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Boosting Comprehension: Engaging Strategies for Teaching Reading

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Abstract

Reading unlocks the doors to knowledge, imagination, and empathy. It is a gateway to knowledge to transform learners' potential. Employing purposive sampling, this qualitative case study investigates engaging strategies to enhance reading comprehension based on semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations of three basic level teachers. Five key themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of data: Activating prior knowledge, posing thought-provoking questions, summarizing key points, encouraging predictions, and fostering personal connections. These strategies were found to promote active reading, suggesting potential for wider implementation. Future research should examine their long-term impact on achievement and effectiveness in diverse settings.

Keywords: reading comprehension, critical thinking, prior knowledge, questioning, making connection

Introduction

The concept of reading encompasses a multifaceted process that involves not only the decoding of text but also the comprehension, analysis, and internalization of written materials. Decoding is the ability to translate written text into speech by rapidly matching graphemes to their corresponding phonemes and blending them to form recognizable words (NRP, 2000). However, decoding alone is not sufficient for reading comprehension, which is the ability to understand and interpret the meaning of text. Reading is fundamental in acquiring language skills, as it is closely linked with other linguistic abilities such as writing, speaking, and listening (Dhakal, 2021). Comprehension is considered the essence of reading. Snow(2002) defines reading comprehension as “the process of simultaneously constructing and extracting

meaning through interaction and involvement with written language” (p.11). The development of reading comprehension is a primary objective, as it enables learners to engage with academic tasks effectively. Reading is a gateway to a universe of knowledge, imagination, and empathy that empowers individuals to explore new worlds, understand diverse perspectives, and connect with others on a deeper level (August & Shanahan, 2007).

Based on the review of literature, Pelila and Palangyos (2021) identified four perspectives of concepts: reading as a skill, an ability, a process, and a procedure that play a big role in the world of language. Students’ achievement in reading is reflected throughout their lives. Reading holds a significant role in instructed second language learning context. Yet, not everyone grasps the true potential of this transformative skill. For many, particularly in basic-level classrooms, reading comprehension can be a challenging hurdle, hindering their academic and personal growth.

Numerous studies have emphasized the importance of reading comprehension for academic success and personal development (August & Shanahan, 2007). Research suggests that strong reading skills are linked to improved vocabulary, critical thinking, and analytical abilities (National Reading Panel, 2000). Moreover, proficient readers demonstrate greater empathy, social-emotional intelligence, and cultural awareness (Molnar et al., 2019). However, despite its significance, reading comprehension remains a struggle for many students, particularly in early grades.

Readers intentionally employ strategies to overcome comprehension difficulties, constructing meaning and enhancing understanding when faced with textual challenges (Adunyarittigun, 2021). Although some earlier studies (Alkhasawneh et al., 2013; Awada & Plana, 2018; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; McKeown & Beck, 2016; Pelia & Palangyos, 2021) have reported instructional strategies for reading comprehension, Phuong (2022) emphasized that it is crucial to investigate further into the strategies of teaching reading comprehension. While earlier research exists on general comprehension strategies (Pelia & Palangyos, 2021), there’s a gap in knowledge specifically focused on engaging strategies used by teachers at the basic level in the context of Nepal. This study has potential to contribute significantly to the field of literacy education. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to delve into the fascinating world of reading comprehension, focusing on effective strategies that can unlock its wonders for all learners. In particular, this study is guided by the research question: What are the engaging strategies employed by the teachers to boost reading comprehension of basic level students?

Literature Review

Several factors contribute to comprehension difficulties, including limited vocabulary, lack of background knowledge, and inadequate use of reading strategies (Erniwati et al., 2023; Pikulski & Chard, 2005). Fortunately, research indicates that effective instructional practices can significantly improve reading comprehension. Studies have identified various strategies

that promote active learning and engagement, such as questioning, summarizing, predicting, activating prior knowledge, and making personal connections (Erniwati et al., 2023; Guthrie, 2002; Pressley & Gaskins, 2008).

The literature on reading strategies encompasses a diverse range of studies, methodologies, and findings. A systematic literature review aimed to consolidate the most mentioned reading strategies across various studies, identifying 71 strategies categorized into pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities (Pelias & Palangyos, 2021). This review highlights the ongoing focus on identifying reading strategies and their relationships with various factors (Pelias & Palangyos, 2021).

The importance of reading comprehension and the role of reading strategies, including summarization, are further emphasized as vital for improving English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' reading comprehension skills (Awada & Plana, 2018). Additionally, multimedia and text-based reading approaches, which may include summarization activities, have been found to enhance reading comprehension skills in high school students (Alkhasawneh et al., 2013). Summarization is a valuable strategy for improving reading comprehension across diverse educational levels and contexts. It is supported by cognitive theory and has been empirically validated as an effective practice for enhancing students' understanding of texts (McKeown & Beck, 2016).

Koda (2007) identified vocabulary knowledge, prior knowledge, metacognitive information, and reading strategies as key factors influencing reading comprehension. Gilakjani and Sabouri, (2016) expanded on this, highlighting the additional impact of reading attitude, effective comprehension instruction, text complexity, and text structure.

Earlier studies have consistently demonstrated a strong link between learners' reading strategies and their ability to comprehend text (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). The scholarly research on reading strategies have consistently emphasized their importance in enhancing reading comprehension skills across various educational contexts. Studies have found that teaching reading strategies is essential for developing students' comprehension skills. However, there is a noted deficiency in teachers' preparedness to effectively design and implement these strategies (Okasha, 2020; Pearson & Afflerbach, 2008). Research has demonstrated that students show significant improvement in reading comprehension when they are explicitly taught reading strategies (Erniwati et al., 2023; Okasha, 2020; Pearson & Afflerbach, 2008). Reading strategies and reading frequencies together accounted for a 33.2% variance in students' reading comprehension skills (Amir et al., 2020). This indicates that both the use of reading strategies and the frequency of reading practice are significant factors in improving comprehension.

Moreover, the distinction between reading skills and strategies is critical for effective teaching. Reading skills refer to the ability to decode and understand text, while reading strategies are the deliberate, purposeful actions readers take to decode text, understand words, and construct meanings of text (Pearson & Afflerbach, 2008). Research consistently

demonstrates that reading strategies significantly improve comprehension (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

The most common reading comprehension strategies identified across various studies include question answering (Almasi & Roberts, 2009; Fisher et al., 2000), summarization (Duke & McMaster, 2002; Pressley et al., 2000), predicting (Afflerbach et al., 2008; Foreman & Douglas, 2011), activating background knowledge (Carnine et al., 2004; Paris et al., 1991), and making connections (Santucci & Faircloth, 2005; Wilhelm, 1997).

Question answering involves students responding to questions posed by the teacher or the text itself, which can help clarify understanding and encourage deeper engagement with the material (Liu, 2020). In a study, Fisher et al. (2000) found that using open-ended questions requiring higher-order thinking skills promoted deeper understanding and critical thinking in struggling readers. Similarly, research by Almasi and Roberts (2009) reported that questioning strategies fostered active engagement and discussion, leading to improved comprehension and vocabulary development.

Summarization requires students to distill the main ideas and essential details from a text, which aids in memory retention and understanding of the text's structure (Duke & McMaster, 2002). Pressley et al. (2000) demonstrated that summarizing activities, such as creating graphic organizers, helped students identify key ideas and improve their ability to retell stories. In the same vein, Duke and McMaster (2002) found that summarizing after reading passages led to better retention of information and improved performance on comprehension tests.

Predicting strategies involve students making predictions about the text based on their existing knowledge, which can activate their schema for better comprehension (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Foreman, & Douglas, 2011). Afflerbach et al. (2008) showed that using prediction strategies like brainstorming potential storylines increased student engagement, motivation, and interest in reading. Supporting this study, Foreman and Douglas (2011) reported that prediction activities helped students activate prior knowledge, anticipate upcoming events, and focus their attention during reading.

A study by Paris et al. (1991) highlighted the importance of activating prior knowledge in facilitating comprehension and building upon existing understanding. Likewise, Carnine et al. (2004) found that explicitly teaching background knowledge relevant to the reading material improved comprehension, especially for struggling readers.

A study by Aisyah and Arief (2021) and Wilhelm (1997) demonstrated that encouraging students to make personal connections to the text increased their motivation, engagement, and overall enjoyment of reading. Similarly, research by Santucci and Faircloth (2005) also found that making connections to personal experiences and real-world scenarios helped students understand the text on a deeper level and make meaning from the content.

Above literature review affirms the potential benefits of various reading strategies, however, their effectiveness may vary depending on the context and the individual learner. It

is essential to continue exploring these strategies to better understand their impact on reading comprehension and literacy development.

This qualitative case study builds upon this existing research by investigating the implementation of these strategies in basic-level classrooms in Nepali context. This study seeks to identify engaging and effective instructional practices by examining teacher experiences that can enhance reading comprehension and unlock the full potential of reading for all learners.

Methods

This qualitative case study explored engaging strategies for enhancing reading comprehension in basic-level (Grades 6-8) classrooms. A purposive sampling approach was employed to select three teachers and their students from basic-level classrooms. The selection criteria focused on experienced teachers known for implementing engaging reading practices and diverse student populations in terms of reading abilities and backgrounds.

Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Interviews were conducted with each individual teacher, focusing on their implementation of reading comprehension strategies and their perceptions of their effectiveness. Each teacher's classroom was observed for a minimum of three sessions, focusing on interactions and activities related to reading comprehension strategies identified in the literature review. Observational notes documented teacher instruction, student participation, and classroom dynamics.

The collected data were analyzed thematically using an inductive approach (Barun & Clark, 2006). Codes were developed based on the research questions and emerging themes, and data were then categorized and analyzed to identify patterns and insights.

To ensure trustworthiness, data triangulation (interviews and observations) and member checking were employed. Informed consent was taken from the participants along with confidentiality, and anonymity of participants was ensured to maintain research ethics.

Results and Discussion

The qualitative analysis of interview and classroom observation data revealed five key themes related to engaging strategies for enhancing reading comprehension in basic-level classrooms. They are described below.

Activating Prior Knowledge

Activating prior knowledge was the first theme that emerged from the field data. It involved connecting new information to what students already know, which helps them make sense of the text and retain the information better. All the participant teachers advocated the importance of activating prior knowledge. They maintained that it is essential for teaching reading comprehension because it helps students make connections between new information and their existing knowledge. This was evident when participant A said,

“When students are able to relate new information to what they already know, they are better able to understand the text and remember it later on “. Participant C further asserted that activating prior knowledge helps students ‘engage with the text on a deeper level’. This shows that by connecting new information to their existing knowledge, students are able to make predictions, ask questions, and draw inferences, which are all important components of reading comprehension (Snow, 2002). This active engagement with the text leads to deeper understanding of the material and better retention of information (Pressley, 2002). This finding supported earlier studies by Brown (2004) and Smith and Jones (2010) who found that students who were taught to activate their prior knowledge before reading a text performed significantly better on comprehension tests than students who did not use this strategy.

Another recent study by Johnson et al. (2015) showed that activating prior knowledge helped students make connections between different texts, leading to improved reading comprehension. In addition, research by Guthrie (2003) has shown that activating prior knowledge is particularly beneficial for struggling readers. Participant teachers repeatedly emphasized that students often struggle with reading comprehension due to insufficient background knowledge. By activating the prior knowledge, teachers can play a crucial role in helping students build upon their existing knowledge to understand new concepts (Guthrie, 2003).

During classroom observation, it was revealed that teachers employed various methods to activate students’ background knowledge before, during, and after reading. This included brainstorming activities, discussions about personal experiences, and connecting the text to familiar topics. All the participant teachers acknowledged that activating prior knowledge helped students understand the text on a deeper level.

Overall, activating prior knowledge is a powerful strategy for teaching reading comprehension. By helping students make connections between new information and their existing knowledge, teachers can improve students’ understanding of the text and enhance their retention of information. The evidence supports the effectiveness of activating prior knowledge for improving reading comprehension, particularly for struggling readers.

Questioning

Next effective strategy for improving reading comprehension reported by participant teachers is the use of questioning. During classroom observation, it was unveiled that questioning was frequent and so pervasive in all the participant teachers’ classrooms. Teachers emphasized the importance of asking students questions before, during and after reading, to help them engage with the text, think critically about the material, and deepen their understanding. For instance, teacher B said:

I use questions all the time. Questions are powerful tools for promoting reading comprehension as it encourages students to actively engage with the text. When students are asked questions about the material they are reading. They are forced to think critically about the content. They are asked to make connections between the

ideas. They draw inferences based on the information presented. This helps students understand the material more deeply. It also improves their ability to retain and recall information (Teacher B, personal communication, February, 2021).

Previous research has also shown that questioning can significantly improve reading comprehension. In a study conducted by Guthrie (2003), students who were taught using a questioning strategy showed greater gains in reading comprehension compared to students who were not. Guthrie found that questioning helped students focus their attention on key ideas, make predictions about the text, and monitor their understanding as they read.

In addition to improving reading comprehension, participant teachers emphasized that questioning can also help students develop important critical thinking skills. Teacher A said, “We can help students become better readers by asking them questions and to analyze and evaluate the information they are reading. This helps them to be able to think critically about the text they read”.

During the interview, teacher C maintained that when implementing a questioning strategy for teaching reading comprehension, the types of questions asked is crucial. She preferred to ask open-ended questions that require students to think critically and provide detailed responses than asking closed-ended questions that only require a ‘simple yes or no answer’. This shows that this teacher is aware of developing critical thinking skills in the students. She further emphasized that teachers should ask a variety of questions targeting different text elements, such as main ideas, supporting details and author’s intent.

During classroom observation it was evident that participant teachers scaffolded the questioning process by starting with simpler questions and gradually increasing the complexity as students became more engaged with the text. Teachers provided opportunities to develop skills they needed to become independent readers by providing students with opportunities to practice answering questions on their own. This way students were able to comprehend and analyze texts on their own.

All three teachers employed various questioning techniques to promote deeper understanding. They used open-ended questions, prompting students to analyze characters, infer motives, and make connections to the text. All teachers reported that questioning fostered active engagement and developed reading comprehension.

Making Connections

The next theme that emerged from the field data was making connections. Teachers reported that they encouraged their students to make personal connections to the text by relating to characters, events, and themes. This involved activities like drawing parallels to their own lives they have experienced, discussing emotions evoked by the story, and identifying lessons learned. Both teacher B and C reported that making connections made the reading experience of their students more meaningful and memorable. For instance, teacher A was teaching reading in grade 8, Unit 5, Reading I. At that time, he asked his students if they crossed the road from zebra crossing. Students replied that they did it often. Teachers

frequently connected the reading content to their personal experiences. This way, teacher B claims that readers are able to deepen their understanding and retention of the material by actively engaging with the text and relating it to their personal experiences, prior knowledge, and other texts. This strategy not only enhanced comprehension but also fostered critical thinking and promoted a more enjoyable reading experience.

This finding corroborates with the findings from earlier studies. For instance, a study by Duke and Pearson (2002) has shown that making connections while reading can significantly improve comprehension. When readers make connections between the text and their own experiences, they are better able to understand and remember the material. This is because making connections helps to create a framework for organizing and integrating new information with existing knowledge (Duke & Pearson, 2002).

Participant teachers emphasized that readers can also make connections to other texts they have read. Teacher A maintained that readers can ‘gain a deeper understanding of the themes, characters, and ideas presented in the material by making connections between different texts. This intertextual connection can enrich the reading experience and provide new insights into text.

Furthermore, teacher C believed that making connections can help readers to engage with the material on a deeper level. By relating the text to their own lives, readers are able to see the relevance and significance of the material, which can increase motivation and interest in the reading. This active engagement with the text can lead to a more meaningful and enjoyable reading experience.

Encouraging Prediction

The fourth theme that emerged from the field data is predicting. Predicting what will happen next in a text is a form of active engagement that requires readers to use their prior knowledge and context clues to make educated guesses about the content (Snow, 2002). Readers are able to anticipate the direction of the text when they can make predictions (Awada & Plana, 2018). This can help them stay focused and motivated to continue reading. Additionally, predicting helps readers connect with the text and their own experiences, which can deepen their understanding of the material read. During classroom observation, it was revealed that participant teachers encouraged students to predict the lesson from the title and pictures at the beginning of the lesson. The teachers also asked students to predict what comes next during reading. For instance, teacher B was teaching reading in grade eight. At that time, he asked students to look at the picture and guess what they were going to learn. Teachers asked the students to predict what comes next during reading instruction.

Research has shown that encouraging prediction can significantly improve reading comprehension. A study by Smith and Jones (2018) found that teaching prediction strategies increased student comprehension by 20%. This demonstrates the powerful impact that prediction can have on understanding and retention of information.

Teacher C believed that encouraging students to predict can help readers develop ‘critical and creative thinking skills’. This reveals that when readers are forced to think critically about the text and evaluate the evidence to support their guesses, it can help readers become more analytical and critical in their reading (Awada & Plana, 2018), which can benefit them in other areas of their academic and professional lives.

Involving students in activities like making predictions based on titles, pictures, and prior knowledge, participant teachers believed that predicting can keep them engaged and motivated to continue reading. This shows that encouraging predication is a valuable strategy for boosting reading comprehension. By actively engaging with the text and making educated guesses about what will happen next, readers can improve their understanding and develop critical thinking skills.

Summarizing

All participant teachers strongly believed that summarizing is a crucial skill that can significantly boost reading comprehension. Summarizing helps readers grasp the main points of a text more easily by condensing information into a concise form. During classroom observation, participant teachers asked students to read the text and retell what they understood. Teacher A and B both often asked students to read a paragraph, summarize, and retell key ideas from the paragraph. Teachers encouraged students to summarize key ideas at various points during reading and after reading. This involved creating graphic organizers, writing short summaries, and participating in partner discussions. These teachers reported that summarizing helped their students retain important information and omit irrelevant details.

These findings are similar to the findings of McKeown and Beck (2016), who found that students who received instruction in summarization strategies demonstrated significantly higher levels of reading comprehension compared to their peers. This highlights the importance of teaching summarizing skills to enhance reading proficiency. These findings reveal that summarizing strategy encourages readers to actively engage with the text and requires them to analyze and synthesize the information, leading to a deeper understanding of the material. Summarization can also help readers become more critical thinkers (Awada & Plana, 2018). By summarizing a text, readers are encouraged to evaluate the credibility and relevance of the information presented (Awada & Plana, 2018). The results of this study corroborate with existing research highlighting the effectiveness of these engaging strategies in promoting active reading and comprehension (Guthrie, 2002; Pressley & Gaskins, 2008). The teachers in this study implemented the strategies creatively and effectively, fostering a positive learning environment where students felt engaged and motivated to participate.

Overall, these findings suggest that incorporating these strategies into basic-level classrooms can be beneficial for enhancing reading comprehension. This qualitative case study involved a limited number of participants and classrooms, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, relying solely on interviews and observations may introduce bias based on participant perspectives and researcher interpretations.

Conclusion

This study offers valuable insights into the use of engaging strategies for enhancing reading comprehension in basic-level classrooms. While educators employ a range of reading comprehension strategies, key strategies employed include question answering, summarizing, predicting, and activating prior knowledge. The effectiveness of these strategies can be influenced by the context in which they are used and the proficiency of the teacher in conveying them to students. The identified strategies offer practical ways for educators to promote active reading and empower students to unlock the full potential of reading. Educators can incorporate these activities into their teaching practices to help students become more proficient lifelong learners. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of this study which employed a relatively small sample. Further research is needed to explore the generalizability of these findings across diverse contexts and student populations. Additionally, subsequent studies could investigate the enduring impact of the strategies on student achievement, and explore potential challenges and adaptations needed for wider implementation.

Author's Bio

Mr. Basanta Raj Dhakal is a PhD candidate in English Education at the Graduate School of Education, Tribhuvan University. With expertise in English language teaching and teacher education, he is a dedicated ELT practitioner and scholar. As a life member of NELTA, his research interests are focused on teacher development, literacy, and literature.

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