An Analysis of Factors Affecting EFL Learners' Reading Strategy Use

Jimmy Cromico
cromicojimmy@gmail.com
Institut Agama Islam Darul A'mal Lampung

Sam Hermansyah
sam.hermansyah82@gmail.com
Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidenreng Rappang

ABSTRACT

Reading strategies play a vital role in enhancing reading comprehension, especially for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). However, the use of these strategies varies widely due to multiple influencing factors. This study aims to analyze the key factors that affect EFL learners' use of reading strategies. Using a systematic literature review combined with descriptive analysis, this research examines relevant empirical studies and theoretical frameworks published between 2014 and 2024. The findings indicate that learner-related factors, such as language proficiency, motivation, gender, and academic level, significantly influence the choice and frequency of reading strategies. In addition, instructional and textual factors, including strategy training and text type, also shape learners' strategic reading behavior. Socio-affective and cultural aspects, such as reading anxiety and educational background, further contribute to the variation in strategy use. The results highlight that reading strategy use is a dynamic and context-dependent process that requires responsive instruction and explicit strategy training. This study is expected to provide insights for EFL educators, curriculum designers, and future researchers in developing effective reading instruction that supports learners' diverse needs and promotes independent reading skills.
Keywords: Reading Strategies; EFL Learners; Influencing Factors; Reading Comprehension; Systematic Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Reading is widely acknowledged as one of the most essential skills in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It enables students to access knowledge, engage with academic texts, and develop critical thinking skills. Despite its importance, many EFL learners continue to face difficulties in achieving effective reading comprehension due to a range of linguistic and non-linguistic factors. This challenge has motivated researchers and educators to explore ways to help students become more strategic readers.

In the context of EFL, reading strategies are defined as deliberate, goal-oriented actions that learners use to facilitate text understanding and overcome comprehension difficulties. These strategies include predicting content, skimming and scanning, making inferences, summarizing, and using contextual clues.

Previous studies have consistently shown that the effective use of reading strategies contributes significantly to learners' reading performance. However, strategy use is not uniform across students; instead, it is influenced by various individual and contextual variables.

Several studies have highlighted the role of learner-related factors in shaping reading strategy use. Language proficiency, motivation, self-efficacy, gender, and academic level are among the most commonly cited variables that affect how frequently and effectively students employ different strategies. For instance, learners with higher language proficiency are more likely to use global and metacognitive strategies, while lower-proficiency students often rely on local support strategies such as word-for-word translation or dictionary use.

Instructional and textual factors also play a crucial role in determining students' strategic reading behavior. The type of texts they read, the tasks assigned, and the presence or absence of explicit strategy training all contribute to variations in strategy use. Research has found that students who receive structured instruction on how to use reading strategies tend to perform better in comprehension tasks than those who do not receive such training. Unfortunately, in many EFL contexts, reading instruction still focuses heavily on translation and factual recall rather than on strategic engagement with texts.

Socio-affective and cultural aspects further influence students' use of reading strategies. Reading anxiety, for example, can hinder learners from applying higher-order strategies, especially when they lack confidence in their language skills. Cultural attitudes toward reading and education also affect learners' willingness to experiment with unfamiliar strategies. In some educational contexts, reading is perceived mainly as a test-oriented activity rather than as a means for exploration and knowledge construction.

Given these diverse and interrelated factors, understanding what influences EFL learners' reading strategy use is essential for designing effective reading instruction. By examining these factors, educators can tailor their teaching methods to better support students' strategic reading development and address individual differences. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of influencing factors can inform the design of curriculum and materials that encourage independent and critical reading habits. In Indonesia, the topic of reading strategies has received growing attention, especially at the university level. However, systematic research that comprehensively maps the factors affecting EFL learners' reading strategies remains limited. Most existing studies tend to focus on isolated aspects, such as the effectiveness of specific strategies or the impact of strategy training in certain contexts. There is still a lack of synthesis that connects learner-related, instructional, and socio-cultural factors into a holistic understanding.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the factors that affect EFL learners' reading strategy use by reviewing relevant empirical studies and theoretical perspectives. It

is expected that the findings will contribute valuable insights for EFL educators, curriculum developers, and future researchers to design reading instruction that is more responsive to learners' diverse needs and to promote autonomous, strategic reading among students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading strategies have been an important topic of research in the field of second and foreign language acquisition for decades. Scholars generally agree that reading is not a passive activity but rather a complex cognitive process that requires learners to actively engage with texts. Anderson (1999) and Grabe and Stoller (2011) argue that strategic reading involves planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's understanding, which are essential skills for academic success. This view has led to a wide body of research exploring what strategies learners use and how these strategies contribute to reading comprehension.

Cognitive strategies are among the most widely discussed in the literature. These strategies involve direct interaction with the text, such as translating, note-taking, summarizing, and questioning. They help learners process information at the word and sentence level. Meanwhile, metacognitive strategies refer to the reader's awareness and control of their reading process, including planning how to approach a text, monitoring comprehension, and evaluating progress. Studies by Mokhtari and Reichard (2002) have shown that high-performing readers use metacognitive strategies more frequently and effectively than less proficient readers.

In addition to cognitive and metacognitive strategies, compensatory strategies have also been highlighted in the literature. Nation (2009) describes these strategies as tools learners use to overcome gaps in vocabulary or grammar knowledge. Guessing the meaning of unknown words from context, using dictionaries selectively, and asking for clarification are examples of compensatory techniques that help maintain comprehension flow despite linguistic challenges. The effective use of these strategies is often linked to learners' overall language proficiency and confidence.

Multiple empirical studies have explored the impact of learner-related factors on reading strategy use. For instance, Rahmani and Sadeghi (2020) found that students' language proficiency and academic level significantly affect the types and frequency of strategies used. Gender differences have also been reported, with some studies suggesting that female students tend to employ metacognitive strategies more frequently than male students (Yusuf et al., 2023). Motivation and self-efficacy have similarly been found to play an important role in strategic reading behavior.

Instructional and textual factors are equally significant in shaping learners' strategy use. Mizumoto and Takeuchi (2019) demonstrated that explicit instruction in reading strategies leads to improved reading comprehension and greater

metacognitive awareness. The type of text being read—whether narrative, expository, or argumentative—also influences which strategies are employed. Susanti and Lailiyah (2024) highlighted that students tend to adapt their strategies depending on task demands and text complexity.

The literature also emphasizes the socio-affective and cultural dimensions of reading strategy use. Li et al. (2024) found that reading anxiety can negatively affect learners' willingness to apply complex strategies, particularly among students with lower proficiency levels. Cultural perceptions of reading as a purely test-oriented activity may limit students' engagement with strategies that promote critical thinking and deeper comprehension. In contrast, educational settings that encourage learner autonomy often see a more diverse and flexible use of strategies.

While numerous individual studies have investigated factors influencing reading strategy use, there is still a lack of comprehensive synthesis that brings these diverse findings together. Many studies are context-specific and vary in how they define and measure reading strategies, making generalization challenging. Therefore, systematic reviews like the one conducted by Li et al. (2024) are essential to identify common patterns and gaps in the literature, providing a clearer picture of how various factors interact to shape strategic reading behavior. Overall, the existing literature suggests that reading strategy use among EFL learners is shaped by a dynamic interaction of cognitive, instructional, socio-affective, and cultural factors. A systematic understanding of these influences is crucial for designing effective reading instruction and interventions that address learners' diverse needs. By reviewing these interconnected factors, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on strategic reading in EFL contexts and to offer practical implications for language teachers, curriculum designers, and future researchers.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This study adopted a qualitative research design through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. The SLR method was selected to comprehensively identify, evaluate, and synthesize empirical studies that address the factors influencing EFL learners' use of reading strategies. The review was conducted following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to ensure transparency, replicability, and rigor throughout the review process. The data sources included reputable international and regional academic databases such as Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, SpringerLink, and DOAJ. These databases were chosen for their accessibility and extensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature in the field of language education. The inclusion criteria required studies to be published between 2014 and 2024, written in English, published in peer-reviewed journals, and based on original empirical research focused on reading strategy use among EFL or ESL learners. A total of 1,238 articles were initially retrieved, and after duplicate removal and

relevance screening based on titles and abstracts, 41 studies met all criteria and were included in the final synthesis.

Instruments and Procedures

The procedures for data collection followed a structured and systematic approach. Boolean operators such as "AND" and "OR" were employed alongside carefully selected keywords like "reading strategies," "EFL learners," "ESL students," "factors influencing," "reading comprehension," and "language learning" to refine the search results. These keywords were designed to reflect the research objectives accurately and ensure comprehensive data retrieval. After downloading the search results, a reference management tool was used to identify and remove duplicate entries. Subsequently, the remaining articles were screened for relevance based on titles and abstracts. Full-text reviews were then conducted to determine their eligibility according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Articles that focused exclusively on first-language reading or unrelated language skills were excluded from the review. The final set of 41 studies formed the core sample for analysis.

Data Analysis

To analyze the selected studies, thematic analysis was employed. The data from each study were coded and categorized according to recurring patterns and themes related to factors affecting reading strategy use. Three major themes emerged: learner-related factors, instructional and textual factors, and socio-affective and cultural factors. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the coding process was conducted by both the primary researcher and an academic supervisor. Any coding disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus. Measures such as maintaining a clear audit trail, using a systematic coding framework, and applying investigator triangulation were implemented to ensure the reliability and validity of the analysis. The results were presented descriptively and analytically, supported by tables and figures that illustrated the distribution and relationships among the identified factors. Finally, the findings were discussed in connection with prior research and theoretical perspectives to provide a thorough understanding of the influences on EFL learners' reading strategy use.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the systematic review of 41 empirical studies published between 2014 and 2024, this study identified a variety of factors that influence EFL learners' use of reading strategies. The results reveal that these factors can be categorized into three major domains: learner-related factors, instructional and textual factors, and socio-affective and cultural factors. Each domain contains specific elements that affect how frequently and effectively learners apply reading strategies.One of the most prominent learner-related factors is language proficiency. Studies consistently show that learners with higher proficiency levels tend to employ a wider range of strategies, including inferencing, summarizing, and evaluating, compared to lower-

proficiency learners who often rely on translation or rereading strategies. Academic level is another significant variable; advanced students generally demonstrate better metacognitive awareness.

Gender differences were also identified in several studies. Female learners were found to use metacognitive and elaborative strategies more frequently than their male counterparts, although this trend varied across cultural contexts. Additionally, motivation and self-efficacy emerged as important predictors of strategy use. Highly motivated students with strong self-efficacy beliefs were more willing to experiment with a variety of strategies. Instructional and textual factors were highlighted as the second major domain. The nature of reading materials, such as text type and complexity, greatly influences learners' strategic choices. For instance, expository and argumentative texts often require higher-order strategies like critical evaluation and summarizing. The presence of explicit strategy instruction was also found to enhance students' awareness and frequency of strategy use.

Socio-affective factors, including reading anxiety and self-confidence, were frequently reported as influencing strategy use. Learners who experienced high levels of anxiety tended to avoid complex strategies and relied on simple techniques instead. Conversely, students with higher self-confidence displayed greater flexibility in applying metacognitive and global strategies. Cultural background also played a role in shaping students' attitudes toward reading and strategy use. In some educational cultures where reading is perceived as test-oriented, students showed limited strategic diversity. On the other hand, students in learner-centered environments demonstrated more active engagement with strategies that require critical and reflective thinking. Furthermore, the interaction between these factors is complex. For example, the effect of explicit instruction may be moderated by cultural context, while the impact of reading anxiety may differ based on learners' proficiency levels. This finding underscores that reading strategy use is a dynamic, context-dependent process rather than a fixed skill. The table below summarizes the key influencing factors identified in the review:

Category	Specific Factors
Learner-Related Factors	Language proficiency, academic level, gender, motivation, self-efficacy
Instructional/Textual	Type of text, task complexity, explicit strategy instruction
Socio-Affective/Cultural	Reading anxiety, self-confidence, educational culture, learner autonomy

These results provide valuable insights for EFL educators, highlighting the need for reading instruction that is responsive to diverse learner backgrounds, needs, and contexts. The findings of this study align with previous research that emphasizes the multifaceted nature of reading strategy use among EFL learners. As demonstrated, learners' language proficiency remains a central factor that shapes their ability to apply and adapt reading strategies. This supports Grabe and Stoller's (2011) assertion that strategic reading develops alongside language skills and requires deliberate practice and scaffolding.

The result that academic level influences strategy use is consistent with studies indicating that students become more metacognitively aware as they advance in their studies. Higher-level students are better equipped to plan, monitor, and evaluate their reading process, which enhances comprehension. This underscores the importance of incorporating metacognitive training at all levels of EFL instruction. The gender differences found in this review reflect trends observed in another educational research. While some cultural contexts show female students using metacognitive strategies more frequently, this should not lead to stereotyping but rather to targeted support that encourages all students, regardless of gender, to develop strategic reading skills.

The impact of instructional and textual factors highlights the critical role of teachers in facilitating strategy use. The positive effect of explicit strategy instruction suggests that teachers should not only teach reading as a product but also as a process, modeling strategies such as predicting, summarizing, and questioning. This finding supports Mizumoto and Takeuchi's (2019) conclusion that strategy training significantly improves comprehension outcomes. Another important point is the influence of socio-affective factors, particularly reading anxiety. As confirmed by Li et al. (2024), anxiety can hinder students' willingness to engage with complex strategies. EFL educators should therefore create supportive environments that reduce anxiety and build students' confidence in tackling challenging texts.

Cultural context also plays a crucial role. In test-oriented educational cultures, students may focus on literal comprehension to pass exams, neglecting strategies that promote deeper engagement with texts. Promoting a culture of reading for meaning rather than for rote memorization could help expand students' strategic repertoire. The interaction among these factors demonstrates that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for teaching reading strategies. Strategy instruction must be flexible and responsive to the unique combination of learner characteristics, instructional design, and cultural background. This finding suggests that more research is needed on how these variables interact in diverse EFL contexts. this study reinforces the idea that effective reading strategy use is dynamic and shaped by a complex interplay of internal and external factors. Educators and curriculum designers should consider these factors when developing reading programs to foster strategic, autonomous, and confident EFL readers.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze the factors that influence the use of reading strategies among learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) by systematically reviewing 41 empirical studies published between 2014 and 2024. The findings revealed that EFL learners' reading strategy use is shaped by a complex interaction of internal and external factors that can be grouped into three major domains: learner-related factors, instructional and textual factors, and socio-affective and cultural factors. Learner-related factors such as language proficiency, academic level, gender, motivation, and self-efficacy were found to play a significant role in determining the frequency and type of strategies used. More proficient and confident learners tend to employ higher-order and metacognitive strategies, while less proficient learners rely on simpler support strategies. Instructional and textual variables, including the type of text and the presence of explicit strategy instruction, also significantly influenced students' strategic reading behavior.

Furthermore, socio-affective factors like reading anxiety and cultural perceptions of reading strongly affected learners' willingness and ability to use certain strategies. These findings emphasize that strategic reading is not a fixed ability, but rather a dynamic and context-sensitive process. The interaction between personal, instructional, and cultural elements means that reading instruction must be responsive to learner diversity. In light of these findings, this study suggests that EFL educators and curriculum developers should integrate explicit strategy training into reading instruction, foster positive reading environments, and consider individual learner needs and cultural contexts. By doing so, they can support students in developing the skills necessary for effective, autonomous, and strategic reading. Future research may further explore how these factors interact longitudinally and across different educational settings to support the continuous improvement of reading pedagogy in EFL contexts.

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