

READING STRATEGIES FOR EFL LEARNERS: HELPING STUDENTS BECOME BETTER READERS

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Abstract. Reading is about understanding meaning, guessing unfamiliar words, and staying motivated. This article explores effective reading strategies that help learners improve comprehension, build vocabulary, and develop confidence. Using a mix of approaches based on learner needs can turn reading into a rewarding experience.

Keywords. EFL reading, comprehension strategies, vocabulary, metacognition, learner autonomy, reading practice

Introduction

For many EFL learners, reading English feels like climbing a hill—steep, slow, and sometimes discouraging. That is because reading in a new language involves more than just knowing letters. Reading in a second language is a multifaceted cognitive process that extends beyond mere decoding of letters. It encompasses the integration of prior knowledge, inference-making, and the application of various strategies to construct meaning from the text. It also requires understanding sentence structure, figuring out unknown words, and connecting ideas. So how can we make this process easier and more effective?

The answer lies in using **reading strategies**—specific tools learners can use before, during, and after reading to help them understand better. When students are taught how to read strategically, they often feel more confident and perform better. As a linguist Anderson said in his book “Individual Differences in Strategy Use in Second Language Reading and Testing(1991)”:

“Strategic reading is not only a matter of knowing what strategy to use, but also the reader must know how to use a strategy successfully and orchestrate its use with other strategies.”

So what Are Reading Strategies?

Reading strategies are ways of approaching a text that help make meaning clearer. Some are used to **get the main idea**, some to **remember details**, and others to **check understanding**.

Let’s look at a few types:

1. Before Reading: Preparing the Mind

Good readers do not just dive into a text. They first try to understand what it is about.

Predicting: Looking at the title or images and guessing the topic. Engaging in

prediction activates learners' prior knowledge and sets a purpose for reading, which can enhance comprehension and engagement with the text.

Setting a purpose: Asking, “Why am I reading this?” helps focus attention.

2. During Reading: Staying Engaged

Guessing unknown words from context: Instead of running to the dictionary, students learn to use nearby words for clues. Contextual guessing, or lexical inferencing, is a widely used strategy among EFL learners for deducing the meanings of unfamiliar words. Studies have shown that this approach not only aids in vocabulary acquisition but also improves overall reading comprehension.

Highlighting or underlining key ideas: This keeps attention active. Highlighting key ideas serves as a visual aid that helps learners focus on essential information, facilitating better retention and understanding of the text's main concepts.

Visualizing: Forming mental images of what's happening in the text helps make sense of it. Visualizing enables readers to construct mental representations of the text, which can enhance comprehension by making abstract ideas more concrete and relatable.

3. After Reading: Checking Understanding

Summarizing: Putting the main idea into their own words. Summarization is a critical strategy that helps learners consolidate information and assess their understanding of the text. It encourages active engagement and facilitates the retention of key concepts.

Asking questions: Reflecting on what was confusing or surprising.

These strategies may seem simple, but many learners do not use them unless they are shown how—and encouraged to practice.

Why Strategies Matter in EFL Learning?

EFL learners often read more slowly and may struggle to guess meaning. One common problem is focusing too much on understanding every single word. This slows reading and makes it frustrating. Teaching students to look at the “big picture” helps them read faster and enjoy it more. Implementing metacognitive strategies, such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's reading process, has been shown to enhance EFL learners' reading comprehension and foster greater autonomy in learning.

For example, research has shown that learners who use strategies like summarizing, predicting, and monitoring their understanding tend to perform better over time. In one study, students who received strategy instruction improved their reading test scores and felt more confident tackling long texts. But the goal isn't just test scores—it's about helping learners become **independent readers** who enjoy reading in English.

Adapting Strategies to Learners

Not all learners are the same. A beginner might need more support—like pre-teaching difficult words—while an advanced learner might be ready to analyze the writer's purpose or style. It is important for teachers to choose strategies that match the learners' level and the type of text. Recognizing the diversity in learners' proficiency levels and backgrounds is crucial. Tailoring reading strategies to individual needs ensures more effective learning outcomes and accommodates varying cognitive and linguistic abilities.

Here is how strategies might differ:

Beginners: Focus on word guessing, using visuals, and simple summarizing.

Intermediate: Start applying note-taking and paraphrasing.

Advanced: Practice critical thinking and drawing inferences from complex texts.

Making It Practical

To bring strategies into the classroom:

Using **think-aloud**. **Implementing the think-aloud strategy has been shown to significantly improve students' reading comprehension abilities, particularly in identifying main ideas, making inferences, summarizing, and interpreting vocabulary.** Teachers read a short passage and explain their thinking out loud—this models strategy use. Think-aloud protocols serve as a valuable instructional tool, allowing students to observe the cognitive processes involved in reading. This method promotes metacognitive awareness and helps learners internalize effective reading strategies.

Pair reading: Students discuss what they read with a partner. Partner reading, a cooperative learning strategy, allows students to take turns reading and provide each other with feedback, promoting fluency and comprehension. This method encourages peer-assisted learning and can be particularly beneficial for English Language Learners.

Strategy journals: Learners reflect on what strategy they used and how it helped. Maintaining strategy journals encourages learners to reflect on their reading processes, fostering metacognitive awareness. This practice helps students identify effective strategies and areas for improvement, leading to enhanced reading comprehension.

Even simple steps like these can make reading lessons more interactive and meaningful.

Conclusion. Reading does not have to be stressful or boring. When EFL learners are taught to use reading strategies, they become more confident and capable readers. The key is to show them how to think before, during, and after reading. With practice and support, even students who once dreaded reading can start to enjoy it—and succeed at it.

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