

# Reading Strategies: A Catalyst for Enhancing Comprehension and Summary Writing Proficiency among High School Students in Lagos State

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## **Abstract**

*This study is an attempt to find out through survey and quasi-experimental research designs the effects of the use of reading strategies on the development of students' proficiency in reading comprehension and summary writing. That is, it sought to determine whether students exposed to reading strategies would improve and perform better in reading comprehension and summary writing than those not so exposed. A total of 240 senior secondary I (SSI) students and 50 teachers were randomly selected from four randomly selected senior secondary schools in Lagos State, Nigeria. Two separate questionnaires of the Likert scale type were administered on the teacher and student samples. Five reading passages were used to teach students some relevant reading strategies such as predicting, thinking aloud, inferring, questioning, context clues and summarising. The pre-test and post-test exercises were used to collect data in both comprehension and summary writing. Data collected were analysed using percentages, mean, standard deviation and ANOVA statistical tools, at 0.05 significant level. Findings showed that while teachers were aware of some reading strategies and techniques of summary writing, students were not; the use of reading strategies had a significant positive effect on students' performance in reading comprehension; reading strategies positively affected students' performance in summary writing; and there was a significant difference in performance between students who received reading instructions using reading strategies and those who did not in both comprehension and summary writing. Based on the findings, recommendations were made on how to create more awareness about reading strategies, their benefits and how to cultivate their use to enhance the performance of students in reading comprehension and summary writing.*

## **Background and Literature Review**

The English language is the most prominent language in Nigeria. It is the country's lingua franca, the language of administration and the mass media, the medium of instruction in schools and a core subject which must be studied and passed at credit level by all students irrespective of course or the level of study. In fact, it has been described as a major index for measuring the quality of high school external examination result (Ukwuegbu, 1999). The high status of English in Nigeria and the high failure rate in it as a school subject have necessitated the need to overhaul its learning process in order to achieve the goal of effective communication using the relevant language skills. Two of these skills – reading and writing – have been selected in this study as the major tools for determining students' proficiency in English.

The primary purpose of reading is to obtain information which could lead to enjoyment, appreciation, judgement and creativeness (Emenike & Odeyemi, 2002). Reading comprehension has been described by Pardo, (2004) as a process in which readers construct meaning by interacting with the text through a combination of prior knowledge and previous experience, information in the text, and the stance the reader takes in relation to the text. Reading comprehension features at three levels: on-the-lines for literal/factual information; between the lines wherein the reader reads the mind of the author, making inference and evaluation; and beyond the lines where reading goes beyond decoding facts and making inferences to thinking and making projections from the text (Davis, 2006). Reading is also gradable such that we can talk about "good readers" and "poor readers".

A good reader is fluent, reads much, is not easily distracted because he reads with concentration and is able to follow the writer's direction of reasoning and interprets accurately the writer's intended meaning (Hudson, 2000). Johnson (2005) describes good readers as "proficient readers" and attributes their proficiencies to the fact that they use reading/comprehension strategies. Comprehension strategies are specific procedures that guide students to become aware of how well they comprehend as they attempt to read and write (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000). Comprehension as a strategic process enables readers to make connections and move beyond literal recall (Ellery, 2006). According to Song (2007), reading strategies indicate how readers conceive a task, what textual cues they attend to, how they make sense of what they read and what they do when they do not understand. Thus, strategies help readers to engage with the text, to monitor their comprehension and fix it when it fails (Pressley, 1999). Thus, the application of cognitive and control strategies are critical requirements that determine effective, independent reading and lifelong learning (Ellis, 1990; Artelt et al 2003). Studies have shown that these reading strategies or instructional techniques are student-centred and when taught to students help to improve their performance on test of comprehension (Song, 2007). The strategies may include: inferring, visualising, previewing, retelling, determining importance, predicting, reading aloud, skimming and scanning, think aloud, re-reading, questioning, synthesising, reflecting, integration, retelling, context clues and self-assessment, among others.

Reading comprehension is neither incidental nor accidental; therefore, teachers of reading have the responsibility to help students maximise their potential to make meaning from text (Spor & Schneider, 2005). Strategic reading fosters metacognition in readers because it implies a systematic and structural approach to comprehending text. According to Harvey and Goudvis (2000), strategic readers' address their thinking in an inner conversation that helps them make sense of what they read and search for the answers to their questions. They take the written word and construct meaning based on their own thoughts, knowledge and experiences. Vacca (2002) reiterates that strategic readers know how to think with text. Teaching strategic reading

therefore involves really teaching problem-solving and empowering students to gain ownership of their own reading and comprehending of text.

Summary writing as an aspect of writing skill represents a short-to-the-point distillation of the main ideas in a text. Summary has been described as an advanced comprehension which requires deep understanding of the passage and the skill of paraphrase (West African Examination Council [WAEC], 2012). The use of appropriate strategies enables readers to sift main ideas from supporting details in reading texts and to be able to write same concisely and correctly. The need to develop reading comprehension proficiency and summary writing skills therefore becomes apparent. According to Pflaum and Bishop (2004), because youngsters are asked to read texts with increasing complexity, the (question of) the need for instruction in strategies for comprehending a variety of text types takes some urgency. Reading comprehension instructions should therefore focus on creating self-regulating strategic readers.

Despite the significance of teaching the strategies highlighted above, Johnson (2007) has observed that not much work has been done that relates to training in reading comprehension strategies in (ongoing classroom) reading programmes, particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. The need to teach relevant reading strategies to help students cope with comprehension and summary writing therefore becomes evident.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study was influenced by two theories: cognitive and metacognitive theories of reading. Unlike the traditional theory of reading which places more emphasis on the form of the printed page and sees reading as “basically a matter of decoding a series of written symbols to make sense of the text”, for meaning exists in the printed page and is interpreted by the reader (Nunam, 1991; McCarthy, 1999), the cognitive theory exponents view the traditional theory as relying too much on words and structures thereby producing passive readers. This theory of reading (cognitive) emphasises the interactive nature of reading, the constructive nature of comprehension and the use of strategies to monitor reading comprehension. It underlines the active involvement of learners in constructing knowledge for themselves, and building new ideas or concepts based upon current knowledge and past experience as well as students’ free exploration within a framework, while the teacher acts as a facilitator who encourages students to discover principles for themselves and to construct knowledge by working to solve realistic problems. Goodman (1967), cited in Paran (1996), presented reading as a psycholinguistic guessing game, a process in which readers sample the text, make hypotheses, and confirm or reject them. With the cognitive theory, the reader rather than the text is at the heart of the reading process. Thus, besides the knowledge brought to bear on the reading process, a set of flexible, adaptable strategies (e.g. transfer, think aloud, inferring, previewing, predicting, questioning, etc) are used by the reader to make sense of the text and monitor ongoing understanding (Dole et

al., 1991). The second theory – the metacognitive theory- is concerned principally with the “thinking and control” readers exercise during the reading process. This control described to as metacognition (Block, 1992) involves thinking about what one is doing while reading. The metacognitive view of reading recognises the control to include all the strategies and manipulations that readers apply in the act of manipulating and understanding a text (Block, 1992), such as summarising, synthesising, and self=assessment, among others. The study draws from these theories to guide students to use selected reading strategies to enhance their comprehension ability.

### **The Problem**

Many teachers and students of the English language, especially in ESL, may not be aware of reading comprehension strategies and so do not encourage their use in reading lessons. According to Song (2007), not much work has been done that relates to training students to use reading strategies, particularly in ESL classrooms. Thus, teachers of English language and their students in ESL contexts (Nigeria inclusive) may not be conversant with reading strategies or use them to develop proficiency in reading comprehension and summary writing. Consequently, WAEC (2012) Chief Examiner’s reports indicate that though the passages for comprehension and summary were straightforward, the candidates engaged in mindless lifting as they could not put the answers in their own words. The reports added that the hallmark of good summary writing which are relevance, conciseness and exclusion of detail and extraneous materials were completely forgotten. The question is: Will the teaching of specific reading strategies selected for this study enhance students’ proficiency in reading and summary writing?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The study was undertaken to examine the place of reading strategies in the development of reading comprehension and summary writing proficiency of Senior Secondary I students. Specific objectives include, to:

1. establish the extent teachers and students in the study are knowledgeable about reading strategies,
2. teach those students and teachers some key reading strategies and determine their effect on the reading comprehension performance of students,
3. teach students the techniques of good summary writing using reading strategies and ascertain their impact on students’ performance in summary writing,
4. determine whether students exposed to the reading strategies will perform better in comprehension and summary writing than those not so exposed.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions guided the study:

5. To what extent are the English language teachers and the students in the study knowledgeable or familiar with reading strategies?

6. Will the students taught with reading strategies perform better in reading comprehension than those not so exposed?
7. Will the students taught reading strategies perform better in summary writing than those not taught with the strategies?

### **Hypotheses**

The following hypotheses were tested:

8. The use of reading strategies will not have any significant effect on students' performance in reading comprehension.
9. Reading strategies will not significantly affect students' performance in summary writing.
10. There will be no significant difference in performance in comprehension and summary writing between students who receive instructions in reading strategies and those who do not.

### **Methodology**

The Solomon Four quasi-experimental control group design was used in the study. The study population comprised all the Senior Secondary School (SSS1) students in four randomly selected schools in Ifako-Ijaiye area of Lagos State. A cluster random sampling of intact classes and 15\10 English teachers per school constituted the sample of 240 students and 50 teachers. The main instruments used were six reading strategies: predicting, inferring, summarising, questioning, think aloud with re-reading, and skimming and scanning to preview. Other instruments include a structured questionnaire, and reading passages. The questionnaire and the passages were duly validated by relevant experts while a reliability coefficient of 0.71 was obtained from test-retest correlation of questionnaire responses of a pilot group.

Data collection was done in four stages, namely administration of questionnaire on the teachers and students to determine their awareness of reading strategies; administration of pretest on the two groups ( $E_1$  &  $C_1$ ) to determine their level of proficiency in reading comprehension and summary writing; teaching the English teachers how to use reading strategies to increase students' reading abilities; the teachers' teaching of reading comprehension and summary writing to two groups of students using those strategies while the researcher scaffolded and supervised the teaching.

Previewing through skimming and scanning was used to motivate the students to read the text. It enabled them to examine text features, get the gist of the text and to evoke relevant thoughts about what they already knew about the topic. The teachers used the title of the text, illustrations and pictures, background information, text structure, and class discussion to activate students' prior personal experiences and background knowledge to the text.

Predicting was taught and utilised before the reading based on previewing and asking questions. Predicting helps readers see expectations for reading, connect early with text for meaning and decide what they think will happen. In this

study, it was based on clues in the title, pictures, key words and key phrases and sentences to elicit from the students what the text is likely to be about. The predictions or foretelling helped to arouse their curiosity and interest to read for later confirmation or modification as necessary.

Think aloud with re-reading occurs when students get stuck and are unable to decipher the intended meaning of text. In this study, the teachers demonstrated think aloud, that is, voicing out the problem, and proceeded to reread the thorny section to get the meaning intended. Thus, think aloud helped to realise point of difficulty and to clarify it by re-reading.

Questioning strategy helps readers review content and to relate what they learn with what they already know (Ellery, 2006). Questioning was also used in this study before the reading to set the purpose for reading; for predicting during reading to identify some information that supports the main points and to stimulate active thinking; and after reading to determine the extent of comprehension at the literal, interpretative and critical evaluative levels akin to what Ellery refers to as *Right There, Think and Search, Author and We, and On My Own*.

Inferring permits the readers to merge their background knowledge with text clues to come to a conclusion about an implied idea. It was used in the study to enable students use implicit information to read between the lines, by asking such questions as: What clues from the text led to your conclusion, what evidence supports your conclusion, how does the chief character feel? Why do you think he/she feels like that? These questions enabled students to make a logical guess of what the author did not explicitly state and helped them read for deep meaning.

Summarising strategy was used to teach the students the skill of summary writing. Summarising helped the students to identify and organise the essential information in the text. They were taught to use "REDW" strategy (Magrum-Srtichart Learning Resources) to read, examine, decide and then write. They read each paragraph in groups, examined it to identify the main idea, decided the topic sentence and then wrote the main ideas in short sentences using only a few words. Appropriate questions were used to propel students' summarising activities such as: What was the main focus of the text? Which words helped you describe the gist of the text? What is the main idea in paragraphs one, two...? Students were encouraged to identify the essential ideas and supporting details but to avoid illustration as part of the summary. Apart from the passages used for pre- and post-tests, four passages were used for teaching the use of the strategies.

The other two groups were taught reading and summary in the conventional way that is, without the application of the strategies. At the end of six weeks of intervention, all the four groups were post-tested on reading comprehension

and summary writing. The assessment focused on different reading and summary skills, such as:

- ability to make meaning predictions based on key words and pictures;
- understanding of word meaning;
- ability to state the gist of the text;
- ability to locate specific ideas;
- ability to respond to literal, inferential and evaluative questions;
- ability to distinguish main points and supporting details; and
- ability to summarise the text, among others.

Data collected were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical tools.

### The Results

The analysis of responses to the research questions and the results of hypotheses testing are presented here. Research question one sought to determine the teachers' and students' awareness of and use of reading strategies while reading. Tables 1a and 1b present the findings.

**TABLE 1a: Students' Awareness of Reading Strategies**

S/N	Items	Weighted Responses	Mean	SD	Remarks
1.	We know little about reading strategies.	716	3.58	2.122	Accepted
2.	We are taught reading using some reading strategies.	453	2.27	1.581	Not Accepted
3.	We have been taught some strategies like inferring, predicting, think aloud, skimming and scanning, summarising, among others.	397	1.99	0.332	Not Accepted
4.	We can read using some reading strategies.	388	1.94	0.215	Not Accepted
5.	We know little about techniques of summary writing.	698	3.49	2.327	Accepted
6.	Our teachers teach us how to write good summary.	579	2.90	1.452	Accepted
7.	We are good in summary writing using strategies.	447	2.24	0.883	Not Accepted
8.	We practise summary writing weekly using relevant reading strategies.	431	2.16	1.017	Not Accepted
9.	Reading strategies can motivate students to read with interest and understanding.	655	3.28	1.895	Accepted

**Table 1b: English Language Teachers' Awareness of Reading Strategies**

S/N	Items	Weighted Responses	Mean	SD	Remarks
1.	I teach my students reading using reading strategies.	148	2.96	2.252	Accepted
2.	I have taught my students strategies like inferring, predicting, think aloud, questioning, skimming and scanning, summarising.	145	2.90	1.818	Accepted
3.	My students can read using reading strategies.	122	2.44	0.632	Not Accepted
4.	I know enough about techniques of summary writing.	158	3.16	1.515	Accepted
5.	I teach my students how to write good summary.	167	3.34	2.027	Accepted
6.	My students are good in summary writing.	113	2.26	0.645	Not Accepted
7.	My students practise summary writing weekly using reading strategies.	118	2.36	0.783	Not Accepted
8.	Reading strategies can motivate students to read with interest and understanding	165	3.30	2.552	Accepted

The items in Tables 1a & b are considered accepted at 2.50 mean value and above. The responses of the students on awareness/knowledge and use of reading strategies show that the accepted mean values of 3.58, 3.49, 2.90 and 3.28 reveal that while the students know little about reading strategies and less about techniques of summary writing, they agreed that reading strategies can motivate them to read with interest and understanding.

On the part of the teacher respondents, the acceptable items with the mean values of 2.96, 2.90, 3.16, 3.34 and 3.30 reveal that they teach students reading using strategies and teach them to apply specific reading strategies, and affirm that reading strategies motivate students to read with interest and understanding. The responses from both groups seem to reveal some inconsistencies, showing that one group might not be knowledgeable about strategies. In the course of the study, it was discovered that the students had no knowledge about reading strategies and knew very little about summary writing. This shows that the teachers only believed in what they did but probably did not articulate same to the students.

Research questions two and three sought to ascertain whether the exposure of students to reading strategies will increase their comprehension and summary writing abilities. Tables 2a and 2b present the performances of Experimental



group one (E<sub>1</sub>), Experimental group two (E<sub>2</sub>), Control group one (C<sub>1</sub>), and Control group two (C<sub>2</sub>) in reading comprehension and summary writing.

**Table 2a:** Students' Post-intervention Performance in Reading Comprehension

Group	Variable	N	Mean	SD	percentage
E <sub>1</sub> (Treatment)	Pre-test	60	35.17	16.10	46.6
E <sub>1</sub> (Treatment)	Post-test	60	61.83	13.21	53.4
C <sub>1</sub> (No treatment)	Pre-test	60	32.33	15.87	59.5
C <sub>1</sub> (No treatment)	Post-test	60	29.33	19.03	40.5
E <sub>2</sub> (Treatment)	Post-test	60	59.83	17.22	60
C <sub>2</sub> (No treatment)	Post-test	60	33.0	18.80	40

**Table 2b:** Students' Post-intervention Performance in Summary Writing

Group	Variable	N	Mean	SD	percentage
E <sub>1</sub> (Treatment)	Pre-test	60	10.83	13.05	44.9
E <sub>1</sub> (Treatment)	Post-test	60	48.16	12.05	55.1
C <sub>1</sub> (No treatment)	Pre-test	60	16.17	18.33	38.4
C <sub>1</sub> (No treatment)	Post-test	60	15.33	14.31	35.7
E <sub>2</sub> (Treatment)	Post-test	60	49.83	13.21	56.75
C <sub>2</sub> (No treatment)	Post-test	60	10.33	12.48	43.3

The data in tables 2a & b reveal that the mean scores of the students in both comprehension and summary writing increased at the post-test stage in favour of the treatment groups. This shows that when students are exposed to appropriate and relevant reading strategies and summary writing techniques they read strategically and improve their performance in reading and summary writing.

### Hypothesis 1

There will be no significant main effect of treatment on students' reading performances between groups exposed to treatment and groups not exposed to treatment in the four groups

**TABLE 3a:** Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Model for the Post-test Only Group in Solomon Four Group Design for Performance in Reading Comprehension

Groups	N	Mean	SD	F <sub>(3,236)</sub>	Sig.	Partial	Eta Square
E <sub>1</sub>	60	61.83	13.21				(Post-hoc) E <sub>1</sub> * C <sub>1</sub>
C <sub>1</sub>	60	29.33	19.03				E <sub>1</sub> * C <sub>2</sub>
E <sub>2</sub>	60	59.83	17.22	172.52	0.00	0.687	E <sub>2</sub> * C <sub>1</sub>
C <sub>2</sub>	60	33.00	18.80				E <sub>2</sub> * C <sub>2</sub>

R Squared = .687 (Adjusted R Squared = .683)

\*Significant positive mean difference at 0.00 and 0.05

Table 1 indicates a significant main effect of treatment on students' reading performance among post-tested groups ( $F(3, 236) = 172.518; p > 0.05$ ). This indicates that significant differences existed among the groups. This table shows that the treatment accounted for 68.3% of the variance when adjusted. In order to ascertain which of the groups was responsible for the significant differences, a Duncan post-hoc was preferred to Scheffe because of the equality of all the groups with respect to size and it shows that positive significant mean difference existed between  $E_1$  when compared to  $C_1$  and  $C_2$  respectively (Mean Difference = 32.50,  $p = 0.00$ ; Mean Difference = 28.83,  $p > 0.05$ ). Similarly, positive significant mean difference existed between  $E_2$  when compared to  $C_1$  and  $C_2$  respectively (Mean Difference = 30.50,  $p = 0.00$ ; Mean Difference = 26.83,  $p = 0.00$ ). However, there was no significant difference between the two experimental groups. This showed the efficacy of the treatments.

### Hypothesis 2

There will be no significant main effect of treatment on students' summary writing performances between groups exposed to treatment and groups not exposed to treatment in the four groups.

**TABLE 3b:** Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Model for the Post-test Only Group in Solomon Four Group Design for Performance in Summary Writing

Groups	N	Meán	SD	$F_{(3,236)}$	Sig.	Partial Eta	Square Duncan (Post-hoc)
$E_1$	60	48.16	12.05				$E_1 * C_1$
$C_1$	60	15.33	14.31				$E_1 * C_2$
$E_2$	60	49.83	13.21	139.73	0.00	0.640	$E_2 * C_1$
$C_2$	60	10.33	12.48				$E_2 * C_2$

**R Squared = .640 (Adjusted R Squared = .635)**

**\*Significant positive mean difference at 0.00 and 0.05**

Table 2 shows a significant main effect of treatment on students' summary writing among post-tested groups ( $F(3, 236) = 139.73; p = 0.00$ ). This indicates that significant differences existed among the groups. Thus, the null hypothesis stated is rejected. This table indicates that the treatment accounted for 63.5% of the variance when adjusted. In order to determine which of the groups was responsible for the significant differences, a Duncan post-hoc was conducted and it shows that positive significant mean difference existed between  $E_1$  when compared to  $C_1$  and  $C_2$  respectively (Mean Difference = 32.83,  $p > 0.05$ ; Mean Difference = 37.83,  $p = 0.00$ ). Similarly, positive significant mean differences were observed between  $E_2$  when compared to  $C_1$  and  $C_2$  respectively (Mean Difference = 34.50,  $p = 0.00$ ; Mean Difference = 39.50,  $p > 0.05$ ). However, there was no significant difference between the two experimental groups. This shows the efficacy of the two treatments.

## **Discussion**

The findings of the study have shown the need for, and the effectiveness of, reading strategies in enhancing students' proficiency in reading and writing. The first research question sought to ascertain the level of awareness and knowledge about reading strategies. The findings show that while the students indicated that they were not familiar with the strategies, the teachers claimed that they were aware of and taught reading using specific strategies. The actual intervention revealed that the teachers must have failed to articulate the concept of reading strategies in that students had no knowledge of the strategies.

Research question two sought to determine if students' ability/proficiency in reading and summary writing improved after the study when student participants were compared with those not exposed to the strategies. The findings from the students' mean scores after the study, as well as the test of significance of difference between their mean scores, revealed that the use of the strategies significantly enhanced the students' ability in both reading and summary writing. This finding supports Song's (2007) assertion that success in learning mainly depends on appropriate strategies used and that unsuccessful learners can improve by being trained to use effective strategies. The findings also support Kelly & Clausen-Grace's (2003) view on how to strengthen students' comprehension and increase their motivation to read independently by nurturing meaningful talk about reading through the use of metacognitive strategies such as predicting, questioning, and summarising, among others.

When the mean scores of the four groups of students were compared using ANOVA, it was discovered that the two groups exposed to the strategies performed significantly better than the groups not so exposed in both reading and summary writing. Song (2007) states that readers who use strategies are able to notice inconsistencies in a text and employ strategies to make these inconsistencies understandable. Ali (1999) and Leki (2001) had earlier stated that meaning construction and text comprehension appear to depend upon the degree of active response to a text. Song (2007) concludes that strategies help to improve reading comprehension; they help to enhance reading efficiency; they help students read as experts do; and they help students process text actively to monitor their comprehension.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

From the findings, it is evident that the use of reading strategies impacted positively on students' reading and summary writing ability. The object of reading is to make meaning and the intended meaning may feature at the literal, inferential and critical evaluative levels requiring students to think deeply and read on the lines, between the lines and beyond the lines respectively with appropriate/relevant reading strategies. It is when this metacognitive process of comprehension is attained that re-stating concisely in summary writing can be done successfully. Summary writing, which most students are scared of, is just an advanced level of comprehension. This seeming fear will be removed when

students are taught reading strategies that aid comprehension and summary writing.

The following recommendations are hereby made based on the findings of the study:

1. Teachers should be adequately informed and trained on how to teach reading strategies to their students so that students can read strategically and be motivated to read independently.
2. Teachers should create awareness in the students on the importance and usefulness of reading strategies by actually teaching them this meta-cognitive process.
3. Students should be guided to practise appropriate and relevant reading strategies at the three reading stages of pre-reading, reading and post-reading to enhance their reading proficiency.
4. The curriculum for training teachers should be enriched with topics on different reading strategies, global and specific ones, to create awareness and teach trainee-teachers how to use them to teach the learners because this study revealed that such knowledge and awareness are presently lacking among teachers of English and their students in Nigeria.

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