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## Do EFL Teachers Reduce the Reading Gap in Qatar? A Study of Strategy Instruction in Government Schools

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**Abstract.** Teachers' instructional practices are crucial to students' achievement in reading comprehension. Students' low English reading competence in Qatar's government schools raises concerns about not only reading comprehension strategy instruction, but also, subsequently, learning as a natural outcome of teachers' praxis. This quantitative survey investigated English as a foreign language (EFL) reading comprehension strategy instruction of a broad cross-sectional sample of (1-12) EFL teachers (n=754) of government schools in Qatar. The study examines teachers' most frequently used strategies and explicit strategy instruction. To relate the findings of an exploratory data analysis, descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequencies, were calculated for each 5-point Likert scale questionnaire item using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS-Version 24) statistics software. Results revealed that participant teachers reported a generally moderate and high frequency of using comprehension strategies (lowest mean 3.56 and highest mean 4.52). The seven most used strategies (mean score  $\geq 4$ ) were: Identify main ideas, set purpose for reading, predictions, preview text, monitor comprehension, prior knowledge activation, and handle unfamiliar words. Conversely, the five strategies reported a comparatively lower use frequency (mean score  $< 4$ ) were: Text structure, questioning, visualizing, summarizing, and think aloud. The major findings on explicit strategy instruction indicated that teachers ignored the gradual release of responsibility to students. The implications of these findings suggest that EFL teachers demonstrate moderate use of reading comprehension strategy instruction. Further recommendations for the Ministry of Education, school principals, and teachers are offered.

**Keywords:** education; comprehension instruction; EFL reading; reading comprehension; reading comprehension strategies; schools in Qatar; strategy instruction

## 1. Introduction

“Reading well is at the heart of all learning” (US Department of Education, 2005). When teachers provide appropriate reading-strategy instruction, students are expected to develop effective reading abilities (Bruen, 2020; Damber et al., 2012; Hall & Piazza, 2008; Zipoli, 2017). Research suggests that reading learning strategies can be taught to foreign language learners to promote their comprehension skills (Grabe, 2009; Quigley, 2020). Hence, the teacher is a critical role player in the reading-strategy instruction, and their instructional practices are crucial to students’ achievement in comprehension (Chamot & O’Malley, 1994; Willingham, 2015). Subsequently, investigating teachers’ instructional practices of English as a foreign language (EFL) supports students’ learning as a natural outcome of teachers’ praxis.

In the case of the State of Qatar, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE) undertook massive educational reform initiatives over the past two decades in fulfilment of the aim of the Qatar National Development Strategy (QNDS), which sets the framework for growth and development, to improve students’ “underachievement in math, science and English language at all levels” (GSDP, 2011, p. 13). Nevertheless, Qatar’s reading performance on standardized assessments, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), remains low, compared to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average (OECD 2009; 2014; 2020), suggesting that the quality of education was not up to international standards (Koç & Fadlilmula, 2016). Further, results of the Qatar Comprehensive Educational Assessment (QCEA), implemented annually to students in grades 4 to 11, showed low academic achievement of students in English. More than 85% of the students could not meet the curriculum standards benchmarked level in English for most of the grade levels (GSDP, 2011). Also, Qatari students studying abroad were reported struggling with English due to their lack of reading and writing abilities (Golkowska, 2013). Furthermore, employers in Qatar showed concerns about Qatari graduates’ poor English skills (Ahmed, 2019). Students’ low reading achievement indicates problems with the reading comprehension-strategy instruction and, consequently, the learning of reading in English (Nasser, 2017). Several studies asserted the ineffective comprehension instruction in Qatar government schools over the past few decades (Ahmed, 2019; Al-Khwaiter, 2001; Brewer et al., 2007; Golkowska, 2013; Nasser, 2013; Palmer et al., 2016).

The MOEHE has embraced the communicative approach for teaching English in Qatar since the 1970s to improve students’ achievement in English. Nevertheless, teachers’ negative attitudes towards the communicative approach contributed to a great extent to the failure of this method to develop students’ reading and writing skills (Al-Khwaiter, 2001). Teachers’ instructional practices were not related to the communicative approach principles. Reading focused mainly on copying, memorizing, and grammar exercises (Abbara, 1991; Galalah, 1992). More recent studies reported that teachers continued to demonstrate insufficient comprehension instruction. According to Nasser (2013), reading teachers contributed little to students’ language acquisition, reading-comprehension strategies, and word knowledge during an extracurricular reading intervention conducted in Qatar governmental schools. Besides, Golkowska (2013) reported

that Qatari university students studying abroad had not received effective reading-comprehension strategy instruction during secondary education and, thus, became struggling readers at the university level. Though one of the main objectives of the education reform in Qatar is to change teachers' instructional practices into student-centred learning (Brewer et al., 2007), which is at the heart of effective reading comprehension instruction (McLaughlin, 2012), skills needed to implement this approach may not have been acquired yet by teachers and students (Palmer et al., 2016).

This study aims to provide insight into reading-instruction strategies used by EFL teachers in Qatar government schools to teach comprehension and bridge the existing research gap in the field by providing empirical data from the context of Qatar. Research supports the view that teaching reading comprehension strategies enhances students' comprehension (Ballou, 2012; Day, 2020; Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2017; McLaughlin, 2012). Exploring EFL teachers' comprehension of instructional practices should allow teacher educators and professional development providers to gain insight from this study as to what in-service teachers believe and practise in their reading classrooms. It is hoped that this knowledge will provide information sources for planning effective future professional development programmes and teacher education courses, both of which are of fundamental importance to any educational reform to succeed (Sahlberg, 2021). Such programmes should target reading comprehension strategies and the systematic conduct of explicit strategy instruction that have been proved crucial to students' comprehension and automaticity (Fogarty et al., 2020). Eventually, findings should support students' reading ability as a natural outcome of teachers' practices (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007). When teachers provide appropriate strategy instruction, they are more likely to succeed in developing the reading abilities of their students (Damber et al., 2012; Hall & Piazza, 2008). It is imperative that teachers recognize what good readers do and what it takes to become a good reader to assist struggling readers (Cárdenas-Hagan, 2020; Grabe, 2009). In other words, teachers should model how good readers read (Lai, 2006) and promote students' good reading behaviour (Hernandez-Laboy, 2009; Lai, 2006). Skilled teachers have a deep knowledge of both subject and teaching methods that interact to form effective teaching competence. They can effectively and flexibly adapt content and methods to students' needs (Darling-Hammond et al., 1999; Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2017).

Therefore, this study aimed to answer the following research questions: 1) What are the reading comprehension strategies employed most frequently by EFL teachers in Qatar government schools? and, 2) How often do EFL teachers in Qatar government schools provide explicit strategy instruction?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **Reading Comprehension Defined**

This study utilizes the definition of reading by Grabe (2009, p. 74) as "a combination of text input, appropriate cognitive processes, and the information that we already know". He further states that this definition should address the characteristics of fluent readers, the cognitive processes used, and how they work together to comprehend a text (Grabe, 2009). This definition is agreed on by a list

of researchers who identified reading as a mental process which the readers use to comprehend a written text (Grabe, 2009; McLaughlin, 2012; McMunn Dooley & Matthews, 2009; Pressley, 2001).

Various perspectives exist from which reading comprehension can be viewed, including sociocultural, affective, physiological, philosophical, educational, and cognitive. This study assumed a cognitive learning theory aligned with social constructivism and Vygotsky's seminal zone of proximal development. Hence, it followed the definition of reading involving mental processes readers utilize in comprehending different texts. This view emerged from the claim that understanding reading as a cognitive process is a prerequisite for understanding other approaches (Azar, 2019; Barber et al., 2020). In addition, Vygotsky (1978) influenced the literacy researchers by his well-applied formulation of the zone of proximal development (Au, 1998). Vygotsky argued that a child's mental functions have social origins as they are mediated by the collaboration with adults (Au, 1998) supporting the gradual release of responsibility until the individuals can independently learn something new and successfully perform the task (Grabe, 2009; Iwai, 2011). Therefore, the role of teachers, peers, and classroom instruction received major emphasis in research on literacy learning (Au, 1998).

### **Skilled Reading Comprehension**

Comprehension strategies refer to the procedures or methods proficient readers employ to ensure their comprehension (Quigley, 2020; Treiman, 2018). Researchers sought to describe the skilled reading comprehension of 'good readers' or 'strategic readers' (Duke & Pearson, 2008; Grabe, 2009; Grabe & Stoller, 2013; Neufeld, 2005; Pressley & Allington, 2014; Pressley & Hilden, 2006).

Grabe (2009) describes strategic readers as being able to use strategies effectively in various contexts, to actively engage in reading, read extensively, identify relevant information and read for more extended periods. They also build automaticity in strategy use for routine situations they encounter (Grabe, 2009). Besides, good readers plan before they read. They set a purpose for their reading, preview the text, activate prior knowledge, and make predictions about the text. During and after reading, good readers mainly monitor their comprehension, identify main ideas and use context clues to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words. They also use text structure to guide comprehension, summarize, evaluate, and reflect on the text (Day, 2020; Neufeld, 2005; Pressley & Hilden, 2002).

### **Teachers' Implementation of Comprehension Strategies**

A considerable number of L1 and L2 language researchers investigated English language teachers' implementation of reading strategies in an attempt to determine the most frequently used by teachers to enhance comprehension in students (Alsamadani, 2012; Althewini, 2016; Hernandez-Laboy, 2009; Kadah, 2005; Kuzborska, 2010; Reyna-Barron, 2016). Alsamadani (2012) explored EFL Saudi teachers' attitudes towards reading-comprehension strategy instruction in the EFL classroom. Results revealed the positive attitudes Saudi teachers had towards nine? strategies, among which: previewing, questioning, and visualization. Conversely, teachers were uncertain about or unaware of the other strategies' importance, such as setting a purpose for reading, and thinking aloud. Reyna-Barron (2016) investigated teachers' lack of knowledge of comprehension

strategy instruction and found that they did not show awareness of the strategies that research proved to be effective in developing comprehension. Moreover, though research states that teachers are aware of the importance of reading strategies in comprehending a written text, some teachers seem to be reluctant to intervene with the student-centred learning classroom, and maintain their role as facilitators, but with no direct instruction (Hernandez-Laboy, 2009). In recent years, teachers are hesitant to deliver direct instruction, including explicit teaching of reading strategies, although research proved that students benefit from the systematic conduction of the process (Hernandez-Laboy, 2009; Reyna-Barron, 2016).

### **Explicit Instruction of Strategies**

Comprehension strategy instruction is the direct and explicit teaching of reading-comprehension strategies to help students become strategic and proficient readers. Increasing students' self-regulation in using strategies is a significant component of comprehension instruction. Students should be taught how, when, and why to use a strategy to increase automaticity (Baker, 2002; Spencer et al., 2019). According to Grabe (2009), reading strategies can be taught effectively, ultimately improving reading comprehension. Explicit strategy instruction has become strongly recommended to teach strategies for students by many researchers (Duffy, 2002; Duke & Pearson, 2008; Hamouda, 2021; Hayes, 2012; Pressley & Hilden, 2002). Pressley and Woloshyn (1995, p. 11) state that, "Strategy instruction should be explicit, intensive, and extensive ... [and] strategies should be taught to students directly over an extended period of time as part of the existing curriculum". However, despite automaticity and efficient use of strategies having been proven by research as evidently critical to reading success, little attention has been devoted to developing instructional methods that promote automaticity in comprehension (Sinatra et al., 2002).

### **Characteristics of an Effective Teacher of Reading**

It has been highlighted in the literature that the teacher is a critical component in reading- strategy instruction. Chamot and O'Malley (1994) assert the importance of teachers of reading as having "an important role in conveying to students the importance of using strategies, defining various strategies and their use with academic tasks, and supporting the students in their efforts to become more strategic, independent, and self-regulated" (p. 58). In other words, teachers are responsible for providing students with an explanation of strategy use. According to Winograd and Hare (1988), the teacher's role is to teach students what the strategy is, how to use it, and when. Though it is generally accepted that teaching children how to read is a demanding task that requires great effort (Duke et al., 2021; Treiman, 2018), Blair et al. (2007) maintain that exerting much effort alone is not enough. Effective teachers know precisely what to focus their effort on to make a difference.

Ruddell (2008) investigated highly effective teachers' practices in reading classes and concluded that effective teachers possess specific characteristics. Effective teachers can activate students' prior knowledge and relate the learning experience and information to their personal beliefs. In addition, effective teachers are vitally important in designing an active learning environment with clear, meaningful

objectives and constructive feedback. Furthermore, effective teachers are aware of their students' different needs, potential, and motives (Ruddell, 2008).

### 3. Research Methods

#### Research Design

A quantitative method design was employed in this descriptive study utilizing a questionnaire survey, which is typically used to gather data at a particular point in time to describe an existing phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2013). In this study it was used to gain insight into the current conditions of reading comprehension strategies instruction in the EFL reading classes. A questionnaire-based survey was used as the method for data generation. According to Cohen et al. (2013), using a survey is useful in educational research in that it usually gathers data over a short period of time, and hence is economical and efficient, represents a broad target population through large-scale data gathering to enable drawing generalizations, and provides descriptive, inferential information (Cohen et al., 2013). In addition, surveys also are used to explore the relationships between variables (McMillan, 1996). Survey research is an appropriate approach to answer the research questions of this study. Surveys collect the required quantitative data (usage frequency of reading instructional strategies) from a broad population (EFL teachers in all government schools in Qatar), allowing for the researchers to draw conclusions and make possible generalizations (see Appendix 1 for the survey questions).

#### Participants and Data Collection

Participants in the study were EFL teachers from Qatari government (public) schools, which make up nearly 9% of the total number of teachers working at all levels in government schools in Qatar (MDPS, 2015). The questionnaire survey was administered online via Survey Monkey. The link was sent to all EFL teachers working in governmental elementary, preparatory, and secondary schools via an invitation email from the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE) official platform. The total population of EFL teachers is 1815 (72% female, n= 1313; 28% male, n= 502), distributed among 103, 58, and 55 elementary, preparatory, and secondary government schools respectively (MDPS, 2015). The number of contacted teachers was 1815, out of which 871 responded to the questionnaire. Completed responses were 754 with a response rate of 41.5%, as 117 respondents withdrew without submitting their responses. A total of 754 EFL teachers responded and completed the questionnaire voluntarily and anonymously, of which 479 (63.5%) were females, while 275 (36.5%) were males. This sample is a fair and representative sample of the population, that is, EFL teachers in Qatar's government schools. Both the MOEHE and Qatar University approved the study as ethical. Table 1 shows the demographic data of participants.

**Table 1: Demographical Data of Participants**

Characteristic	Level	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Female	479	63.5%
	Male	275	36.5%
Teaching-Level	Elementary	338	44.8%
	Preparatory	189	25.1%
	Secondary	227	30.1%

Years of Experience	5 years or less	88	11.7
	Between 6-11 years	264	35.0%
	Between 12-17 years	200	26.5%
	18 years or more	202	26.8%

### **Instrument, Validity and Reliability**

This study utilized *The Reading Comprehension Strategy Instruction* survey instrument, initially developed by Hernandez-Laboy (2009), based on the cognitive/social constructivist approach (Ballou, 2012; Hernandez-Laboy, 2009; Negari & Askani, 2014) and Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Ballou, 2012; Grabe, 2009). Teachers responded to 12 close-ended questions by rating their frequency of instruction of the reading strategy described in each of the statements, and six close-ended questions by rating the frequency of implementing explicit strategy instructional practices on a five-point Likert scale ranging from never=1 to always=5.

A panel of three experts evaluated the instrument: one in the field of ESL curriculum, an ESL methodology and reading expert in the learning and reading processes of ESL, and an evaluation and assessment expert. The panel used a validation instrument prepared by the researcher, who initially developed this instrument, to evaluate pertinence, wording, and adequacy. Statistically, the questionnaire generated a Cronbach's Alpha of .880, indicating high reliability. For validity, the mean score of each expert was as follows: 3.00, 3.00, and 2.97 (maximum score was 3). Experts' feedback on the survey construction items was collected through cognitive interviews. These interviews helped to evaluate and prepare a reliable and valid questionnaire (see Hernandez-Laboy, 2009).

A pilot study was conducted in the new context Qatar government schools, to ensure the validity of the questionnaire with the selected sample. According to Cohen et al. (2013), a pilot study is conducted to check the clarity of the questionnaire items, the time it takes to complete the questionnaire, and to gain feedback on the questionnaire's appearance, layout, and instructions. Based on the feedback from the pre-test group, no modifications were applied to the survey instrument.

To ensure instrument reliability, internal consistency of the instrument was measured using the Cronbach-alpha coefficient. The result shows that with 754 participants (N=754) the Cronbach-alpha coefficient computed for the 18 items of the questionnaire was .901, which indicated high reliability.

### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequencies, were calculated for each questionnaire item using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS-Version 24) statistics software to obtain exploratory data analysis. Data gathered were analysed using a survey scale that varied from always to never. The alternatives were scored as: always=5; frequently=4; sometimes=3; rarely=2; and never=1.

## 4. Results

### Question One

To answer research question one, “What are the reading comprehension strategies employed most frequently by EFL teachers in Qatar government schools?”, data were obtained from responses to 12 items of the instrument dealing with the reading strategies teachers used in the reading-instruction process and how frequently they engaged students in strategic reading. The data were tabulated and the frequency, percentage and mean scores were generated for each item and the overall number of items for this part.

Teachers’ responses converged on always (5) and frequently (4) for most items with a total mean score of 4.16. The *think-aloud strategy* dealt with in item #5, which is considered essential in developing the reading skills in EFL learners, seemed to be not habitually utilized by most teachers. Only 22.8% of the participants chose ‘always’ as their response, while 77.2% of their responses concentrated on frequently, sometimes, rarely, and never. The generated mean score for this strategy (3.56) is remarkably low regarding other items such as #1 (*Identify their purpose of reading*) and #3 (*Make predictions before and during reading*), which obtained (4.5).

As for items #7 and #9, which dealt with *visualizing* and *summarizing* respectively to aid comprehension, approximately 35% of participants’ answers centred on always, while the rest, ~66%, were distributed around frequently (~30%), sometimes (~28%), rarely (~6%) and never (~1%). These strategies were expected to be more frequently used in the reading classes by EFL teachers, but they were found to be less preferred with mean scores of 3.92 and 3.93, respectively. Though item #10 (*generating questions*) generated almost the same low mean score (3.93), participants’ answers focused more on always (~42%), whereas the remaining 58% of the responses ranged from frequently to never. *Generating questions* is one of the most effective protocols in reciprocal reading, a strategy that primarily demands of students to read and comprehend a text. Participants in this study seemed to prefer traditional teaching methods, which were always less demanding for themselves in terms of planning, instruction time, and individualized activities.

These findings correspond with the relatively low total mean score of the complete sample (4.16) for this part of the questionnaire. A higher score was expected, which would have indicated extensive use of strategic reading in the EFL reading process. These findings also were congruent with the high mean scores ranging from 4.52 to 4.29, which is notably higher than the total mean score of the complete sample (4.16), obtained for items 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, and 12, which dealt with less demanding instructional strategies based mainly on traditional oral practices, and requiring less effort in planning and instruction, namely *purpose of reading*, *text preview*, *prediction*, *prior knowledge*, *main ideas*, and *monitoring comprehension*. Table 2 below presents a summary of question one results dealing with strategic reading.

**Table 2: Total Mean Scores in a Descending Order for Reading Comprehension Strategy Use in the Reading Process**

#	Strategy	Mean
8	Identify the important ideas in a text	4.52
1	Identify their purpose of reading	4.5
3	Make predictions before and during reading	4.5
2	Preview text before reading	4.34
12	Monitor their comprehension during reading	4.3
4	Activate relevant background knowledge for reading	4.29
11	Handle unfamiliar words using context clues	4.12
6	Use text structure to support comprehension	3.99
10	Generate questions for the text	3.93
7	Create visual representation to aid comprehension and recall (visualizing)	3.92
9	Summarize what they read	3.9
5	Think aloud while reading	3.56
Total Mean Score		4.16

### Question Two

To answer question two, "How often do EFL teachers in Qatar government schools provide explicit strategy instruction?", data obtained from the six items measuring the frequency of including each explicit instruction practice in the reading class were tabulated, and the frequency, percentage and mean scores were calculated for each, as well as for the overall number of items for this part.

For items #1, 2, 3, and 4 (*strategy-explicit instruction, modelling, cooperative learning, and guided practice*), the majority of the respondents' answers (N=754) centred on always (5) and frequently (4), with 77.6%, 78.5%, 82.8%, and 81.4%, respectively. Items #5 and #6 were different since only 63.7% and 57.6% of the responses centred on always and frequently, respectively, which indicated that participants were not confident enough about their practice of these two strategies dealing with the *independent practice of the strategy* (item #5) and *using a combination of multiple strategies* (item #6).

As for items #5 and #6, an analysis was determined due to the significant differences compared to the other items in the same part. For item #5, which dealt with the *independent practice of the reading strategy in the classroom*, teachers' answers conveyed a doubtful knowledge of this strategy. Only 26.3% of teachers selected 'always' as a response to the question, while the responses of the remaining 73.7% were distributed over frequently (37.4%), sometimes (32.2%), rarely (3.8%), and never (.3%).

Item #6, which dealt with combining *multiple reading strategies* in the classroom, showed inconsistent responses. Several (23.9%) of the responses centred on always, while the remaining 76.2% were distributed over frequently (33.7%), sometimes (32.8%), rarely (8.4%), and never (1.3%).

The data analysis of this part of the instrument, with a mean score of 4.06, suggests that participants in this study knew about explicit teaching using reading strategies. However, two out of six items showed inconsistency and limited use

of these strategies. This might imply that teachers had difficulty in practising specific strategies which demand more time and differentiated instructional strategies. For an insightful view of the findings for this part of the questionnaire, Table 3 below summarizes the results, including frequency, percentage, and mean score for each item in this part in descending order.

**Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Explicit Reading Comprehension Strategies used in Instruction in a Descending Order**

#	Items		Always	Frequently	Some-times	Rarely	Never	Mean
3	Collaborative use of the strategy (cooperative learning)	F	336	288	121	8	1	4.26
		%	44.6%	38.2%	16.0%	1.1%	0.1%	
4	Guided practice using the strategy	F	317	297	131	7	2	4.22
		%	42.0%	39.4%	17.4%	0.9%	0.3%	
2	Modelling of the strategy in action	F	325	267	148	10	4	4.19
		%	43.1%	35.4%	19.6%	1.3%	0.5%	
1	Explicit instruction of the strategy in action	F	303	282	148	19	2	4.15
		%	40.2%	37.4%	19.6%	2.5%	0.3%	
5	Independent practice using the strategy	F	198	282	243	29	2	3.86
		%	26.3%	37.4%	32.2%	3.8%	0.3%	
6	Combination of multiple reading strategies (orchestration)	F	180	254	247	63	10	3.7
		P	23.9%	33.7%	32.8%	8.4%	1.3%	
Total Mean Score								4.06

## 5. Discussion

### Use of Reading Comprehension Strategies by EFL Teachers in Qatar Government Schools

In response to research question one, dealing with the comprehension strategies used by EFL teachers, results of this study asserted frequent implementation of reading comprehension strategy instruction in the reading classes to enhance students' comprehension. This result reported by language researchers stressed the crucial role of teaching comprehension strategies in building strategic readers. Pressley (2000) and Duke et al. (2021) contended that explicit comprehension strategies should be implemented to develop strategic readers. Similarly, Quigley (2020) and Cárdenas-Hagan (2020) highlighted the importance of being a strategic reader in enhancing reading comprehension. Furthermore, Koda (2005) and Bruen (2020) determined that strategic reading improved comprehension in students and developed their critical thinking skills. Teachers in their studies indicated positive attitudes towards comprehension strategy instruction.

The following results summarize the top seven reading-comprehension strategies the respondents used in their teaching most often (mean score  $\geq 4$ ). These strategies, in descending order of frequency of instruction, are: *identify main ideas* (4.52), *set purpose for reading* (4.5), *predictions* (4.5), *preview text* (4.34), *monitor comprehension* (4.3), *prior knowledge activation* (4.29), and *handle unfamiliar words* (4.12).

Teachers reported highly frequent use of *identifying the purpose* of reading a text in their classes. These results are congruent with Reyna-Barron's study (2016) that reported that teachers had strong beliefs and attitudes towards teaching reading-comprehension strategies to students – teachers implemented the strategy of identifying a goal or a purpose for reading and explained to students how to apply it through direct instruction and modelling (Reyna-Barron, 2016). In addition, this finding implies teachers have strong attitudes towards routinely implementing the strategy of setting a purpose for reading in the reading classes. Teaching students the concept of developing a clear goal for reading a text is of fundamental importance in building strategic readers (Conner & Farr, 2009; Pressley & Hilden, 2002; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001).

This result also indicates that teachers demonstrate a belief that good readers should set a goal for reading. The current study's finding was consistent with research suggesting that utilizing the strategy of setting a goal for reading is beneficial in developing students' comprehension. According to Neufeld's (2005) overview of expert readers' characteristics, expert readers can set a purpose for reading. To become strong readers, devoted to comprehending texts, students should have a compelling purpose in mind when reading a text (Duke & Pearson, 2008). Reading with no purpose in mind leads to a lack of necessary inputs to deal with the text and understand the information presented (Conner & Farr, 2009).

On the other hand, the current study was incongruent with findings from Hernandez-Laboy (2009) and Kuzborska (2010). Hernandez-Laboy (2009) conducted a study investigating the reading strategies ESL teachers utilized to enhance comprehension in students. The majority of the teachers did not teach students how to establish a clear goal for reading. Almost similarly, Kuzborska (2010) found that setting a goal for reading was rarely practised by teachers in the observed classes. In relation to the current study, this could highlight the importance of observing instructional practices of EFL teachers in the reading classes to explore how teachers implement the strategy and whether their reported belief is consistent with their practices. As Cummins et al. (2004) contend, to create an effective learning environment, it is vital to determine the congruence between what teachers believe about reading comprehension instruction and the actual practices in the classroom.

In this study, the majority of teachers indicated their frequent use of teaching students the strategy of *identifying the main ideas in a text*. It seems that the majority of the teachers upheld the importance of this strategy to comprehend a text. This finding confirms Grabe's (2009) claim that in teaching and planning reading activities, emphasizing comprehension as the main idea should be the teachers' priority instructional practice. Consequently, this practice will ensure that students understand why effective main-idea comprehension activities are

important. Post-reading questions then will help teachers assess their students' abilities to grasp the critical ideas in a text and differentiate these from minor details. To achieve the goal of this strategy, teachers should facilitate class discussions, including negotiations and assessment of peers' answers, asking for evidence-based answers supported by the text, sharing ideas, and evaluating responses (Anderson, 2009; Grabe, 2009; Quigley, 2020). In this respect, it is essential to emphasise teachers' abilities to plan such activities and implement these in the reading class. Previous research outlined teachers' lack of the ability and required attitude to teach main-idea comprehension activities. Examining a similar EFL context in Saudi Arabia, significant similarities can be observed. Altheweni (2016), in accordance with this study's findings, reported that Saudi EFL teachers demonstrated a strong tendency toward utilizing the main-idea strategy. However, Alsamadani (2012) concluded that Saudi EFL teachers were doubtful about implementing comprehension activities that foster the main-idea comprehension, such as writing summaries to reflect on key ideas in a text, discussing and evaluating students' answers, providing feedback on what a student has read, or analysing the given information. Results from the present study and previous research accentuate the need for guided professional development that supports teachers' performance in designing and planning main-idea comprehension activities.

In the study reported here, teachers displayed irregularity in implementing the strategies of *prior knowledge activation* and *text previewing*. Findings indicated that 48.8% and 55.3% of teachers selected 'always' using these strategies. This finding suggests teachers' lack of awareness of the crucial role these two strategies play in comprehension. Activating students' knowledge about a topic and previewing a text before reading serve as the basis of reading comprehension, especially for struggling readers (Mathes et al., 2007, Fogarty, 2020). According to Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2007), activating students' prior knowledge through well-designed activities is an overarching characteristic of an effective reading teacher. However, unlike what the present study reveals, previous studies reported teachers' strong attitudes towards activating students' prior knowledge (Alsamadani, 2012) and teachers spending the largest proportion of instruction time on activating prior knowledge of students and/or previewing texts (Reyna-Barron, 2016). It is worth noting that teachers' attitudes and beliefs do not necessarily reflect the actual classroom practices (Fang, 1996). Reyna-Barron (2016), who analysed the implementation of reading comprehension instructional activities in 7<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms found that all 12 participants observed spent 65 percent of comprehension activities on activating students' prior knowledge and/or previewing the text. Teachers focused mainly on pre-reading activities while neglecting the importance of the other activities to be conducted during and after the reading. Results from previous research and the current study suggest that teachers may lack an awareness of the essential principles of comprehension strategy instruction. This indicates that teachers should be able to plan effectively for the reading comprehension instruction period to achieve the maximum benefit of strategy instruction.

Results of this study indicate a list of the top five reading comprehension strategies that were employed *least* by the participant teachers (mean score <4).

These strategies in descending order of frequency of instruction are *text structure* (3.99), *questioning* (3.93), *visualizing* (3.92), *summarizing* (3.9), and *thinking aloud* (3.56). Although these strategies were reported as the least frequently used, the teachers reported usage of these strategies as moderate.

Teachers asserted moderate use of *text structure* to support comprehension strategy. This finding contradicts research findings regarding the importance of teaching students text structure for comprehension. According to Duke & Pearson (2008), Grabe (2009), and Arabmofrad et al. (2021), promoting students' awareness of discourse signalling markers and organization through explicit instruction are fundamental for comprehending a text successfully, locating the main ideas, and even organizing information within a certain discourse structure to fit the purpose of their piece of writing in a writing exercise (Grabe, 2009; Pearson, 2009). It can be implied that teachers in the current study lacked basic knowledge about teaching text structure and how essential it is for comprehension. This result was congruent with recent studies (Hernandez-Laboy, 2009; Kuzborska, 2010; Reyna-Barron, 2016) investigating reading comprehension strategy instruction. Hernandez-Laboy (2009) found that teachers who participated in her study did not use text structure strategy to support comprehension with the regularity anticipated. In addition, Kuzborska (2010) concluded that teachers were dubious about the need of their students to learn text structure. Based on classroom observations, Kuzborska (2010) and Reyna-Barron (2016) found teaching text structure to support comprehension was not practised by teachers. In accordance with previous research findings, the expectation with the present study was that teachers would take responsibility for implementing text structure strategy in the EFL reading classes. To achieve the goal of text structure strategy, teachers ought to design activities that engage students in pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading active learning exercises to develop students' awareness of text structure (Duke & Pearson, 2008; Grabe, 2009; Grabe & Stoller, 2013).

The *think-aloud strategy* scored the lowest frequency of use among all strategies. It could be argued that teachers did not consider using the 'think aloud' protocol as a comprehension strategy. This result contradicts Oster's (2001) conclusion that "thinking aloud leads students to improved discussions, better understandings and more enjoyment of literature" (p. 64). The finding of the present study could imply teachers' lack of knowledge and proficiency necessary for implementing the think-aloud strategy demonstrated to be crucial in students' comprehension. Besides, students seemed to miss the research-supported benefits of using the think-aloud strategy in the reading classes. Empirical research studies assert that think-aloud strategies are effective at improving student comprehension (Baumann et al., 1993; Bereiter & Bird, 1985). Often cited is a research study conducted by Bereiter and Bird (1985) that concluded students who were taught to think aloud while reading comprehended better than those who were not taught the same, based on the results of a comprehension test as the instrument of assessment.

Moreover, the *think-aloud strategy* was found to be beneficial for 4<sup>th</sup> grade students (Baumann et al., 1993; Chien, 2019). The researchers asked the children to read a story aloud and stopped them intermittently to ask about what they were doing

or thinking about while reading a certain part of the story. Students' responses showed great awareness of monitoring comprehension and critical thinking (Baumann et al., 1993). Scored the lowest among the other strategies selected by teachers in the present study, the limited use of the read-aloud strategy concedes the ineffective use of an essential group of strategies, namely *prediction, monitoring, questioning, summarizing, and visualizing*. According to Keene (2009), the think-aloud strategy is one of the fundamental ways teachers deploy to share these strategies with their students. This group of strategies is being shared in all grade levels and is meant to become skills used by all students effortlessly and automatically (Duke & Pearson, 2009). These conclusions agree with the results from the present study that reported low-use frequency of *summarizing, questioning* and *visualizing* strategies. This result is also aligned with that of Hernandez-Laboy (2009), asserting that the majority of teachers who participated in her study had not considered the think-aloud strategy as a comprehension instructional practice.

### **Use of Explicit Strategy Instruction as Reading Comprehension Strategies**

In response to research question 2, results of this study reported that participant teachers asserted their frequent use of *direct explicit instructional practices* of reading-comprehension strategies. However, it was concluded that teachers did not teach students how to *independently practise and implement comprehension strategies* in the reading process with the regularity anticipated. This result is inconsistent with the crucial role direct explicit instruction of strategies plays in the comprehension process. Metacognition, the awareness of one's cognitive processes, is found to develop through the use of explicit instruction (Barber et al. 2020; Duke & Pearson, 2008; Oster, 2001; Pressley & Hilden, 2002). Teachers in the present study seemed to ignore the *gradual release of responsibility* to students; albeit such release of responsibility ultimately leads to *independent practice*. Explicit comprehension strategy instruction must include a *direct explanation* to students of the goal and application of the strategy, as well as *direct practise* using the strategy, *collaborative use* of the strategy, *guided practise with gradual release of responsibility*, and then *independent use* of the strategy by students (Duke & Pearson, 2008; McLaughlin, 2012). Teachers may be constrained in doing this by the limited instruction time and the extensive curriculum they need to cover. Other factors may contribute to this result, such as lack of professional knowledge and efficiency.

## **6. Recommendations and Conclusion**

Based on the data analysis of the present investigation, findings, discussion, and recommendations are offered to the MOEHE to provide in-service teachers with meaningful professional development targeting reading-comprehension strategy instruction, including mentoring and coaching, in order to promote positive change in EFL classrooms. In addition, EFL teachers should critically examine and evaluate their reading classroom practices and measure the impact of their instruction on students' performance. Furthermore, students should be involved in guided practice activities followed by independent practice of the strategy to implement gradual release of responsibility. Students thus will become competent users of the strategy.

The MOEHE and school principals are strongly encouraged to adopt reading strategies in all disciplines, since strategic reading is generalizable to different content areas. Hence, in-service training on reading strategies should be provided to all subject teachers. Pre-service education programmes are urged to comprise courses on comprehension strategy instruction and practical teaching practices of these strategies. This would provide student-teachers with great opportunities to reflect on their practice and administer a deep understanding of the strategy instruction process.

However, this study also had several limitations. First, empirically this study merely relied on a self-reported questionnaire survey. Although it provides an overall picture of the government school EFL teachers' instructional practices in the reading classes, the reasons for these patterns might have been better explained through in-depth qualitative interviews. In addition, surveying teachers presenting self-reported data may not necessarily represent classroom realities. Therefore, future studies comprising on-site observations to determine the relationship between teachers' beliefs and classroom realities should be conducted. Finally, students' practices in reading classes should be investigated to determine the quality and effectiveness of the reading-comprehension instruction they receive in EFL classrooms. Such investigations could help to identify strategies and instructional practices that are effective in developing reading comprehension.

In conclusion, reading in a foreign language is a challenge for both students and teachers. EFL teachers lack the awareness and skills needed to equip their students with the strategies required through effective strategy instruction and gradual release of responsibility in the classroom. Consequently, comprehension has become problematic as the language barrier hinders understanding of a text. The MOEHE, supervisors, and teachers should consider that performing strategy instruction solely cannot improve student comprehension. Still, collaborative work and commitment of all the educational process stakeholders should contribute to the development of reading comprehension in EFL students. The goals of educational reform initiatives in Qatar, QNV, and QNDP are aimed at implementing a student-centred approach in education and, subsequently, at improving students' achievement in reading as would be indicated by international student standardized tests (e.g., PISA). Therefore, ongoing assessment of both classroom practices and students' outcomes is highly recommended for the development process of reading-strategy instruction to meet these educational goals.

## 7. References

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## **Appendix 1: Survey Questions: Reading Comprehension Strategy Instruction**

### I. Demographic Information

1. What is your gender?
  - a) Female
  - b) Male
  
2. What is your latest academic preparation?
  - a) Bachelor's Degree
  - b) Bachelor's Degree plus credit towards Master's Degree
  - c) Master's Degree
  - d) Master's Degree plus credits towards Doctoral degree
  - e) Doctoral Degree
  
3. What level do you teach?
  - a) Elementary
  - b) Preparatory
  - c) Secondary
  
4. Are you certified at that level?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No
  
5. How many years of experience do you have as an English teacher?
  - a) 0-5
  - b) 6-11
  - c) 12-17
  - d) 18 or more
  
6. Did you take any courses on the teaching of reading comprehension during your bachelor's degree studies?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No

## II: Instructional Strategies in Classroom

A. How frequently are students taught the following reading comprehension strategies in your class?

Strategy	Always	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1. Identify their purpose of reading					
2. Preview text before reading					
3. Make predictions before and during reading					
4. Think aloud while reading					
5. Activate relevant background knowledge for reading					
6. Use text structure to support comprehension					
7. Create visual representation to aid comprehension and recall (visualizing)					
8. Identify the important ideas in a text					
9. Summarize what they read					
10. Generate questions for text					
11. Handle unfamiliar words using context clues					
12. Monitor their comprehension during reading					

B. How often do you include the following teaching practices in your reading classes?

Practice	Always	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1. Explicit instruction of the strategy					
2. Modelling of the strategy in action					
3. Collaborative use of the strategy (cooperative learning)					
4. Guided practice using the strategy					
5. Independent practice using the strategy					
6. Combination of multiple reading strategies (orchestration)					