

# Reading Strategy: Tackling Reading through Topic and Main Ideas

Bharathi Naidu<sup>1</sup>, Marshal Briewin<sup>2</sup> & Mohamed Amin Embi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Centre of Liberal Arts and Languages, INTI International University, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

Correspondence: Bharathi Naidu, Centre of Liberal Arts and Languages, INTI International University, Malaysia.  
Tel: 60-13-7278-378. E-mail: rathi.lifestyle@hotmail.com

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## Abstract

Reading comprehension is one of the four skills essential in learning English. In a reading class, students tend to read all the information provided in reading materials, but how much do they actually retain? This study explores whether learners use identification of the topic and main ideas as a reading strategy to assist in reading comprehension. The objective of this study is to enable learners to determine key concepts and main ideas in reading texts. By using this technique, learners will be able to get a clearer picture of what they are reading. A sample of 48 English as foreign language (EFL) learners from a private university in Malaysia participated in this study. The two instruments utilized in this study were grade interval and a self-reflection questionnaire. The findings confirmed an improvement in participant's grades over pre- and post-reading assessments. Furthermore, the failure rate of the reading assessment decreased after the strategy was introduced. The results from this study will help instructors assist EFL learners in comprehending textual materials.

**Keywords:** EFL learners, skimming for the main idea, pre- and post-reading assessments

## 1. Introduction

Most English as a foreign language (EFL) learners face challenges in distinguishing key points in reading texts. This results in them reading the whole article and trying to understand the text. However, after finishing reading, some learners still face difficulties in comprehending the article and in answering comprehension questions.

One strategy learners can use to overcome this issue is to identify the topic and main ideas discussed in the reading, which will enable them to distinguish the important information from the unimportant. Furthermore, this strategy will allow the learners to summarize clearly, what each paragraph discusses.

This study examines EFL learners' strategy of identifying the topic and main ideas of a reading article. The results of this study will demonstrate that learners can develop an effective method of comprehending a reading passage.

### 1.1 EFL and English as a Second Language (ESL) Learner

There are differences in meaning between the terms ESL and EFL. Brown (2001) states that ESL learners can access the target language outside the classroom environment, whereas EFL learners cannot. Since this study focuses solely on EFL learners, the results may not be generalizable to ESL learners.

### 1.2 Teaching Reading

If readers always attempt to understand all information in a text, they tend to become confused. Rice (2009) claims that reading is actually a process in which the reader interacts with the article to procure meaning. To interact with the reading material, it is essential for learners to have strategies that assist them in grasping a text's meaning. One such strategy comprises identifying the topic and main ideas in the reading material to aid comprehension.

Skimming the reading text to determine the main idea can help learners achieve this aim. Brown (2001) claims that skimming reading material helps learners to ascertain the author's meaning and locate the main idea. Additionally, Baxendell (2003) emphasizes that learners face problems simply because they do not know how to identify ideas presented in an article. Takako Kawabata (2007) asserts that locating the main idea in reading texts helps learners distinguish important information from less important information. This enables learners to grasp

the core ideas in the text and be more focused when starting to read it.

Chowdhury (2009) points out that skimming is glancing swiftly through a text to obtain its meaning. Her study of Bangladeshi students found that learners lack skimming skills, which affects their understanding of texts. As such, because understanding every word of a reading text is not essential to attain comprehension, it is crucial for language learners to be able to effectively use skimming.

Shen and Huang (2007) conducted collaborative action research on a group of Taiwanese students to explore possible ways to motivate them to be engaged in reading. The researchers also investigated how the students perceived the reading strategy used and their attitude towards learning it. The research was performed in several phases, summarized as follows: diagnosing the problem, implementing the plan, modifying, evaluating, and reflecting. The overall results indicated that the students' learning attitude changed as they found the reading strategies helpful. They also claimed that repeated classroom practice was useful to them.

Bharathi Naidu (2012) researched the development and evaluation of a reading module on EFL learners. One of the reading strategies developed in the module was to highlight ideas related to the topic, main idea, and supporting details of reading articles. On the basis of the findings, the researcher claimed that the participants rated the strategy as least popular, possibly because the steps they had to follow to find the required information were rather long. The study also took into account only the participants' response regarding whether they liked the strategy; no assessment was conducted to verify the learners' improvement in reading. Hence, the current study simplified the strategy by only taking into account the topic and main idea, making it easier for learners to understand the strategy. Significantly, the current study involved conducting pre- and post-reading assessments to verify the effectiveness of the strategy.

The above literature review shows that developing reading strategies enables learners to connect with the reading material and grasp the meaning of reading texts.

## 2. Methods

A sample of 48 participants was used in this study. The participants were enrolled in English for academic purposes (EAP) course at a private university in Malaysia. A placement test qualified them as advanced level learners. The learners were from China, the Middle East, Equatorial Guinea, and Mongolia and had minimal exposure to the English language.

This study involved three phases. In the first, the learners were given a pre-reading assessment that the researcher evaluated. In the second phase, the learners were taught the reading strategy. The learners were given examples and some short reading exercises that allowed them to utilize the strategy. In the third phase, the learners were given a full-length article to read. This was a post-reading assessment and was again evaluated by the researcher. At the end of the third phase, a questionnaire was administered to the learners to evaluate their learning.

The reading assessments used in the study were obtained from an EAP question bank comprising past years' examinations and coursework. The reading articles as well as the questions used for this study were assessed by colleagues who taught the EAP program to determine the level of difficulty. The questions included Wh-questions, linking ideas, and vocabulary.

Two instruments were used in the study. The first was grade interval, typically used to assign grades for coursework. It is approved by the Malaysia Qualifications Agency (MQA), a board that determines the quality assurance practices and accreditation of higher education institutes. As grade interval is typically used to verify learners' grades in Malaysian universities, this instrument was used to substantiate the learners' performance in the reading assessments. A passing grade is classified as (A+) through (C-) and a failing grade, as (D+) through (F). The second instrument was a self-reflection questionnaire—adapted from Mohamed Amin Embi and Mohd Zaki (2010) – containing three items. This questionnaire ascertained learners' understanding of and reaction to the reading strategy.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

#### 3.1 Pre-Reading and Post-Reading Assessment

Table 1. Results of pre- and post-reading assessments on the basis of the grade interval

	A+	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	F
Grade Interval	90-100	85-89	80-84	75-79	70-74	65-69	60-64	55-59	50-54	45-49	40-44	0-39
Pre-reading Assessment	8.33%	2.10%	8.33%	4.20%	8.33%	18.75%	8.33%	16.67%	12.50%	8.33%	2.10%	2.08%
Post-reading Assessment	16.67%	8.33%	20.83%	22.92%	4.17%	8.33%	4.17%	8.33%	0%	2.08%	2.08%	2.08%

Table 1 shows the results of the pre- and post-reading assessments. In general, significant improvement was observed in the percentage of learners receiving specific grades between the pre-reading and post-reading assessments (i.e. (A+), (A), (A-), (B+), (B-), (C), (C-), and (D+)). The results for the pre-reading assessment show that learners mostly received the (B-) and (C) grades. The percentages for these grades are 18.75% and 16.67%, respectively. The learners likely received these grades because they had a different way of reading the texts. The lowest percentage is 2.08%, shown under (A), (D), and (F).

The result for the post-reading assessment indicates that learners mostly received the (A-) and (B+) grades, the percentages being 20.83% and 22.92% respectively. The lowest percentage for the post-reading assessment is 0% for the (C) grade. The change in grades from pre- to post-reading is notable. The change in (C-), which shows 12.5% for the pre-reading and 0% for the post-reading, is also significant. From the post-reading assessment results, it is apparent that learners benefited from using the strategy introduced in this study. In addition, the reduction in the failure rate, which combines grades (D+), (D), and (F), from 12.51% for pre-reading to 6.24% for the post-reading strengthens the fact that the strategy aided the learners in improving their reading.

The pre- and post-reading assessment grades indicate that the learners benefited from the reading technique introduced to them. As the next step, the learners were administered self-reflection questionnaires.

#### 3.2 Self-Reflection Questionnaire

Table 2. Self-reflection results

	Yes	To some extent	No
1. I can understand the topic discussed in the reading articles.	62.50%	35.42%	2.08%
2. I am able to identify the main idea of each paragraph in the reading articles.	52.08%	45.83%	2.08%
3. I am able to identify the answers to the follow-up questions in the reading articles.	45.83%	50%	4.17%
4. This reading strategy helps me to understand the reading articles.	75%	22.92%	2.08%

Table 2 highlights the findings of the self-reflection questionnaire. The chart shows participants' opinions of the reading technique. A total of 62.50% of learners responded 'Yes' to Question 1, which investigated whether the learners could understand the topic discussed in the reading articles. The results show that the learners could identify the topic in the reading texts.

Question 2 investigated whether the learners could identify the main idea of each paragraph in the reading articles. A total of 52.08% said 'Yes' to Question 2, which shows that the learners were indeed capable of determining the main idea. This indicates that the learners found the reading strategy taught to them to be beneficial.

However, 50% of the learners answered 'To some extent' for Question 3, which investigated whether they could

identify the answers to the follow-up questions in the article. This shows that other factors besides the reading strategy influenced the identification of the answers. Table 3.0 shows the marks specification of the questions asked in the reading assessments. The table shows the number of learners who responded correctly to the pre- and post-reading assessments. The results for the post-reading assessment indicate that in comparison with the vocabulary questions, the linking idea and Wh-questions received a higher rate of correct answers. In the vocabulary section, a low percentage of learners obtained correct answers. The learners attained 8.33% and 12.50% of correct answers for the pre- and post-reading assessments respectively. The inability to perform well in the vocabulary section could be one of the reasons the learners felt that the reading technique taught to them were not much help in answering the follow-up questions.

In Question 4, 75% of learners agreed that the reading strategy helped them to understand the reading texts. This indicates that the learners agreed that the reading technique was effective and assisted in comprehending the texts.

Chowdhury (2009) asserts that among other reading problems, an issue frequently mentioned by learners is that they find the reading texts difficult to understand, as they are not able to grasp the meaning of the paragraphs. For better comprehension, it is crucial for learners to be able to grasp the meaning of reading passages. This study's findings demonstrate that the learners were somewhat able to understand the texts by using the strategy introduced to them.

Baxendell (2003) claims that learners struggle mostly to distinguish the main idea from minor details. However, the pre- and post-reading assessments show that the reading strategy used in this study helped the learners to make the said distinction. The marks specification below further demonstrates that the learners were able to comprehend the topic and main ideas, as the percentages for both the linking ideas and Wh-questions were higher than the vocabulary section.

The pre- and post-reading assessments and the self-reflection questionnaires were designed to facilitate the teaching and learning process. From the findings discussed above, it is evident that the learners improved in identifying the topic and main ideas of reading texts. This ultimately makes it possible for them to connect with reading texts which are important in the academia.

Table 3. Marks specification of the reading assessments

	Pre-reading Assessment	Post-reading Assessment
Linking ideas	25%	41.70%
Wh-question	12.50%	39.60%
Vocabulary	8.33%	12.50%

#### 4. Conclusion

Reading techniques are essential to assist in the teaching and learning of reading. From the findings, it is clear that learners gained some knowledge on effectively using the topic and main ideas of a reading text to aid comprehension. In future studies, researchers should concentrate on other areas such as vocabulary, which is something learners still lack an understanding of. Future researchers should also test learners on higher-order thinking skills or provide challenging articles on the level of the International English Language Testing System examination. This will indirectly be useful to learners in their years of university study.

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