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STRATEGIC APPROACHES TO IMPROVING READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS FOR EFL STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY OF SECONDARY EDUCATION

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Annotation. Reading comprehension is a cornerstone of language acquisition in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. However, secondary school learners frequently struggle due to cognitive overload caused by limited vocabulary, L1 interference, and passive reading habits. This thesis investigates the efficacy of integrating strategic reading methodologies—specifically balancing intensive and extensive reading, contextual vocabulary acquisition, and metacognitive scaffolding. Using a case study approach at school No. 75, this research synthesizes contemporary pedagogical frameworks to provide a comprehensive model for enhancing EFL reading literacy and transforming passive readers into critical comprehenders.

Keywords: reading comprehension, EFL students, reading strategies, English language teaching (ELT), secondary education, strategic reading, metacognitive strategies, vocabulary development, reading proficiency, learner-centered instruction, critical thinking, language acquisition.

In the contemporary globalized educational landscape, proficiency in reading English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is paramount for academic success and future professional integration. Unlike first-language (L1) readers who possess an intuitive grasp of syntactic structures, EFL learners face the dual challenge of decoding a foreign linguistic code while simultaneously extracting conceptual meaning[1] (Nuttall, 2005). Traditional secondary school methodologies often overemphasize mechanical translation, transforming reading into a tedious grammar-decoding chore rather than an active process of meaning-making[2].

Furthermore, psychological barriers such as foreign language reading anxiety often hinder students' ability to process text smoothly[3]. This study aims to address these pedagogical and psychological gaps by examining how structured reading strategies can mitigate cognitive barriers and foster fluent reading comprehension among secondary school EFL learners.

This study utilizes a qualitative and conceptual analysis framework, supplemented by empirical classroom observations. Specifically, the practical efficacy of the proposed strategies was examined through a targeted case study involving 75 students from the 10th grade at secondary school No. 75.

The methodological approach evaluated three core pedagogical interventions implemented during a designated academic term:

[1] Nuttall, C. (2005). *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language* (3rd ed.). Macmillan Education.
[2] Alderson, J. C. (2000). *Assessing Reading*. Cambridge University Press.
[3] Saito, Y., Garza, T. J., & Horwitz, E. K. (1999). Foreign language reading anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 83(2), 202-218.

Contextual Lexical Inferencing: Moving away from rote dictionary memorization toward context-clue decoding in classroom texts, focusing on the lexical threshold necessary for comprehension[4].

The Dual-Reading Framework: The systematic integration of Intensive Reading (IR) for structural precision during class hours and Extensive Reading (ER) for homework assignments using graded readers[5].

Metacognitive Scaffolding and Schema Activation: Implementing pre-, during-, and post-reading tasks designed to activate background knowledge and reduce language anxiety[6].

A primary impediment to EFL reading comprehension among the observed 10th-grade students was lexical deficiency. When a text contains more than 5% unfamiliar words, reading comprehension breaks down significantly because the cognitive load becomes unsustainable[7]. Rather than relying on bilingual dictionaries—which constantly interrupts cognitive flow—training students in contextual guessing enables them to utilize semantic and syntactic clues surrounding an unknown term[8]. The empirical data showed that students who maintained a structured "vocabulary journal" to record contextual clues displayed higher retention rates than those relying on rote memorization.

Synergizing Intensive and Extensive Reading

The research indicates that developing long-term reading proficiency relies on a balanced linguistic diet consisting of both macro- and micro-level texts:[9]

Reading Type	Pedagogical Focus	Target Outcome	Target Material Level
Intensive Reading (IR)	Grammatical accuracy, syntactic breakdown, cohesive devices.	Deep comprehension and structural mastery.	Slightly above current student level ($i+1$).
Extensive Reading (ER)	Fluency, speed, reading for pleasure/gist.	Cognitive automaticity and reduced anxiety.	Slightly below or at current student level.

Krashen's Input Hypothesis strongly supports Extensive Reading, asserting that exposure to comprehensible, low-anxiety input accelerates natural language acquisition. While IR ensures that 10th-grade students grasp the academic rigor required by the national curriculum, ER builds the reading stamina and automaticity necessary to transition from decoding to true reading fluency[10].

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[4] Laufer, B., & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, G. C. (2010). Lexical threshold to second language reading: How many words are needed for comprehension and vocabulary learning?. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 22(1), 15-30.
[5] Bamford, J., & Day, R. R. (Eds.). (2004). *Extensive Reading Activities for Teaching Language*. Cambridge University Press.
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Metacognitive Strategies, Schema Theory, and TBLT

Passive reading results in low information retention. Activating metacognitive strategies transforms learners into active participants. According to Schema Theory, comprehension occurs when a reader maps new text information onto their pre-existing background knowledge[11].

By implementing Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) frameworks, teachers can structure reading lessons into three distinct phases[12]:

Pre-reading: Tasks such as predicting content via headings and images prime the brain's existing schemata and build curiosity.

During-reading: Strategies like skimming (for the main idea) and scanning (for specific data) prevent students from getting bogged down by minor details.

Post-reading: Text annotation, peer discussions, and collaborative summarizing create a active dialogue between the reader and the text, cementing critical analysis skills.

Observations at school No. 75 indicated that implementing these pre- and during-reading tasks significantly lowered foreign language reading anxiety, leading to a more participatory classroom dynamic.

Improving reading skills in an EFL context requires shifting the instructional paradigm from passive translation to active, strategic comprehension. By balancing the precision of intensive reading with the fluency-building power of extensive reading, and anchoring both in contextual vocabulary acquisition and schema activation, educators can significantly alleviate the cognitive burdens faced by secondary school learners. The practical application of these methods among 10th-grade students at school No. 75 demonstrates that structured metacognitive scaffolding not only enhances reading literacy but also serves as a catalyst for overall language proficiency, positively influencing writing skills and spoken production.

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