

THE IMPACT OF PRE-READING STRATEGIES ON STUDENTS' READING
COMPREHENSION

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Abstract: Pre-reading strategies have been widely recognized as an essential component of effective reading instruction, particularly for learners who struggle with text comprehension or read in a second language. This article examines the influence of pre-reading strategies—such as schema activation, prediction, vocabulary preview, brainstorming, and guided questioning—on students' reading comprehension. Drawing on established theories, including schema theory, metacognition, and interactive models of reading, as well as empirical findings from Graves and Liang (2008), Carrell and Eisterhold (1983), and Zhang (2010), the article evaluates how pre-reading stages prepare learners for deeper engagement with texts. Analysis indicates that pre-reading strategies enhance comprehension by activating relevant background knowledge, reducing cognitive load, promoting metacognitive awareness, and building motivation. Studies in both first and second language contexts confirm their effectiveness across age groups and proficiency levels. The article concludes by emphasizing the pedagogical importance of structured pre-reading tasks and offers implications for classroom practice, particularly for EFL and ESL settings.

Introduction

Reading comprehension is a multifaceted cognitive process that requires readers to integrate background knowledge, linguistic information, and strategic processing skills. For many learners, particularly in second language (L2) contexts, comprehension difficulties arise not only from unfamiliar vocabulary or syntactic complexity but also from insufficient background knowledge and limited engagement with the topic of the text. To address these concerns, researchers have emphasized the significance of pre-reading strategies, which help learners build mental readiness for text processing (Hudson, 2007; Zhang, 2010). Pre-reading strategies refer to instructional activities conducted before reading a text with the aim of activating prior knowledge, generating interest, setting purposes for reading, and reducing comprehension barriers.

The theoretical foundations for pre-reading practices derive largely from schema theory, which posits that readers interpret information by relating it to existing mental structures or “schemata” (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). When learners lack relevant schema, comprehension becomes impaired, and pre-reading activities compensate for this gap by constructing or activating prior knowledge. Other scholars have explored the metacognitive dimension of reading preparedness, demonstrating that pre-reading tasks support students' awareness of how they read and why certain strategies improve comprehension (Zhang, 2010). In applied contexts, numerous empirical studies highlight how activities such as vocabulary preview, discussion, questioning, and storytelling enhance comprehension across elementary and secondary classrooms (Graves & Liang, 2008; Al-Mansour & Al-Shorman, 2011).



This article synthesizes findings from major studies on pre-reading strategies and analyzes how these strategies contribute to improved reading comprehension. It reviews theoretical frameworks, examines empirical evidence, and offers pedagogical implications for educators, particularly those working in English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as a second language (ESL) environments.

Theoretical Foundations of Pre-Reading Strategies

Schema Theory and Text Comprehension

Schema theory remains the most influential theoretical framework in explaining why pre-reading strategies facilitate comprehension. According to Carrell and Eisterhold (1983), reading comprehension is an interactive process in which readers link new textual information with prior knowledge structures. When schema are activated, readers process information more efficiently and understand the text more deeply.

However, in many educational settings, students lack sufficient background knowledge to interpret unfamiliar topics or culturally distant materials. Pre-reading activities such as previewing text features, discussing the topic, predicting content, or viewing visuals help learners construct the necessary schema before encountering the text (Koda, 2005). This preparation reduces cognitive load, allowing learners to allocate cognitive resources to deeper levels of comprehension rather than decoding basic concepts.

Metacognitive Frameworks

A second theoretical basis for pre-reading strategies concerns metacognition. Zhang (2010) argues that pre-reading activities not only prepare students cognitively but also influence how they regulate their reading. When learners set goals, anticipate difficulties, and reflect on their understanding before reading, they engage in metacognitive control processes that enhance comprehension outcomes.

This perspective shifts the focus from purely cognitive readiness to strategic awareness, suggesting that pre-reading is not merely about activating knowledge but also about shaping the reading mindset. Techniques such as KWL (Know–Want to Know–Learned), guided questions, or reflective prompts directly support metacognitive monitoring.

Interactive Models of Reading

Interactive reading models also emphasize the reciprocal role of top-down (knowledge-driven) and bottom-up (text-driven) processes in comprehension (Hudson, 2007). Pre-reading strategies primarily support top-down processing by enabling learners to generate hypotheses and expectations about the text. When these hypotheses are tested during reading, comprehension becomes both more active and more accurate.

Thus, pre-reading strategies help integrate the two processes, allowing students to construct meaning dynamically rather than passively decode words.

Types of Pre-Reading Strategies and Their Educational Functions



1. Schema Activation Activities. Schema activation strategies include brainstorming, discussing prior experiences, analyzing images or titles, and connecting the topic to learners' cultural or personal backgrounds. According to Graves and Liang (2008), such activities significantly enhance comprehension because they provide conceptual scaffolding for incoming information.

2. Prediction and Hypothesis Building. Prediction activities rely on text features such as titles, subtitles, visuals, or key vocabulary. Nuttall (1996) notes that prediction increases engagement and comprehension because it activates inferential thinking. When students verify predictions during reading, they interact more deeply with the text.

3. Vocabulary Preview. Unfamiliar vocabulary is a major barrier to reading comprehension, especially for EFL learners. Vocabulary preview sessions—glossaries, word maps, semantic clusters—help reduce this barrier. Koda (2005) emphasizes that vocabulary knowledge is foundational to schema activation because key terms often represent core concepts of the text.

4. Storytelling and Teacher-Led Narratives. Al-Mansour and Al-Shorman (2011) found that storytelling significantly improves comprehension because narrative input creates emotional engagement and contextual familiarity. For younger learners, storytelling as a pre-reading activity increases motivation and aids comprehension by simulating schema construction.

5. Questioning and Goal Setting. Guiding questions before reading help learners focus on key themes and improve selective attention. Zhang (2010) argues that pre-reading questions enhance metacognitive awareness by prompting learners to think about what they should read for and what information is relevant.

Empirical Evidence on the Effectiveness of Pre-Reading Strategies

Studies with Young Learners

Research across elementary classrooms consistently demonstrates that pre-reading strategies improve comprehension. Graves and Liang (2008) observed that students who engaged in prediction, discussion, and vocabulary preview scored significantly higher on comprehension tests than those who began reading without preparation. These findings underscore the role of background knowledge activation.

Similarly, the storytelling study by Al-Mansour and Al-Shorman (2011) showed measurable improvement in comprehension among Saudi elementary school children. The authors attributed this success to the affective and cognitive benefits of storytelling as a preparatory activity.

Studies in ESL/EFL Contexts

In second language learning, pre-reading strategies play an even more critical role due to learners' limited linguistic and cultural familiarity. Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) highlighted that ESL learners often fail to comprehend texts not because of grammatical complexity but because they lack relevant schema. Consequently, pre-reading instruction is essential for bridging linguistic and cultural gaps.



Zhang (2010) further demonstrated that metacognitively oriented pre-reading activities improve reading comprehension scores among ESL university students. These activities helped learners anticipate text structure and monitor their understanding.

Studies on Strategic Awareness

Zhang's (2010) dynamic metacognitive system model revealed that pre-reading tasks enhance students' awareness of reading strategies. Students who engaged in reflective pre-reading activities showed improved ability to evaluate their comprehension and adjust reading strategies during the task.

Pedagogical Implications

1. Integrating Structured Pre-Reading into Lessons. Teachers should incorporate pre-reading strategies as a formal instructional stage rather than optional warm-up activities. Textual previews, concept maps, brainstorming sessions, and vocabulary reviews should be explicitly planned to activate relevant schema (Hudson, 2007).

2. Adapting Strategies to Learner Needs. EFL learners benefit most from vocabulary preview, visuals, and cultural background information. Young learners may respond better to storytelling or interactive prediction activities. Teachers must adapt pre-reading formats to age, proficiency, and text complexity.

3. Encouraging Metacognitive Reflection. Incorporating tools such as goal-setting prompts and KWL charts fosters metacognitive awareness. As Zhang (2010) notes, this increases learners' control over their reading process and leads to improved comprehension outcomes.

4. Using Technology to Enhance Pre-Reading. Digital tools—videos, interactive previews, and concept-mapping software—support multimodal schema activation. These tools can provide richer contextual information, particularly for culturally unfamiliar texts.

Conclusion

Pre-reading strategies play a critical role in preparing students for effective reading comprehension. Theoretical frameworks, including schema theory and metacognition, provide strong justification for incorporating pre-reading activities into reading instruction. Empirical findings from multiple studies demonstrate that strategies such as vocabulary preview, prediction, schema activation, and storytelling significantly enhance comprehension across age groups and linguistic contexts. For teachers in EFL and ESL settings, structured and purposeful pre-reading activities are indispensable to helping students overcome comprehension barriers and engage actively with texts. Ultimately, the success of pre-reading instruction lies in its ability to connect learners' existing knowledge with new textual information, reduce cognitive load, and develop strategic awareness—key elements for successful reading in academic and real-world contexts.

References



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