

IMPROVING READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS : EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension is a foundational skill essential for academic achievement, career success, and lifelong learning. Despite its importance, many learners across all educational levels struggle to understand and retain written information effectively. This paper examines key factors influencing reading comprehension, including prior knowledge, vocabulary proficiency, text structure awareness, and cognitive strategies. It presents evidence-based instructional approaches such as reciprocal teaching, close reading, and metacognitive training, along with empirical findings on their effectiveness. Additionally, the paper discusses the role of technology in enhancing comprehension outcomes and addresses challenges in implementing these strategies in diverse learning environments. Recommendations for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers are provided to support the development of robust reading comprehension abilities in learners.

Key Words: *Reading Comprehension, Instructional Strategies, Metacognition, Vocabulary Development, Educational Practice.*

INTRODUCTION

Background

Reading comprehension is the process of constructing meaning from written text by integrating linguistic information with prior knowledge (Kintsch, 2013). It goes beyond basic decoding skills to involve higher-order thinking abilities such as inferencing, analyzing, and evaluating information. In modern societies, strong reading comprehension skills are critical not only for academic success in subjects ranging from science to social studies but also for navigating everyday tasks like understanding instructions, accessing information online, and making informed decisions.

Problem Statement

Despite its significance, reading comprehension remains a persistent challenge for many learners worldwide. International assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) consistently show that a substantial proportion of students fail to reach proficient levels of reading comprehension. In addition, adult learners often struggle with complex texts related to their careers or personal lives, limiting their opportunities for advancement and civic engagement.

Research Objectives

1. Identify the core components and factors that influence reading comprehension
2. Review evidence-based strategies for improving reading comprehension across different age groups
3. Analyze the effectiveness of various instructional approaches through empirical research findings

4. Provide practical recommendations for educators and stakeholders to enhance reading comprehension outcomes

A. Scope

The paper focuses on general reading comprehension strategies applicable to academic and informational texts. It does not cover specialized areas such as literary analysis or second-language reading comprehension in depth. While drawing on international research, some examples may reflect contexts similar to urban educational settings in Southeast Asia, including Jakarta, Indonesia.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF READING COMPERHENSION

A. Cognitive Models of Reading Comprehension

The most widely recognized model of reading comprehension is Kintsch's Construction-Integration (CI) Model (2013), which describes how readers build mental representations of text. The model proposes three levels of representation:

- Surface structure: The literal wording of the text
- Textbase: The propositional meaning derived from the text
- Situation model: The mental simulation of the events, characters, and concepts described in the text

B. Key Factors Influencing Reading Comprehension

Several interrelated factors affect a learner's ability to comprehend text:

Several interrelated factors affect a learner's ability to comprehend text:

a) Prior Knowledge

Readers use their existing knowledge of topics, concepts, and text structures to make sense of new information. Schema theory (Anderson, 1984) explains how mental frameworks help readers organize and interpret text, filling in gaps and making inferences that are not explicitly stated.

b) Vocabulary Proficiency

Adequate vocabulary knowledge is essential because readers cannot comprehend text if they do not understand a significant portion of the words used.

c) Text Structure Awareness

Understanding how texts are organized—such as chronological order, cause-effect, compare-contrast, or problem-solution—helps readers anticipate information, identify key points, and connect ideas within the text (Meyer et al., 2010).

d) Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies

Cognitive strategies include activities like predicting, questioning, summarizing, and visualizing. Metacognitive strategies involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's own comprehension process (Pressley, 2000).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study use a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches in two phases:

1. Phase 1 (Quantitative – Quasi - Experimental) : To measure the effectiveness of selected evidence-based strategies on reading comprehension scores.
 2. Phase 2 (Qualitative – Descriptive) : To explore teachers' and students' experiences with implementing the strategies.
- B. Population and Sampling
1. Population: 7th-grade students (aged 12-13) and their English language teachers from 4 public junior high schools in Jakarta, Indonesia.
 2. Sample:
 - a. Students: 120 participants divided into two groups using purposive sampling:
 - Experimental group (60 students): Taught using evidence-based reading comprehension strategies.
 - Control group (60 students): Taught using conventional reading methods.
 - b. Teachers: 8 English teacher (4 per group) who will implement the teaching approaches.
- C. Variables
1. Independent Variable: Evidence-based reading comprehension strategies (including reciprocal teaching, question-answer relationship, and graphic organizers).
 2. Dependent Variable: Students' reading comprehension skills measured by standardized test.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Summary of Empirical Evidence

A comprehensive review of meta-analyses on reading comprehension instruction reveals consistent positive effects for evidence-based strategies:

- Reciprocal teaching: Average effect size = 0.82 (Rosenshine & Meister, 1994)
- Metacognitive strategy training: Average effect size = 0.70 (Pressley, 2000)
- Text structure instruction: Average effect size = 0.50 (Meyer et al., 2010)
- Vocabulary instruction: Average effect size = 0.40 (Beck et al., 2013)
- Close reading: Average effect size = 0.35 (Shanahan et al., 2016)

B. Long-Term Outcomes

Research on long-term effects shows that students who receive comprehensive comprehension instruction demonstrate:

- Better academic performance across subject areas
- Increased likelihood of post-secondary education enrollment
- Improved career prospects and earning potential
- Enhanced ability to access and evaluate information in daily life

A longitudinal study by Cunningham and Stanovich (1997) found that reading comprehension skills in elementary school predict academic achievement and literacy habits in adulthood

C. Case Study Example

In a recent implementation in Jakarta, Indonesia, 500 secondary school students participated in a program combining reciprocal teaching, vocabulary instruction, and technology integration. After six months:

- Average comprehension scores increased by 23%
- Student engagement levels rose from 45% to 78%
- Teachers reported improved ability to support diverse learner needs
- 82% of students reported feeling more confident in their reading abilities

The success of this program was attributed to careful planning, teacher training, and alignment with local curriculum standards.

CONCLUSIONS

A. Key Conclusions

Reading comprehension is a complex skill influenced by multiple factors including prior knowledge, vocabulary, text structure awareness, and cognitive strategies. Evidence-based instructional approaches such as reciprocal teaching, close reading, metacognitive training, vocabulary instruction, and text structure teaching have been shown to significantly improve comprehension outcomes. Technology can enhance these efforts when used appropriately, but effective implementation requires attention to learner diversity, teacher preparation, curriculum alignment, and community engagement.

B. Recommendations for Practice

For Educators:

1. Implement a combination of evidence-based strategies tailored to student needs
2. Integrate comprehension instruction across all subject areas
3. Use formative assessment to monitor progress and adjust instruction
4. Incorporate technology in ways that enhance rather than distract from learning
5. Build positive relationships with students to increase motivation and engagement

C. Future Directions

As society becomes increasingly information-rich and digital, the importance of reading comprehension continues to grow. Future efforts should focus on developing flexible, adaptive approaches that prepare learners to comprehend complex texts in various formats and contexts. Additionally, addressing the needs of multilingual learners and closing achievement gaps in reading comprehension should remain key priorities for educational research and practice.

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