

Iraqi EFL University Students' Reading Strategy use and Comprehension

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Abstract

Reading constitutes one of the fundamental receptive skills a university student is required to develop to succeed in academic pursuits. Reading skill development not only facilitates linguistic ability but also augments the development of other language components like writing, vocabulary, and critical evaluation. The effective use of reading strategies can contribute significantly to overall reading comprehension.

The aims of the study are to find out Iraqi EFL university students' use of reading strategies, level of reading comprehension, and the correlation between Iraqi EFL university students' use of reading strategies and their level of reading comprehension.

Hence, a random sample of (350) students is selected from third-year students enrolled in the English Language Departments of the Colleges of Education at Baghdad University (College of Education/Ibn Rushd for Human Sciences), Missan University (College of Education), and Mosul University (College of Education for Human Sciences). Two instruments are used to fulfill the objectives of this research: the reading strategy questionnaire (RSQ) to measure the frequency of students' self-reported strategy use and the reading comprehension test (RCT).

The results indicate that Iraqi EFL university students utilize metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies, with a notable preference for metacognitive strategies. Moreover, the results reveal that the students' level of reading comprehension is moderate. Furthermore, the findings show that the use of reading strategies is significantly and positively correlated with reading comprehension.

Keywords: (Reading strategies, Reading comprehension).

الاستراتيجية المستخدمة والاستيعاب في القراءة لدى طلبة الجامعة العراقيين دارسي اللغة

الانكليزية لغة اجنبية

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الملخص

القراءة تشكل إحدى المهارات الاستقبالية الأساسية التي يُطلب من الطالب الجامعي تطويرها للنجاح في المساعي الأكاديمية. تطوير مهارة القراءة لا يُسهل فقط القدرة اللغوية، بل يعزز أيضًا تطور مكونات أخرى للغة مثل الكتابة، والمفردات، والتقييم النقدي. يمكن للاستخدام الفعال لاستراتيجيات القراءة أن يساهم بشكل كبير في تحسين فهم النصوص بشكل عام.

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى : معرفة استخدام طلبة الجامعة العراقيين الذين يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لاستراتيجيات القراءة، ومعرفة مستوى الاستيعاب عند القراءة لديهم . كما تهدف الدراسة إلى معرفة العلاقة بين استخدام استراتيجيات القراءة ومستوى الاستيعاب لدى هؤلاء الطلبة.

لذا، تم اختيار عينة عشوائية مكونة من (٣٥٠) طالبًا من طلبة السنة الثالثة المسجلين في أقسام اللغة الإنجليزية في كليات التربية بجامعة بغداد (كلية التربية/ابن رشد للعلوم الإنسانية)، وجامعة ميسان (كلية التربية)، وجامعة الموصل

(كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية). تم استخدام أداتين لتحقيق أهداف البحث: استبيان استراتيجيات القراءة لقياس تكرار استخدام الطلبة للاستراتيجيات وفقاً لتقريرهم الذاتي، واختبار الاستيعاب عند القراءة. تشير النتائج إلى أن طلبة الجامعة العراقيين الذين يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية يستخدمون استراتيجيات فوق معرفية، واستراتيجيات معرفية، واستراتيجيات تعويضية، مع تفضيل ملحوظ للاستراتيجيات فوق المعرفية. وعلاوة على ذلك، تكشف النتائج أن مستوى فهم القراءة لدى الطلبة متوسط. كما تظهر النتائج أن هناك علاقة ارتباط إيجابية ودالة إحصائية بين استخدام استراتيجيات القراءة وفهم النصوص القرائية.

1. Introduction

1.1 The problem and its significance

Reading is not merely a form of entertainment or information gathering; it plays a key role in language learning and academic achievement. As a fundamental skill, it enhances learners' competencies and intellectual abilities, enabling them to interact with texts effectively and critically (Farid & Akbar, 2012). Since comprehension is the main aim of reading, it requires readers to combine text content with prior knowledge to form a coherent mental representation (Pressley, 2000).

Successful comprehension helps students gather information, compare viewpoints, and connect ideas. However, achieving this level of understanding demands cognitive effort and appropriate reading strategies. Many students struggle with comprehension due to factors such as language barriers, lack of reading exposure, and ineffective strategies. Difficulties in identifying main ideas or making inferences often lead to frustration and decreased motivation.

This issue is particularly evident among Iraqi EFL university students, who struggle with reading comprehension. Research shows they often fail to

understand main ideas or extract needed information, which affects their performance on exams and participation in discussions (Abdul-Majeed, 2015). They also face challenges in decoding words and suffer from limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge, which negatively impacts their comprehension (Al-Saadi, 2019).

While much research has explored reading strategies and comprehension in general contexts, few studies have examined this relationship within Iraqi EFL settings. Given their distinct linguistic and educational backgrounds, further investigation is needed.

Therefore, understanding the connection between reading strategies and comprehension is crucial for developing effective interventions that address the challenges faced by Iraqi university students. Since reading is vital to academic success, identifying the causes behind their reading difficulties is important. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring the relationship between reading strategy use and reading comprehension, with the goal of informing instructional practices and creating learning environments that support students' comprehension skills.

1.2 Aims

The study aims to

1. determining Iraqi EFL university students' use of reading strategies,
2. determining Iraqi EFL university students' level of reading comprehension,

3. determining the correlation between Iraqi EFL university students' use of reading strategies and their level of reading comprehension.

1.3 Limits

This study is limited to Iraqi EFL 3rd year university students in the departments of English / colleges of education except Kurdistan region during the academic year 2024/2025.

1.4 Value

This study may offer valuable insights for EFL teachers regarding the investigated variables, helping them adjust their teaching methods, provide support, and encourage the use of effective reading strategies. It may also be useful for educational policymakers and curriculum developers by emphasizing the connection between self-efficacy, strategy use, and reading comprehension. This highlights the need to incorporate strategy instruction and confidence-building into EFL curricula, allowing for more effective and student-centered reading materials that promote autonomy, critical thinking, and deeper engagement with texts.

Finally, the study may benefit the academic community by serving as a foundation for future research. Scholars can build upon it by exploring how self-efficacy and strategy use change over time or how they can be enhanced. It also allows for cross-disciplinary and cross-context comparisons to deepen understanding of EFL reading development.

2. Literature review

2.1 Reading strategies

The concept of reading strategies is emerged in the 1970s, referring to the cognitive processes that readers use to decode text, understand vocabulary, and construct meaning (Afflerbach et al., 2008). These strategies are deliberate and purposeful actions that readers use to monitor their understanding, solve comprehension problems, and make sense of texts (Jarrah & Ismail, 2018).

Reading strategies are conscious, flexible, and goal-oriented, and their use depends on factors such as the reader's purpose, the difficulty of the text, and the reading context. While some strategies may become nearly automatic with practice, others require full attention, especially when the reader encounters unfamiliar or complex material (Afflerbach & Cho, 2009).

It is also important to distinguish reading strategies from reading skills. Skills are automatic and routinized processes, whereas strategies involve conscious control and decision-making (Paris et al., 2013). However, with experience, strategies can develop into skills over time. Understanding the role of reading strategies is essential in enhancing reading comprehension, particularly for EFL learners who often face linguistic and textual challenges.

2.2 Classification of reading strategies

Reading strategies are commonly categorized based on the cognitive and metacognitive processes involved in comprehending texts. Scholars often distinguish between strategies that directly process information (cognitive), those that regulate comprehension (metacognitive), and those

that compensate for gaps in language knowledge (compensation) (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002) These categories help educators and researchers understand how learners approach reading tasks and identify areas that require support (Oxford, 2011).

2.2.1 Cognitive strategies

Cognitive strategies involve mental processes used during reading, such as decoding, organizing, and elaborating on text content (Zare, 2012). They include rehearsal (e.g., underlining, rereading, memorization), elaboration (e.g., summarizing, paraphrasing, note-taking, explaining to others), and organization (e.g., identifying main ideas, classifying, outlining) (Zhang, 2018). These strategies aid in understanding, structuring, and retaining information and are essential for academic reading success.

2.2.2 Metacognitive strategies

Metacognitive strategies refer to readers' awareness and control over their reading processes. They involve planning (e.g., goal setting, previewing), monitoring (e.g., checking understanding during reading), and evaluating (e.g., assessing comprehension after reading) (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002). These strategies help readers manage their reading behavior, engage prior knowledge, and adjust approaches when comprehension difficulties arise.

2.2.3 Compensation strategies

Compensation strategies are used when readers encounter unfamiliar words or gaps in knowledge. They include using linguistic clues (e.g.,

affixes, syntax) and contextual clues (e.g., text structure, background knowledge) to infer meanings (Oxford, 1990). These strategies help EFL learners overcome vocabulary limitations and enhance reading comprehension and fluency (Nation, 2013).

2.3 Reading comprehension

Reading comprehension is the process of making sense of written text through the interaction of various cognitive abilities (Oakhill et al., 2015). It involves recognizing vocabulary, retaining information, analyzing text structure, and constructing meaning by connecting the content with prior knowledge (Grabe & Stoller, 2020). The goal is to extract and build meaning effectively from the text.

Comprehension also depends on the reader's background experiences, vocabulary knowledge, and overall language proficiency. Students may interpret texts differently based on their personal perspectives. Difficulty understanding terminology or complex language structures can hinder comprehension.

According to Duke and Pearson (2009), proficient readers set clear reading goals, monitor their understanding, and clarify unfamiliar words using contextual cues. They continually assess their comprehension, synthesize information, and refine their understanding as they read. Thus, effective comprehension is not only about decoding text but also about active engagement and regulation of understanding throughout the reading process.

2.4 Kinds of Reading

Reading involves recognizing written words and constructing meaning by drawing on prior knowledge, vocabulary, and grammar. Harmer (2010) classifies reading into two main types: extensive and intensive reading. Additionally, skimming and scanning are common strategies used for different reading purposes.

2.4.1 Extensive Reading

Extensive reading refers to reading longer texts, such as novels, newspapers, or articles, often outside academic syllabi. Learners choose materials based on interest, which promotes reading fluency and enjoyment. Comprehension is often demonstrated by summarizing or discussing the content (Harmer, 2010).

2.4.2 Intensive Reading

Intensive reading focuses on understanding detailed meaning and language use in shorter texts, typically during classroom tasks. Materials are selected based on learning goals and are accompanied by activities that assess grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension (Harmer, 2010).

2.4.3 Skimming

Skimming is a rapid reading strategy used to grasp the general idea of a text. It involves reading the first and last sentences of paragraphs and identifying keywords (Liao, 2011). This technique helps readers locate main ideas without reading every word and supports top-down processing (Brown, 2003).

2.4.4 Scanning

Scanning is used to find specific information, such as names, dates, or facts, without reading the whole text (Sutz & Weverka, 2009). It involves quick eye movement to locate target words or phrases. Effective scanning requires focus, use of clues, and identification of text features like bold or italicized words (Thamrin, 2014).

2.5 Characteristics of Skilled Readers

Literacy researchers agree that many characteristics of proficient readers are shared by both first language (L1) and second language (L2) readers (Pang, 2008). Skilled readers in both L1 and L2 show automatic word recognition, understanding of text structure and content, linguistic ability, and a broad vocabulary that set them apart from less capable peers (Afflerbach et al., 2008). Additionally, proficient readers are goal-driven and integrate prior knowledge with textual cues to derive meaning (Brown et al., 1996).

Moreover, skilled L2 readers use various reading strategies before, during, and after reading (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2008), while monitoring their comprehension and performance (Baker & Beall, 2009). In essence, proficient readers engage in constructively responsive reading, which Pressley and Gaskins (2006) describe as metacognitively competent reading, involving strategic and metacognitive skills.

Metacognition must be practiced before strategic approaches are applied, as it enables readers to become aware of and use appropriate

strategies (Nokes & Dole, 2004). The strategic process goes beyond knowing strategies; it includes coordinating, adapting, testing, and modifying strategies until comprehension problems are resolved (Trabasso & Bouchard, 2002).

Recent research highlights two key aspects of strategic reading: metacognitive awareness of reading strategies and learners' willingness to use them. According to Mokhtari and Reichard (2002), skilled readers monitor and control their comprehension using various metacognitive processes. However, knowing strategies alone does not guarantee better reading performance. As Afflerbach et al. (2008) note, readers must actively engage and self-regulate their strategy use, adapting to text difficulty, reading purpose, and context.

Reading proficiency involves integrating motivational, cognitive, and linguistic processes. Motivation plays a crucial role in combining cognitive goals and strategies during reading, as the use of reading strategies depends greatly on the reader's motivation (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

3. Methodology

3.1 Population and sample

Population, according to Kumar (2018), is the body from which the investigators obtain the data that are related to the research problems. The population in this study represents (3879) Iraqi EFL 3rd year university students in the departments of English / colleges of education except Kurdistan region during the academic year 2024/2025.

The sample consists of 350 third-year Iraqi EFL students, randomly selected from the English Departments in three Colleges of Education ; University of Baghdad (Central Region), University of Mosul (Northern Region) and University of Misan (Southern Region) This sample represents approximately 9% of the original population, which is considered sufficient for correlational research (Faul et al., 2009) see table (3.1).

Table 3.1: Sample Distribution

No	University	College	Sample
1	Baghdad	College of Education /Ibn Rushd for Human Sciences	136
2	Mosul	College of Education for Human Sciences	150
3	Misan	College of Education	64
Total			350

3.2 Research design

This study adopts a descriptive-correlational design, aiming to identify the relationship between reading strategies and reading comprehension among Iraqi EFL university students.

3.3 Instruments

Reading strategy questionnaire (RSQ) and Reading Comprehension Test (RCT) are used to obtain the research aims.

3.3.1 Reading strategy questionnaire (RSQ)

The RSQ, adopted from Shang (2010), is used to measure the frequency of students' self-reported use of reading strategies (see Appendix A). It contains 44 items covering three main categories; Cognitive strategies

(items 1–16), Metacognitive strategies (items 17–33) and Compensation strategies (items 34–44)

A 5-point Likert scale is used; Never or almost never true of me ,Usually not true of me, Somewhat true of me, Usually true of me and Always or almost always true of me. The total score ranges from 44 to 220, with higher scores indicating more frequent use of reading strategies.

3.3.2 Reading comprehension test (RCT)

The reading comprehension test is constructed by the researcher to assess students' abilities in understanding, interpreting, and critically engaging with written texts. It includes three reading passages adapted from educational materials such as Cambridge IGCSE and academic English textbooks. The passages cover various skills such as inferencing, identifying main ideas, and vocabulary understanding. The test includes; Passage one in which contains multiple-choice and true/false questions, Passage two in which contains short-answer questions. Finally, Passage three in which it is cloze test. The test consists of 25 items, with each correct response awarded 2 points, giving a maximum total score of 50.

3.4 Validity

Two types of validity are examined:

3.4.1 Face validity

The instruments are reviewed by a panel of experts in English language teaching from several Iraqi universities to evaluate the clarity,

relevance, and appropriateness of the items. The experts confirm the alignment of the questionnaire and test items with the study objectives.

3.4.2 Construct validity

Construct validity is established through theoretical grounding and statistical methods. Item-total correlations are calculated to verify internal consistency, item discrimination, and subscale-to-total correlations supported the structural validity of the reading strategy questionnaire. For the reading comprehension test, item discrimination and difficulty indices, along with point-biserial correlations, confirm that items effectively measured the intended construct.

3.5 Reliability

Reliability refers to the degree to which an instrument yields consistent and stable results over time and under consistent conditions (Cohen et al., 2007). In this study, the reliability of the Reading Strategy Questionnaire (RSQ) and the Reading Comprehension Test (RCT) is examined through statistical procedures including test-retest reliability, internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha), and the Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20).

3.5.1 Reliability of the Reading Strategy Questionnaire (RSQ)

To assess the temporal stability of the RSQ, a test-retest method is applied. The questionnaire is re-administered to a pilot sample of 50 students after a 14-day interval. The Pearson correlation coefficient between the two

administrations iss 0.88, indicating a high level of stability and confirming the instrument's reliability over time (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

In addition to test-retest reliability, internal consistency is evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, which measures the extent to which the items of a scale are interrelated and consistent in measuring the same construct (Nunnally, 1978). The overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the RSQ is 0.85, suggesting high internal consistency.

3.5.2 Reliability of the reading comprehension test (RCT)

The reliability of the Reading Comprehension Test is estimated using the Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20), which is appropriate for dichotomously scored items. The analysis yields a coefficient of 0.87, indicating a high degree of internal consistency. According to Cohen et al. (2007), coefficients equal to or greater than 0.67 are considered acceptable for non-standardized educational assessments. This result confirms that the RCT is a dependable instrument for measuring reading comprehension among the study sample.

4. Results

4.1 The Use of Reading Strategies among Iraqi EFL University Students

In trying to attain this aim, the researcher implements a reading strategies questionnaire on a research sample of 350 male and female participants. The researcher then computes the arithmetic mean and standard deviation for each strategy separately. To check for the significance of the differences between the arithmetic means and the theoretical mean for each

strategy, the researcher uses a one-sample t-test. The findings are presented in Table (4.1) and Figure (4.1).

Table 4.1

The arithmetic Means, Standard Deviations, and t-Values for the Reading Strategies Scale

Reading strategy	Sample Size	Arithmetic mean	Standard Deviation	Theoretical Mean	t-test		Sign. (0.05)
					computed	Critical	
Cognitive	350	56.857	10.974	48	15.099	1.96	Sign.
Meta-cognitive		55.437	11.085	51	7.488		Sign.
Compensation		35.677	7.678	33	6.523		Sign.

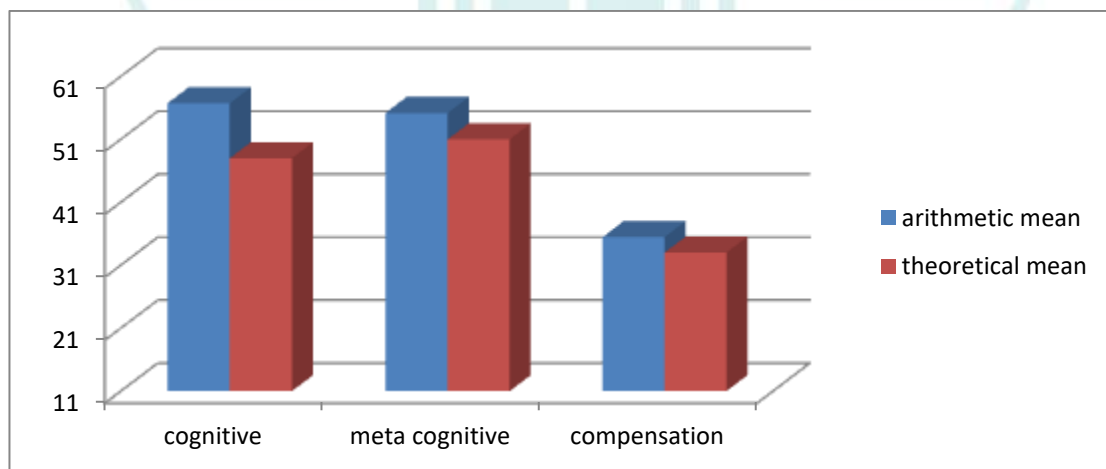


Figure 4.1

The Arithmetic and Theoretical Means Values for the Reading Strategies Scale

The results indicate a statistically significant usage of all three types of reading strategies among the sample students. Cognitive strategies are the most used, followed by metacognitive and compensation strategies.

4.2 Reading comprehension level of Iraqi EFL university students

The researcher conducts a reading comprehension test on a sample of 350 male and female students. The findings indicate that the arithmetic mean of participants' scores is 25.709, with a standard deviation of 6.901. Using a one-sample t-test to compare this with the theoretical mean (25), the result is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level, as shown in Table (4.2) and Figure (4.2).

Table 4.2

The arithmetic Means, Standard Deviations, and t-Values for the Reading comprehension test

Variable	Sample Size	Arithmetic mean	Standard Deviation	Theoretical mean	t-test		S
					Computed	critical	
Reading comprehension	350	25,709	6.901	25	1.921	1.96	(0

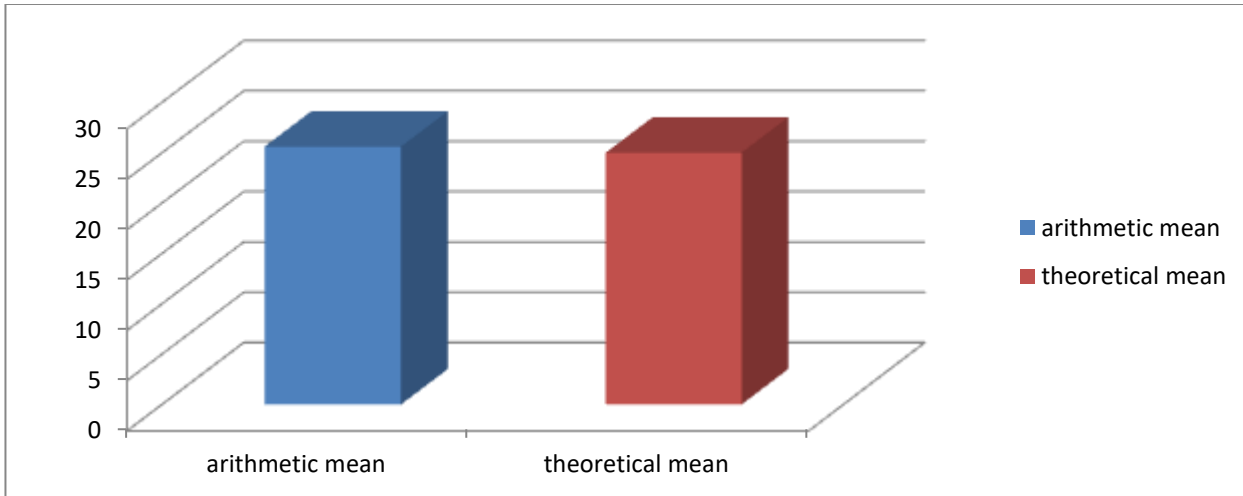


Figure 4.2

The Arithmetic and Theoretical Mean Value for the Reading comprehension test

This indicates that students have a **moderate** level of reading comprehension, as the arithmetic mean is close to the theoretical mean.

4.3 The correlation between reading strategies and reading comprehension

The researcher applies Pearson's correlation coefficient to examine the relationships between students' use of reading strategies and their performance in reading comprehension. The findings are shown in Table (4.3).

Table 4.3

The Correlation between reading strategy & Reading Comprehension

Reading strategies	Sample size	Correlation Coefficient (reading strategy & Reading Comprehension)	t-test		Sign. (0.05)
			computed	critical	
Cognitive	350	0.635	14.111	1.96	Sign.
Meta cognitive		0.502	11.155		Sign.
Compensation		0.436	9.689		Sign.
Whole strategies		0.522	11.600		Sign.

These results show significant **positive** correlations between the use of all reading strategy types and reading comprehension, with **cognitive strategies** having the strongest relationship.

5. Discussion of Results

The findings of the current study indicate that Iraqi EFL university students employ a wide range of reading strategies, particularly cognitive and metacognitive ones, in their reading processes. This strategic behavior contributes positively to their reading comprehension performance. Among these, cognitive strategies were found to be the most frequently used, followed by metacognitive and then compensation strategies. The use of such strategies—such as summarizing, predicting, and inferring—was statistically and significantly correlated with students' performance in reading comprehension tasks. Furthermore, the level of reading comprehension among the students is found to be moderate, indicating that while students have an acceptable understanding of English texts, there is still room for further improvement in deeper comprehension skills. The results also confirm that cognitive strategies had the strongest correlation with reading comprehension, suggesting that these strategies play the most prominent role in enhancing understanding. This is followed by

metacognitive strategies and then compensation strategies, which also showed significant yet comparatively lower associations with comprehension performance. These outcomes highlight the importance of fostering strategic reading behavior among Iraqi EFL learners in order to enhance their academic reading achievements.

6. Recommendations

1. **Explicit instruction** of cognitive, metacognitive, and compensation strategies should be incorporated into EFL classrooms.
2. **Reading materials** should be designed to promote strategic behaviors such as summarizing, predicting, and making inferences.
3. **Strategy instruction** should be scaffolded across course levels and adapted to academic reading requirements.
4. **Self-assessment tools** (e.g., strategy checklists, journals) should be introduced to help students monitor their strategy use.
5. **Teacher training workshops** should focus on strategy-based reading instruction.

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