

# THE EFFECT OF READING STRATEGIES ON THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE READING SKILLS OF STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to emphasize the effect that the use of reading strategies can have on the improvement of foreign language reading skills. To indicate the effect of reading strategies on reading skills a study was carried out with university students, respectively eleven students of the second year and twelve students of the third year pursuing their English language studies at the University of Tirana. To this purpose, the students were introduced to different kinds of Reading texts and Close exercises in two different sessions. During the first session students were asked to do the exercises relying on their own knowledge about language and reading, and afterwards they were introduced to different kinds of reading strategies which they practiced for nearly a month. During the second session students were asked to do the new exercises based on the reading strategies they had learned. The results of the study pointed to a noticeable improvement of students' reading skills once they had used reading strategies to do their exercises. As a conclusion, the article aims to point out that reading strategies are essential for the improvement of reading skills and they should be promoted in English language teaching.

## UDC & KEYWORDS

■ UDC: 378 ■ EFFECT ■ STRATEGIES ■ IMPROVEMENT ■ SKILLS ■ READING

## INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the four main skills that students of foreign languages need to master in order to successfully learn the language. Also, reading is one of the main activities of our everyday life as every one of us is engaged in reading in a way or another, be it just reading a newspaper article or taking a glimpse at the main headlines, reading a book or the label of a bottle of medicine. Apart from that reading is one of the most significant ways of acquiring knowledge and successful reading, not only improves the quality and quantity of our knowledge, but also our use of time whether it is applied in different study contexts or learning of various academic subjects. For this reason, due to the ever increasing importance of reading in every aspect of our everyday life, it is essential to find ways or methods to improve our reading skills. To this purpose a great emphasis is laid on the use of reading strategies as the best way so far to improve our reading skills.

## Literature review

Reading strategies have been one of the main areas of interest recently. The majority of studies on this subject have had as their focal point the method of teaching foreign language students to use a variety of reading strategies to improve their reading skills. Singhal (2001) has concluded that strategy training leads to improved reading performance. Even though many researchers have not been able to present a common definition of reading strategies due to different contexts of language learning, still there is

a generally accepted idea that reading strategies refer to conscious reading behavior. Carrel (1998) has pointed out that such strategies include skimming, scanning, predicting, guessing, making inferences, confirming or disconfirming inferences, identifying main idea, rereading, etc. Other researchers have made a different arrangement of reading strategies. Rubin (1987) classified language learning strategies as learning strategies, communication strategies and social strategies. Oxford (1990) has introduced many strategies, which she believes are relevant to successful reading and learning of foreign languages. She divides language learning strategies into two main classes, direct and indirect. According to Stern (1992), there are five main language learning strategies: management and planning strategies, cognitive strategies, communicative-experiential strategies, interpersonal strategies and affective strategies. Brantmeier (2002) and Brown (1990) introduced skimming, scanning and guessing as effective strategies in reading.

The aim of research in reading strategies is to find the best way to achieve effective reading and to specify the kinds of techniques that readers prefer using. While Rosenshine et al. (1996) and Guthrie et al. (2004) initially studied the results of strategy instruction in first language contexts, other studies, like that of Cohen (1998) or Chamot and Kupper (1989) were focused on the effectiveness of teaching several strategies in combination. Brunstein et al. (2008) studied the instructional effect of four reading strategies (summarizing, questioning, clarifying, predicting) which were practiced in small groups on elementary-school students' reading comprehension and found that these students got higher scores both in the post-test and follow-up tests than the students who were given traditional instruction.

## Data and methodology

My study is focused on the combination of a number of reading strategies, such as: preview, prediction, skimming, scanning, guessing from the context, inference, linking, morphology, syntax etc., with the aim of pointing out their role in the improvement of reading skills. There is a customary belief that the use of reading strategies stands to reason because different readers can use a number of reading strategies even without attending instructional teaching of these strategies, or even without being aware of using them. The questions that arise are: Is this kind of reading strategy use sufficient to achieve a relatively good comprehension of the written text? Is it necessary to explain particular reading strategies during the teaching process, so as to point out their specific characteristics and to clarify when the use of one strategy is more effective than that of another one, as well as their combination in specific contexts?

To give an answer to these questions I carried out a comparative empirical study with the Albanian students of English language at the Faculty of Foreign Languages of the University of Tirana, the branch of Saranda. The study was concentrated on two main issues:

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- The identification of the reading strategies that students used with or without being aware of using them and the level of text comprehension as a result of the usage or not of these strategies.
- The role of instructional teaching of reading strategies and their practicing in specific reading contexts with respect to the improvement of the level of written text comprehension and the enhancement of reading efficacy.

The method of study was the analysis of the data obtained through experimentation with reading strategies in the classroom. To point out the importance of instruction and learning of reading strategies I organized my study in three stages. In the first stage, I asked eleven English language students of the second year and twelve students of the third year to do some reading and open cloze exercises based on their knowledge. The results of their work are illustrated in tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1: Percentage of accuracy of second year students before reading strategy instruction

Students	Gapped text reading	Multiple choice reading	Multiple choice cloze	Open cloze
Eli	0%	40%	60%	26%
Elona	50%	60%	65%	40%
Euresti	33%	60%	60%	26%
Klaudja	0%	40%	55%	33%
Marjeta	50%	0%	75%	33%
Tana	16%	20%	65%	40%
Rudina	16%	60%	55%	33%
Pranvera	0%	0%	50%	53%
Xhesjana	33%	40%	80%	60%
Alma	0%	40%	55%	40%
Elana	33%	60%	55%	26%

Source: Author

As it can be seen from table 1 which illustrates students percentage of accuracy before they were instructed on the different kinds of reading strategies, out of the 11 students of the second year, 37% of the students were completely incorrect in their answers to the gapped text reading, 18% of the students were 16% correct at the gap filling exercise, 27% of the students were 33% correct and 18% of the students were 50% correct. In general 82 % of the second year students were 0-33% correct at the gapped text reading exercise, while 18 % of the students were 50% correct.

Regarding the multiple choice reading exercise 18% of the second year students were completely incorrect, 8% of the students were 20% correct, 37% of the students were 40% correct and 37% of the students were 60% correct. All in all, 26% of the students were 0-20% correct, whereas 74% of the students were 40-60% correct.

With reference to the multiple choice cloze exercise 9% of the students were 50% correct, 37% of the students were 55% correct, 18% of the students were 60% correct, 18% of the students were 65% correct, 9% of the students were 75% correct and 9% of the students were 80% correct. In general 82% of the students were 50-65% correct, while only 18% of the students were 75-80% correct.

Concerning the open cloze exercise, 27% of the second year students were 26% correct, 27% of the students were 33% correct, 27% of the students were 40% correct, 9.5% of the students were 53% correct and 9.5% of the students were 60% correct. In general 81% of the students were 26-40% correct and 19% of the students were 53-60% correct.

Table 2: Percentage of accuracy of third year students before reading strategy instruction

Students	Multiple choice reading	Multiple choice cloze
Ermira	40%	50%
Ferasete	60%	70%
Elvira	80%	80%
Emanuela	20%	65%
Erioni	20%	35%
Xhuliana	60%	40%
Eriselda	60%	60%
Xhuljeta	40%	90%
Nikollaqi	60%	60%
Marjeta	40%	65%
Anisa	60%	55%
Elmira	0%	75%

Source: Author

As it can be seen from table 2, the percentage of accuracy is relatively higher with the third year students, which can be related to the greater amount of practice these students have had. More concretely, with reference to the multiple choice reading exercise, out of the 12 students of the third year, 8% of the students were completely incorrect, 17% of the students were 20% correct, 25% of the students were 40% correct, 42% of the students were 60% correct and only 8% of the students were 80% correct. In general, 50% of the students were 0-40% correct and 50% of the students were 60-80% correct.

Regarding the multiple choice cloze exercise 8% of the students were 35% correct, 8% of the students were 40% correct, 8% of the students were 50% correct, 8% of the students were 55% correct, 18% of the students were 60% correct, 18% of the students were 65% correct, 6% of the students were 70% correct, 8% of the students were 75% correct, 8% of the students were 80% correct and 8% of the students were 90% correct. All in all, 50% of the students were 35-60% correct and 50% of the students were 65-90% correct.

After the completion of the first stage of the study that consisted in the experimentation with students' level of reading comprehension, I proceeded with the second stage, that of the analytical instruction of reading strategies and their practice through the six step process introduced by O'Malley and Chamot (1990), that of realization, modeling, general practice, action planning, in-depth practice and strategy evaluation. The main strategies that were explained to the students were taken from the list of strategies introduced by Brown (1990), such as:

- Previewing - looking at the titles, subtitles or figures to create a general idea of the structure and content of the reading material.
- Prediction:
  - Using knowledge about the subject to make predictions about the content of the vocabulary and to check comprehension.
  - Using knowledge about the kind and the purpose of the text to make predictions about the text's structure.
  - Using knowledge about the author to make predictions about literary style, register and content.
- Skimming and scanning – reading through the text quickly to grasp the main idea, to identify the text's structure and to confirm or question the reader's predictions.

- Guessing from the context – using reader’s knowledge about the theme and ideas of the text as the basis for guessing the meaning of unknown words without using the dictionary.
- Paraphrase – checking comprehension at the end of a reading part by restructuring the information and the text’s ideas.
- Symbol identification – noting down words frequently used by the author, which have a different meaning from their literary one, so as to identify the theme and ideas of the text.
- Morphology and syntax – Paying attention to the morphological structure of words and the syntactical structure of sentences to guess the meaning of unknown words, or to fill in missing information.

After students had practiced the above mentioned strategies for nearly a month, the study passed on to its third stage that was that of the second experimenting test with different exercises of the same kind. The results of the second experiment are given in the tables 3 and 4 below.

Table 3: Percentage of accuracy of second year students after reading strategy instruction

Students	Gapped text reading	Multiple choice reading	Multiple choice cloze	Open cloze
Eli	16%	60%	70%	40%
Elona	50%	80%	75%	60%
Euresti	50%	80%	75%	60%
Klaudja	16%	60%	65%	53%
Marjeta	50%	20%	85%	46%
Tana	33%	40%	80%	53%
Rudina	33%	80%	70%	46%
Pranvera	33%	20%	65%	66%
Xhesjana	50%	60%	90%	66%
Alma	66%	60%	70%	46%
Elana	50%	80%	75%	66%

Source: Author

As it can be seen from table 3, out of the eleven students of the second year, 18% of the students were 16% correct at the gapped text reading exercise, 27% of the students were 33% correct, 46% of the students were 50% correct and 9% of the students were 66% correct. In general, 45% of the students were 16-33% correct and 55% of the students were 50-66% correct.

Regarding the multiple choice reading exercise, 18% of the second year students were 20% correct, 9% of the students were 40% correct, 36.5% of the students were 60% correct and 36.5% of the students were 80% correct. All in all, 27% of the students were 20-40% correct and 73% of the students were 60-80% correct.

With reference to the multiple choice cloze exercise, 18% of the students were 65% correct, 27.5% of the students were 70% correct, 27.5% of the students were 75% correct, 9% of the students were 80% correct, 9% of the students were 85% correct and 9% of the students were 90% correct. In total, 73% of the students were 65-75% correct and 27% of the students were 80-90% correct.

Regarding the open cloze exercise, 9% of the students were 40% correct, 27.5% of the students were 46% correct, 18% of the students were 53% correct, 18% of the students were 60% correct and 27.5% of the second year students were 66% correct. In general, 36.5% of the students were 40-46% correct and 63.5% of the students were 53-66% correct.

Table 4: Percentage of accuracy of third year students after reading strategy instruction

Students	Multiple choice reading	Multiple choice cloze
Ermira	60%	55%
Ferasete	80%	80%
Elvira	80%	90%
Emanuela	40%	55%
Erioni	40%	75%
Xhuliana	80%	50%
Eriselda	80%	70%
Xhuljeta	60%	90%
Nikollaqi	80%	65%
Marjeta	60%	75%
Anisa	80%	75%
Elmira	60%	85%

Source: Author

As it can be seen from table 4, out of the twelve students of the third year, 17% of the students were 40% correct at the multiple choice reading exercise, 33% of the students were 60% correct and 50% of the students were 80% correct. In general, 50% of the students were 40-60% correct and 50% of the students were 80% correct.

Regarding the multiple choice cloze exercise, 8% of the students were 50% correct, 17.5% of the students were 55% correct, 6% of the students were 65% correct, 8% of the students were 70% correct, 25% of the students were 75% correct, 8% of the students were 80% correct, 8% of the students were 85% correct and 17.5% of the students were 90% correct. All in all, 41.5% of the students were 50-70% correct and 58.5% of the third year students were 75-90% correct.

### Results and discussion

It is obvious when comparing the results of table 1 and 2 with table 3 and 4 that there was a great increase in the level of reading comprehension and accuracy after the explanation of reading strategies in the classroom. More concretely while in the first test 37% of the second year students were completely incorrect with reference to the gapped text reading exercise, in the second test 0% of the students were completely incorrect. Also in the first test only 18% of the students were 50% correct as the uppermost limit of accuracy, while in the second test 46% of the second year students were 50% correct and 9% of the students were 66% correct. In general, while 82% of the students were 0-33% correct in the first test and 18% of the students were 50% correct, in the second test 45% of the students were 16-33% correct and 55% of the students were 50-66% correct.

Regarding the multiple choice reading exercise, while 18% of the second year students and 8% of the third year students were completely incorrect in the first test, after the explanation of reading strategies there were no completely incorrect answers. While only 8% of the second year students were 20% correct in the first test, 18% of these students were 20% correct in the second test. Also, while 0% of the second year students and only 8% of the third year students were 80% correct in the first test, 36.5% of the second year students and 50% of the third year students were 80% correct in the second test. In general, while 26% of the second year students were 0-20% correct in the first test, 27% of these students were 20-40% correct in the second test. Also, 74% of the second year students were 40-60% correct in the first test whereas 73% of these students were 60-80% correct in the second test. As far as

the third year is concerned, while 50% of the students were 0-40% correct and 50% were 60-80% correct in the first test, 50% of the students were 40-60% correct and 50% were 80% correct in the second test.

Concerning the multiple choice cloze exercise, while 82% of the second year students were 50-65% correct and 18% of the students were 75-80% correct in the first test, 45.5% of the second year students were 65-70% correct and 54.5% were 75-90% correct in the second test. Regarding the third year, while 50% of the students were 35-60% correct and 50% of the students were 65-90% correct in the first test, 25.5% of the students were 50-55% correct and 74.5% of the students were 65-90% correct in the second test.

With reference to the open cloze exercise, while 81% of the second year students were 26-40% correct and 19% of the students were 53-60% correct in the first test, 9% of the students were 40% correct and 91% of the students were 46-66% correct in the second test after the explanation of reading strategies.

In general, nearly all of the students achieved higher results in the second test. There were few cases of equal results between the two tests in one of the exercises and there was also a case when one of the students performed better in one exercise and worse in the other, but these can be put down to their lack of concentration during the explanation of reading strategies.

### Conclusion

The findings of this study show that the use of reading strategies is directly linked with students' reading skills, which is clearly reflected in the students' level of accuracy in the second experimental test. This leads to the conclusion that instruction of reading strategies increases greatly comprehension and improves noticeably not only the process of reading but also that of learning. For this reason the object of this study is not only to point out the importance of reading strategies, but also to emphasize the importance of teaching these strategies to students to enable them to use them consciously as well as to differentiate between the uses of specific strategies in particular reading contexts.

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