings offer strong support for the integration of metacognitive strategy instruction into beginner-level French curricula.

CONCLUSION

This study provides clear empirical evidence that metacognitive strategies significantly enhance reading comprehension in beginner level learners of French as a Foreign Language (FLE). Through structured training in planning, monitoring, and evaluating, learners developed greater awareness of their own reading processes, which enabled them to interact with texts more purposefully and effectively. The substantial improvement in the experimental group's post-test performance, coupled with their reflective engagement in reading tasks, underscores the pedagogical value of explicitly incorporating metacognitive instruction into foreign language curricula.

The research highlights several key implications for language educators. First, teaching metacognitive strategies should not be reserved for advanced learners; even beginners can benefit when these strategies are scaffolded appropriately. Second, combining metacognitive training with authentic French materials such as articles, dialogues, and informational texts maximizes learners' exposure to real world language while simultaneously supporting strategy development. This dual focus not only improves comprehension outcomes but also fosters learner autonomy, critical thinking, and confidence.

Moreover, the qualitative findings from learner journals suggest that students who engage in metacognitive reflection are more likely to transfer these strategies to other language learning contexts, including listening and writing. As a result, metacognitive strategy training serves not only as a tool for improved reading comprehension, but also as a foundation for holistic language proficiency.

In conclusion, integrating metacognitive strategy instruction into FLE programs is a research-backed, learner centered approach that equips students with the tools needed to become independent, strategic readers. It shifts the focus from passive reading to active meaning-making, empowering learners to take control of their comprehension and long-term language development.

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