

Creating A Grounded Theory On Acquiring English Reading Skills: Perspectives From Learner Experiences And Cognitive Approaches

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Abstract

Despite a wealth of research on the acquisition of English reading skills, few studies have focused on the process from the perspective of learners' experiences and cognitive strategies, especially within an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. A significant portion of existing research relies on established models rather than extracting insights directly from students, which creates a gap in understanding the development of reading proficiency in actual academic environments. This study seeks to create a grounded theory of English reading skill acquisition by exploring the experiences, challenges, and strategies of EFL learners. Utilizing a constructivist grounded theory methodology, data was gathered via semi-structured interviews with thirty undergraduate students across various proficiency levels (beginner, intermediate, and advanced) and ten English language instructors. The analysis employed the constant comparative method, which included open coding to identify themes, axial coding to recognize relationships, and selective coding to construct a theoretical framework. Results indicate that students face obstacles such as limited vocabulary, complicated sentence structures, cultural unfamiliarity, and reading anxiety, while utilizing strategies like skimming, scanning, predicting meanings, summarizing, and applying translation tools. Instructors highlight the necessity of explicit instruction in reading strategies and scaffolding techniques to aid learners. The study concludes that effective reading instruction should combine strategy-based

learning with techniques to alleviate anxiety, ensuring that teaching methods are in tune with students' cognitive processes to improve reading proficiency in higher education EFL settings.

Keywords: Grounded Theory, English Reading Skill, Learner Experiences, Cognitive Strategies.

A. Introduction

Reading is an essential skill in acquiring a second language, particularly for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), as it acts as a key to achieving academic success and unlocking professional opportunities (Fisher et al., 2024; Reiber-Kuijpers et al., 2021). Nonetheless, reading in a second language brings about distinct challenges, such as limited vocabulary, complex grammatical structures, cultural unfamiliarity, and cognitive processing issues (Yudintseva, 2023). In spite of these challenges, learners develop a range of strategies to understand and engage with English texts, shaped by their cognitive skills, previous knowledge, and teaching experiences (Hossain, 2024; Smith et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2022). To gain insight into how EFL learners acquire reading skills, a thorough investigation of their reading behaviors, challenges, and the strategies they employ is necessary.

Previous investigations into reading acquisition have underscored the significance of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in improving comprehension and addressing reading challenges (Kan et al., 2024). Proficient readers utilize techniques such as skimming, scanning, predicting meaning, summarizing, and inferring to enhance their understanding and retention of material (Azhari et al., 2023; Nasim et al., 2024; Vettori et al., 2024). Moreover, extensive reading, vocabulary growth, and self-regulated learning have been recognized as crucial components in developing reading proficiency (Harris, 2024; Zhang & Zou, 2024) (Nation, 2013). However, while prior research has looked into these strategies, a gap remains in comprehending how learners naturally cultivate and adjust their reading capabilities over time in authentic academic environments. By employing grounded theory methodology, this study aims to formulate a theoretical framework that clarifies how EFL learners gain and refine their reading skills through their experiences and cognitive engagement.

A key hurdle to achieving reading comprehension in an EFL setting is linguistic complexity. Learners often grapple with advanced grammatical structures, idiomatic phrases, and unfamiliar discourse conventions, which can hinder their ability to effectively process and understand English texts (Jafary et al., 2024). Additionally, cultural unfamiliarity significantly affects comprehension, as English texts frequently include references, humor, and sociocultural assumptions that differ from those in the learners' native languages (Q. N. Nguyen, 2022; Oshchepkova et al., 2023; Toth, 2022). Alongside these linguistic obstacles, many learners face reading anxiety, which may impact their motivation and engagement with English materials (Aleidan, 2024). These issues emphasize the need for theoretical insights into how learners confront reading difficulties and the strategies they adopt to overcome them.

This study aims to create a grounded theory of English reading skill acquisition by exploring the lived experiences and cognitive approaches of EFL learners, offering theoretical perspectives on the process of developing reading skills in a foreign language setting.

Literature Review

The acquisition of reading skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting has been thoroughly examined, particularly concerning cognitive strategies, metacognitive understanding, challenges in reading comprehension, and teaching methods (Vettori et al., 2024; Wongdaeng & Higgins, 2023). However, a significant portion of the literature has predominantly utilized established theoretical frameworks, resulting in a shortfall in insight into how learners innately cultivate and enhance their reading skills through their experiences (X. Chen et al., 2024; Sukarno & Riyadini, 2024). The grounded theory method allows for an investigation into how EFL students attain reading proficiency by extracting emerging themes and patterns from their personal viewpoints, rather than relying on pre-existing models (Chong et al., 2022; Falebita & Kok, 2024). This segment evaluates pertinent research on essential elements of reading skill acquisition, including obstacles to comprehension, cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and the impact of instructional support on improving reading skills

Challenges in Reading Comprehension

EFL learners encounter various challenges in achieving reading proficiency, often stemming from linguistic, cognitive, and psychological factors. A primary hurdle is vocabulary acquisition; limited word knowledge constrains comprehension and reduces reading speed (Ajabshir, 2023). Studies indicate that learners with a robust vocabulary are more adept at inferring meanings, establishing connections among concepts, and processing texts efficiently (Kovalenko, 2024). Moreover, grammatical intricacies and discourse structures can present significant difficulties, especially when learners face unfamiliar syntactic forms or culturally specific phrases (Naveen & Trojovský, 2024).

Another considerable obstacle is reading anxiety, which adversely impacts learners' motivation and interaction with texts (Al-Wossabi, 2024). Students often feel anxious when confronted with complex academic readings, intricate sentence constructions, or unfamiliar subjects, resulting in avoidance behaviors and diminished comprehension effectiveness (Ismailov et al., 2021; Kianinezhad, 2024; Mote, n.d.; Muris & Ollendick, 2021). Cultural unfamiliarity also complicates the understanding of texts that presuppose knowledge of Western historical, social, or literary contexts (Lorette, 2023). These issues underscore the necessity for efficient strategies and teaching interventions to assist learners in improving their reading competencies.

Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies in Reading

The significance of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in reading has been broadly recognized within second language acquisition (SLA) research, as these strategies affect how learners engage with, process, and remember information from texts (Ahsani & Budairi, 2022; Wen & Naim, 2023; Yang et al., 2021). Cognitive strategies include direct processing methods such as skimming, scanning, summarizing, predicting meanings, and utilizing context clues (T. B. T. Nguyen, 2022; Thao & Long, 2021). Proficient readers utilize both bottom-up and top-down processing to merge linguistic knowledge with background information to construct meaning effectively (Ahsani & Budairi, 2022; Saputra, 2022).

Conversely, metacognitive strategies involve the awareness, oversight, and self-regulation of reading processes (S. Chen & McDunn, 2022; Ghadamgahi & Ghafournia, n.d.; Negi et al., 2022). Effective readers articulate reading goals, modify their approaches according to text difficulty, and assess their comprehension through methods like self-questioning and summarization (Ocampo & Tosino, 2024). Research has demonstrated that direct instruction in metacognitive strategies enhances reading efficiency by fostering learner independence in text processing (Dignath & Veenman, 2021; Ozturk, 2022). Nonetheless, a significant number of EFL students struggle with selecting and applying these strategies, highlighting the need for instructional support to facilitate the development of effective reading practices.

The Role of Instruction in Reading Skill Development

Reading skill acquisition in EFL contexts is heavily shaped by teaching methods and educational strategies (Fisher et al., 2024; Hasumi & Chiu, 2024; Yuan et al., 2022). Conventional reading instruction typically emphasizes translation exercises and intensive reading tasks, which may not adequately prepare learners with practical strategies for independent reading comprehension (Ali et al., 2022; Moon & Kwan, 2022). Evidence suggests that communicative and strategy-oriented teaching leads to enhanced reading fluency and comprehension outcomes (Graham, 2022; Ruffini et al., 2024).

One beneficial instructional strategy is explicit strategy training, wherein educators demonstrate and support cognitive and metacognitive techniques through think-aloud exercises and guided practice sessions (Greene et al., 2024, 2024). Moreover, extensive reading initiatives, which encourage students to read a variety of materials for enjoyment and general understanding, have been shown to support vocabulary expansion and reading fluency (Janah et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2024; Rahman & Mohamad, 2023; Robb & Ewert, 2024). However, effectively implementing these strategies necessitates that instructors adapt resources, consider diverse learner needs, and tackle motivational issues (Rapanta et al., 2021).

B. Methods

This research adopts a grounded theory framework (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to investigate the development of English reading skills among learners. The grounded theory was selected as it facilitates the construction of a theory based on the real experiences, strategies, and challenges faced by learners rather than being limited to existing hypotheses. The study employs a constructivist grounded theory methodology (Alzaanin, 2020; Atmawijaya, 2024; Lal

et al., 2012; Misdi et al., 2023), focusing on the subjective experiences of participants and the cyclical nature of data collection and analysis.

Participants

The study encompasses EFL learners, chosen through purposive sampling to ensure diverse representation in terms of proficiency levels, backgrounds, and reading experiences. Specifically, the sample consists of thirty undergraduate students across various proficiency levels (beginner, intermediate, and advanced) to capture a broad spectrum of reading skills and strategies. This selection facilitates an in-depth examination of how students with differing abilities process, understand, and engage with English texts. By including participants from various backgrounds aims to assess the influence of previous exposure, motivation, and individual reading habits on reading comprehension and strategic approaches. Furthermore, this careful selection guarantees that the findings reflect the real experiences of students pursuing EFL in a university environment, where proficient reading is crucial for academic achievement.

Alongside the student participants, the study incorporates ten English language instructors who provide insights into instructional practices, challenges, and pedagogical methods pertinent to teaching reading skills. Engaging instructors allows for a triangulated analysis, broadening the exploration beyond the students' viewpoints to include the methodologies, curriculum design, and classroom dynamics that affect reading skill development. By collecting insights from both learners and instructors aims to connect learner experiences with teaching methodologies, identifying potential areas for pedagogical enhancement. The varied composition of participants offers a comprehensive perspective on the elements influencing English reading skill acquisition, enhancing the applicability of the findings to EFL settings in higher education.

Data Collection

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews with both students and instructors, aimed at exploring their experiences, perceptions, and strategies regarding English reading. These interviews provide detailed insights into the challenges, techniques, and instructional methods within the EFL context. Key reading comprehension obstacles investigated include vocabulary limitations, complex sentence structures, cultural unfamiliarity, and reading anxiety, which frequently obstruct students' understanding of English texts. The study also examines the strategies that learners implement to enhance their reading abilities, such as skimming, scanning, predicting meaning, summarizing, and utilizing dictionaries or translation tools. Instructors contribute their insights on effective reading instruction, sharing their teaching strategies, the challenges they encounter in guiding students toward improved comprehension, and their perspectives on how learners can bolster their reading skills. By gathering perspectives from both students and educators aims to cultivate a holistic understanding of the factors affecting English reading proficiency, ultimately leading to improved teaching practices and enhanced learning outcomes.

Data Analysis

In accordance with grounded theory principles, the data analysis is performed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to systematically derive a theory based on participants' experiences. The analysis starts with open coding, wherein recurring themes and patterns in participant responses are identified, allowing for categorization of shared challenges, strategies, and perceptions concerning English reading skills. Subsequently, axial coding is utilized to delineate relationships among these categories, linking specific reading challenges (unfamiliar vocabulary and sentence complexity) to the strategies students deploy to navigate them (skimming, inferring meaning, or using dictionaries). This step refines the data by elucidating connections between learners' reading experiences and instructional practices. Finally, selective coding is conducted to synthesize these findings into a cohesive theoretical framework that elucidates the process of reading skill acquisition among EFL learners. This structured methodology ensures that the emerging theory is closely tied to real-world experiences, providing valuable insights into how students cultivate reading proficiency and how educators can enhance their pedagogical strategies.

C. Findings

This study's results, based on a grounded theory approach, uncover several significant themes concerning the acquisition of English reading skills among EFL learners. By conducting semi-structured interviews with both students and instructors, the research identifies various challenges, strategies, instructional influences, and emerging trends in reading development.

Through the data analysis process—which included open, axial, and selective coding—the study illustrates how learners tackle comprehension challenges, utilize cognitive strategies, and engage with instructional methods. The findings are organized into the following thematic categories:

Challenges in English Reading Comprehension

Participants outlined numerous obstacles to effective reading comprehension, which can be grouped into linguistic, cognitive, and emotional challenges:

1. **Vocabulary limitations:** Every student, independent of their proficiency level, pointed to unfamiliar vocabulary as the most pressing barrier to reading English texts. While beginners struggled with basic word recognition, intermediate and advanced students faced difficulties with academic and technical terminology. Many relied on dictionaries but found that frequent look-ups interrupted their reading flow.
2. **Complex sentence structures:** A number of learners encountered challenges with lengthy, syntactically intricate sentences that included multiple clauses or passive constructions. Although advanced learners showed better capability in understanding meanings, beginners and intermediate students often resorted to translating word by word, which resulted in slow and fragmented comprehension.
3. **Cultural unfamiliarity:** Texts filled with Western cultural references, idiomatic expressions, and background knowledge assumptions posed particular difficulties. Students noted that their lack of exposure to specific cultural contexts hampered their ability to deduce implicit meanings found in narratives and academic texts.
4. **Reading anxiety:** Psychological barriers, such as fears of misunderstanding, low self-confidence, and pressure to perform, were especially prominent among learners with lower proficiency levels. Some students expressed reluctance to engage with longer or more complex texts due to perceived challenges, which constrained their reading exposure and practice.

Cognitive and Metacognitive Reading Strategies

In spite of these obstacles, students employed a range of cognitive and metacognitive strategies to improve their reading comprehension. The analysis uncovered several notable strategies:

1. **Skimming and scanning:** Intermediate and advanced learners often utilized skimming (to quickly identify main ideas) and scanning (to find specific details). However, beginners struggled with these techniques and tended to revert to a linear reading style, failing to differentiate key information.
2. **Inferring meaning from context:** Advanced learners exhibited a stronger ability to infer meanings of unfamiliar words based on context clues, whereas beginners tended to rely extensively on dictionaries. Some students experimented with bilingual translation apps but raised concerns about their accuracy.
3. **Summarization and note-taking:** Higher-proficiency students actively summarized texts in their own words. In contrast, intermediate learners preferred to highlight important points, while beginners often resorted to copying sentences verbatim, indicating a deficiency in paraphrasing skills.
4. **Rereading and self-monitoring:** Learners at all levels engaged in rereading challenging passages, but differed in their awareness of comprehension gaps. Advanced students demonstrated a higher level of metacognitive control, adapting their strategies based on the difficulty of the material, while beginners frequently persisted through confusion without adjusting their approach.

Instructor Perspectives on Effective Reading Instruction

Interviews with instructors revealed essential teaching strategies and the challenges they faced in delivering English reading skills instruction:

1. **Strategy-based instruction:** Instructors highlighted the necessity of explicit training in reading strategies, which includes guiding students to identify text structures, make predictions, and summarize content. Nevertheless, they noted that many learners continued to struggle with applying these strategies independently.
2. **Use of authentic materials:** Some educators incorporated real-world resources, like newspaper articles, academic documents, and digital texts, to familiarize students with practical English usage. However, they observed that students often felt overwhelmed by the complexity of the vocabulary used in these materials.
3. **Encouraging extensive reading:** Instructors promoted outside-class reading activities, but acknowledged that student motivation was low, especially for non-academic texts. Many

students viewed reading as an obligation rather than an enjoyable pursuit, which resulted in minimal engagement.

4. Challenges in differentiated instruction: Due to the diverse proficiency levels present in classrooms, educators found it challenging to customize reading instruction to meet the varying needs of students.

D. Conclusion

The results of this study enhance our understanding of how learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) cultivate their reading skills through a variety of cognitive strategies and teaching influences. Through a grounded theory framework, the research has pinpointed significant challenges that students encounter, including limited vocabulary, complex sentence structures, cultural unfamiliarity, and reading anxiety. To address these issues, learners apply diverse reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, inferring meaning, and summarizing, which aid them in effectively navigating and comprehending English texts. Additionally, the study emphasizes the critical role of instructors in facilitating reading development, providing insights into their teaching methods and the challenges they face in helping students improve their comprehension skills. The findings highlight the dynamic relationship between learners' experiences and instructional practices in developing English reading proficiency.

Moreover, the study stresses the need for incorporating strategy-based instruction into EFL reading courses to better assist students in overcoming comprehension hurdles. Educators should integrate explicit training on reading strategies, ensuring that students not only learn effective methods but also apply them in various reading situations. The implementation of scaffolding techniques, such as guided practice and collaborative reading, can further enhance students' engagement with challenging texts. Additionally, tackling reading anxiety through confidence-boosting exercises and fostering a supportive learning atmosphere can empower students to become more independent and motivated readers. By aligning teaching practices with student needs, educational institutions can create more effective reading instruction approaches.

While this research offers valuable insights, it also highlights several areas requiring further investigation. Future studies could broaden the participant base to include students from various universities or learning environments, thereby enhancing generalizability. Incorporating performance-based assessments, like comprehension tests or think-aloud protocols, could yield a more objective measure of the effectiveness of reading strategies. Longitudinal research tracking the development of students' reading skills over time would also provide a deeper understanding of how these skills progress and which strategies are most effective over the long term. Additionally, examining the effects of digital and multimedia resources on reading comprehension could offer a more enriched view of modern EFL educational contexts.

This study advances the existing literature on EFL reading skill acquisition by presenting a grounded theory rooted in learner experiences and cognitive strategies. The insights from students and instructors underscore the need for focused instructional interventions to enhance reading comprehension and foster strategic reading practices. By refining educational methodologies and addressing the challenges faced by learners, educators can better equip students with the essential skills needed for success in their academic pursuits in English. Ultimately, developing robust reading skills among EFL learners is vital for their overall language proficiency and future academic and professional opportunities.

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