

Instructional Strategies for Improving English Language Learners' Reading Comprehension: A Systematic Review

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Abstract: English language learners make up the largest portion of English speakers all over the world. Moreover, the population of English language learners is growing fast these days. Therefore, teachers need to learn more effective teaching strategies to handle this rapid change. When studying English, reading comprehension has always been one of the most important skills that students should acquire. This review is a systematic review divided into two parts. The first part focuses on two of What Works Clearinghouse's reviews; valuable reading comprehension instruction strategies were sifted out. The second part of the review selects four strategies published recently from 2019-2021. These strategies were chosen to support reading comprehension instruction by improving students' vocabulary inference ability, knowledge connection ability, content prediction ability, and motivation.

Keywords: English language learner, reading achievement, instructional strategies, engagement, reading anxiety, teacher education

1. Introduction

English is no doubt the most prominent language in the world, including both its native and non-native speakers. In fact, according to Ethnologue [1], non-native English speakers outnumber native English speakers by a wide margin. In other words, many individuals are learning English, and therefore teachers encounter various challenges while attempting to assist their students in developing their language skills.

Among the four basic language skills, reading comprehension is one important skill for obtaining knowledge. An important process of learning using another language goes from learning how to read to using the reading ability to learn. Based on the statistics of the National Institution of Literacy, in the United States, almost 40% of students struggle with fundamental reading skills [2]. Struggle readers also face academic difficulties in other subjects due to their inadequate comprehension skills, for example, when they are reading word problems. Plus, the majority of behavioral issues in class—60%—occur during group or individual reading tasks. Struggle readers suffer both socially and emotionally.

The U.S. government has long tried to ensure that all children attending public schools have an equal opportunity and a high-quality education, including reading education. In 2000, a report published by the National Reading Panel (NRP), *Put Reading First*, reviewing reading instruction studies and discovering teaching strategies that regularly lead to reading achievement to offer teachers

more practical instruction strategies. This review is only applicable to a larger student group. Minority student groups, such as English language learners (ELLs), were not included in the report.

Thereafter, in 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was passed. More students with “limited English proficiency” joined classrooms where the language of instruction was exclusively English. Despite the negative effect that changing learning environments had on English Language Learners, teachers in those classrooms were also under a lot of pressure to change instructional strategies to meet every student’s needs [3].

Later, in 2015, Every Student Succeeds Act has taken the place of NCLB. Then, established by ESSA, the National Center on Improving Literacy provides a database for teachers called What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), containing practice materials that could give instructors some teaching techniques to aid ELLs’ literacy and English language acquisition.

“Quality of instruction is more important than language of instruction [3].” Keep improving the quality of instruction should be the goal for every educator. Therefore, teachers’ knowledge improvement and teachers’ application of knowledge and skills are essential, not only in general classes but also in classes that have low-proficiency students [4]. Students who lack sufficient vocabulary and are unfamiliar with the reading contents may have trouble comprehending reading texts and feel anxious if the teachers do not address the related knowledge [5].

With these materials of reading instructional strategies for English language learners, which were mentioned above, this review focuses on three main objects. The first part of this review summarizes and categorizes instructional strategies that can help students’ reading comprehension according to WWC’s reviews published from 2012 to 2018. Subsequently, the second part adds extra examples for relative instructional strategies of the first part researched recently from 2018 to 2023. This part also analyzes the research on effective instructional strategies that can help improve ELLs’ engagement and reduce ELLs’ anxiety during reading comprehension instruction processes.

2. Methodology

A thorough literature search of works published between 2000 and 2023 was conducted using the databases ProQuest, Sage, ResearchGate, and Google Scholar, with a focus on studies about potential effective instructional strategies for reading proficiency among ELLs. The majority of the articles that fit the criteria are from academic journals.: *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, *Reading Research Quarterly*, *The Reading Teacher*, *Journal of College Reading and Learning*. When searching for information related to the subject of this review, various combinations of the following phrases are used: ‘English language learner’, ‘reading’, ‘improvement’, ‘achievement’, ‘reading instructions’, ‘engagement’, ‘reading anxiety’, ‘teacher education’, and ‘instructional strategies.’

This review is broken down into two main portions, as was mentioned previously. The first section is intended to summarize the methods from WWC’s reviews that teachers can apply to improve ELLs’ reading comprehension abilities; The second section is about teaching methods that were recently researched and can enhance ELLs’ reading performance and engagement. Studies had to fulfill the following inclusion criteria in order to be included in the review of reading comprehension instructional strategies.

Studies were chosen if they: (i) have empirical data; (ii) have been published after 2012 (studies on a similar topic were found prior to this year during extensive research); (iii) mentioned potential reading-comprehension-teaching techniques for English language learners; or (iv) suggested possible methods for enhancing ELLs’ engagement or reducing ELLs’ anxiety during reading comprehension processes.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Definition

Students who are developing their knowledge and proficiency in the English language are known as English language learners. The terms limited English proficient (LEP) and English learners (ELs) are sometimes used to describe these students by educators and researchers. Language minority students are those whose parents do not speak English as their first language at home., regardless of whether or not they have *limited English proficiency*. When specific information on English proficiency is unavailable, this more general term is frequently used to categorize study populations.

The study of English by non-native speakers in countries where it is not the national language is known as “English as a Foreign Language” (EFL). Moreover, when students are required to read in a language other than their own, such as when EFL students read English, they often experience fear and trepidation. This is known as foreign language reading anxiety. One of the factors that may impede reading when people form their own interpretations of the meaning of the text has been highlighted as anxiety. Therefore, reading anxiety should be addressed appropriately, particularly while studying a second or foreign language since it might result in poor understanding.

3.2. WWC’s Reviews on Reading Comprehension Instructional Skills for ELLs

In WWC, there are three practice guides for teachers who are teaching English language learners: *Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades* [6], *Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School* [7], and *10 Key Policies and Practices for Teaching English Language Learners* [8].

Institution of Education Science first developed *Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades* [6] as a practice manual for ELLs’ teachers. This practice guide mainly focused on research conducted until 2005. It reviewed and highlighted several screening instruments that may be used with struggling ELLs and the fundamentals of successful literacy interventions for these students, especially those in lower grades. Other recommended strategies mentioned in this review were vocabulary instruction, such as academic English, and peer-assisted learning.

Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School [7]. However, was an updated version of the practice guide [6]. Both learners who had their status “reclassified” as competent English speakers as well as those who were formally classed as *limited English proficient* were included in this practice guide [7]. Also, this guide expanded the group of students from elementary students only to K-8 students. As explained by the guide [7], High school students or preschoolers who are learning English are not covered by the guidebook. English language learners students register in school in grades 9 through 12 are required to acquire a new language and prepare for a new educational system; they deal with distinct problems than students in schools K–8. Additionally, considering the academic goals in pre-K settings, instructional tasks in pre-K education are also extremely distinct from tasks in K-8. Therefore, this updated guide is aimed at K-8 English language learners.

Based on this guide [7], the instructional strategies ELs need to achieve academic reading comprehension improvement include the following:

(a) Academic vocabulary instruction: Using concise, engaging, informative material that incorporates academic vocabulary as the base, teach intensively with a select of academic vocabulary for days. During content-area education, teach the academic vocabulary that is relevant to the topic explicitly, as well as the more general language that supports it.

While choosing words to teach, there is a total of six criteria (not every word used for instruction

must meet every criterion) offered by the guide [7]: (i) Key words for comprehending the content; (ii) Words that often appear in the text; (iii) Vocabulary that could be used across multiple discipline areas; (iv) Words that have different meaning under different contexts; (v) Words that can be modified by prefixing and/or suffixing; (vi) Words that can be connected with another language.

1. (b) Visual Aids: Use instructional resources efficiently to teach and aid students in understanding the subject, such as short film clips, images, and graphic organizers. Videos and graphics are helpful because, when used wisely, they maintain students' attention; and they provide students with the necessary background information to assist them to prepare for a session, bringing up relevant concerns, and expressing the concepts that will be covered in the session. Also, the multimedia elements of visual aids are crucial elements that naturally immerse students in reading activities and help students develop a good attitude toward reading English-language literature by stimulating their interest [9].

(c) Small-group instructional intervention: Students who are having trouble with language and literacy should get extra tutoring with three to five students clustered together. To make sure learners memorize what they have learned, use scaffolded instruction that allows them lots of chances to practice and review what they have learned in a variety of situations through multiple classes.

10 Key Policies and Practices for Teaching English Language Learners was published by The Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk at The University of Texas at Austin. This brochure provided teachers with suggestions on how to help K-12 English language learners achieve their academic goals through high-quality teaching [8].

Within this booklet, suggestions for teachers to improve ELLs' reading comprehension achievement are: (i) Teachers draw direct links between what students are learning now and what they have already experienced or provide experiences and explanations to increase background knowledge while reading; (ii) Teachers teach vocabulary in a systematic, clear, and sustained manner to enhance content acquisition; (iii) Teachers use visual aids to help connect key concepts and language while teaching; (iv) Teachers provide students chances to participate in peer discussions about reading content.

To summarize, WWC's reviews offered three focuses of strategies for teachers to improve reading comprehension ability in pre-reading, post-reading, and during reading, which are vocabulary and background knowledge, visual aids, and group learning.

3.3. Empirical Studies of Instructional Strategies

3.3.1. Lexical Inference Strategy Instruction

Vocabulary skills were discovered to be crucial for reading comprehension and to have a strong and positive correlation with reading performance [10]. The research on reading comprehension has focused a lot on lexical inferencing as a successful technique for dealing with unknown vocabulary. The lexical inference approach is crucial for improving second or foreign-language learners' reading comprehension. It requires students to use all available linguistic clues combine with the learner's overall understanding of the world, the awareness of the co-text, and other relevant knowledge.

Hamouda's study sought to determine how to teach lexical inference techniques to improve Saudi EFL students' reading comprehension. Furthermore, it aimed to define the lexical inference strategies employed when Saudi EFL students were facing unfamiliar vocabulary in a text and to determine whether lexical inference techniques and reading comprehension are correlated with one another.

The 60 participants were chosen following their Oxford Placement Test outcomes, which showed that they had intermediate levels of English ability. They were students from the English department of Assuit University and were randomly divided into control and experimental groups (each containing 30 students).

During the experiment, pre-test and post-tests were given to the control and experimental groups. According to Hamouda [11], the t-test for independent samples, the paired t-tests, and the Spearman correlation coefficient showed that the development of EFL students' reading comprehension was greatly influenced by the instruction of lexical inference. Thus, the result of Hamouda's study indicated that teachers could use lexical inferencing strategies to improve their EFL students' reading comprehension [11].

3.3.2. Balanced Reading Instruction

Balanced reading instruction is an overarching approach in that students are instructed to comprehend the language structure and tie their knowledge of the world to the book they are reading. This instruction helps develop students' phonological awareness, decoding, and comprehension skills.

According to Namugenyi, to understand a given text, students should first be able to decode and recognize the vocabulary in the text [12]. After understanding the meaning of the words, phrases, and sentences, students should then connect the text's meaning to the sentences' meanings. And eventually, students need to access their prior knowledge to draw inferences and keep track of their comprehension of the text constantly.

This study employed a critical qualitative research paradigm to analyze whether the balanced reading instruction program provides instructors with methods to promote their teaching in English and students' natural tongues in Uganda. The direct participants of this study were four teachers, and the indirect participants were forty Grade 3 students. The researcher collaborated with the chosen teachers to create, modify, implement, evaluate, and assess a balanced reading teaching program for the purpose of helping teachers improve their delivery of comprehension instruction in English as well as their native tongues.

Qualitative data were gathered through group interviews, program observation, and the researcher's reflective journal. The results demonstrated that teachers who took part in the balanced reading instruction program obtained better strategies, such as teaching reading comprehension to students in their primary language before moving on to English, to enhance English language learners' reading comprehension performance.

Though the researcher cooperated with teachers in only one school, the result of this action-oriented study still shows that balanced reading instruction can be used in similar teaching conditions to improve teachers' instruction of reading comprehension.

3.3.3. Translanguaging Instruction

Reading comprehension can be improved by predicting how events might be presented in the following text. According to Mgijima [13], the idea of translanguaging is credited to Cen Williams. It refers to a teaching strategy in an environment with several languages where learners get information in one language and do work in another [14].

As a reading development strategy, the translanguaging strategy encourages students to express their predictions of what they have read in a language other than that in which the text was written. According to prior research, allowing students to make predictions while reading texts improves reading engagement and comprehension [15]. Mgijima's study [13] focused on the effectiveness of using a translanguaging teaching strategy to increase English language learners' capacity to precisely anticipate events while reading.

The study conducted a Solomon Four quasi-experimental design. The participants were 215 Grade 4 English language learners from different elementary schools. The results showed that translanguaging strategies have an advantageous effect on English language learners' competence to create feasible expectations from the readings. The results also showed that a variety of variables, for

example, the student's acquaintance with the topics, the setting of the reading passage, and the language, affect how well the text is predicted. Therefore, to improve students' reading comprehension, teachers can use translanguaging strategies to match students' knowledge of the vocabulary, the settings, and the language with the text.

In addition, based on Mgijima's study [13], strategies that teachers can use to improve students' engagement and reading ability are: (i) a think-aloud strategy using different input and output languages; (ii) a psycholinguistic guessing game employing an understanding of relevant linguistic signals to make a prediction; (iii) picture walk; and (iv) prediction guide using a true-false quiz.

3.3.4. Flipped Learning

According to Afzali and Izadpanah [16], many studies on flipped classrooms show numerous benefits for students, including an improvement in learning motivation, academic achievement, and general involvement.

In flipped learning, the first phase of learning begins outside of class when students explore the readings and tasks given by the teacher. For example, with the flipped teaching model, students may more easily study at their own speed by watching teacher videos. Therefore, students will arrive at class prepared with some of the course's core concepts after pre-learning the material. Additionally, through various task-based, critical thinking activities, students will have extra opportunities and possibilities to interact in deeper depth with the material and effectively apply what they have learned early in the process.

However, the effects of flipped learning might be different across all subject areas.

Therefore, Afzali and Izadpanah's study examined the effects of flipped classroom methods on students' involvement and motivation of intermediate and upper-level students while studying English grammar, using quasi-experimental research [16]. During the summer term of 2019, this research was run as part of the English course for six weeks. The participants were 360 English language learners from four different institutions. They were picked by a multi-cluster sampling procedure and randomly allocated to the control and experimental groups. The results of this research showed that students who participated in flipped learning scored higher than those in the regular setting.

Also, implementing flipped learning approach in EFL classrooms increases students' understanding of English idioms [17]; and encourages their active learning in the form of improving their reading comprehension and raising their satisfaction with the learning process [18, 19].

4. Implications

This review filtered and summarized some instructional strategies that can prepare teachers who want to help improve their ELLs' reading comprehension skills. The aim of this review is to help teachers accumulate their repertoire of teaching strategies. However, the research of the four selected strategies has some limitations. The research of lexical inference strategy instruction has a limited sample size and only took place in one school's English department. Likewise, the research on balanced reading instruction also has a limitation in its experiment sample size. For future research, educators can test the effectiveness of these strategies in a larger-scale study under different teaching environments.

Also, in this review, the ages of English language learners are not limited from kindergarten to Grade 12. According to Massey and Lewis [20], some processes in tutoring elementary school students and upper-level students are quite similar, including teaching comprehension strategies and boosting students' interests and motivation. However, no evidence shows that the chosen reading strategies could work across all age groups. Therefore, for future study, educators can also compare the outcomes of using the same reading comprehension strategy at different age groups to conclude

whether a strategy could be used on all English language learners.

5. Conclusion

Due to the increasing population of English language learners, more and more teachers need to prepare themselves to assist ELLs in their classes. The review provides teachers with more instructional strategies to aid their ELLs in developing their reading comprehension. Overall, by selecting strategies from WWC's reviews and reviewing recent research that contained relative strategies, both languages use instructional strategies and curriculum design strategies are listed in this review to help teachers get their students ready for reading comprehension tasks, reduce students' anxiety, increase students' engagement, and finally improve students' reading comprehension performance.

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