

Reading beyond words: Strategic approaches to literature in the EFL classroom

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a literature-based review of reading strategies applied to the teaching of literary texts in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Considering the relevance of literature in language education, the study discusses how the use of effective reading strategies can enhance students' comprehension and engagement with texts, supporting the development of additional skills such as writing, speaking, and listening. Emphasis is placed on the role of teachers in mediating the reading process and fostering readers' interaction with the text through the activation of prior linguistic and extralinguistic knowledge. The study highlights how strategic reading enables learners to construct meaning, recognize relevant information, and connect the text to their own realities, promoting both language acquisition and critical thinking.

Keywords: Reading Strategies. Literary Texts. EFL. Language Skills. Reading Comprehension. Teacher Mediation.

1 INTRODUCTION

Reading is a complex cognitive process involving active interaction between the reader and the text. As Hughes (2007) points out, it requires more than basic literacy; it demands the use of strategies and skills to build meaning, access prior knowledge, and engage with the content. This complexity increases when reading in a foreign language, as readers must deal with both linguistic and cognitive challenges.

Healy (2002) emphasizes that reading comprehension involves not only decoding the written word but also interpreting its content and constructing meaning. This process is strongly influenced by the reader's background knowledge, cultural experiences, and familiarity with different textual structures.

Among the many types of texts used in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, literary texts stand out for their potential to enrich language learning. Literature offers students

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exposure to authentic language use, cultural elements, and diverse linguistic styles. However, literary texts can also be challenging due to unfamiliar vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and complex narrative forms.

In this context, the use of effective reading strategies becomes crucial for supporting learners in understanding and appreciating literature in the EFL classroom. Therefore, this article aims to analyze and reflect on key reading strategies that can be applied in EFL literature classes, by drawing on theoretical perspectives about reading processes, the challenges of reading in a foreign language, the nature of literary texts, and pedagogical approaches that foster comprehension and engagement.

2 WHAT IS READING?

Before exploring reading strategies, it is essential to understand what reading is. According to Diane Henry Leipzig (2001), reading is a complex cognitive process involving the decoding of symbols with the purpose of constructing or deriving meaning. It serves as a means of language acquisition, communication, and the sharing of information and ideas. Like all language processes, reading is shaped by a dynamic interaction between the text and the reader, an interaction that is influenced by the reader's prior knowledge, experiences, attitudes, and cultural background. Reading requires ongoing practice, development, and refinement.

Therefore, reading goes beyond simply decoding words on a page; it entails an active and meaningful engagement with the text. As Spedell (2015) notes, skilled readers make connections as they read. They relate the text to personal experiences (text-to-self), to other texts (text-to-text), and to their knowledge of the world (text-to-world). These connections help activate background knowledge and contribute to deeper comprehension.

Ariana and Ardiana (2001) offer a more mechanical perspective, defining reading as the process of interpreting written symbols to extract meaning. According to the authors, when we read, we use our eyes to recognize letters, punctuation marks, and spaces, and our brain to process them into coherent messages.

Reading is considered a receptive skill, meaning it involves receiving, rather than producing, information. People read for various reasons: for pleasure, to obtain or verify information, to follow instructions, or simply to stay informed. The strategies readers use may vary depending on their purpose. For example, reading for pleasure might involve savoring each sentence, while reading for general understanding may involve skimming.

Rivers and Temperley (1978, p. 187) identify seven main purposes for reading:

1. To obtain information on a topic of interest or curiosity;

2. To follow instructions for work or daily tasks;
3. To participate in a play, game, or puzzle;
4. To maintain correspondence or understand written communication;
5. To find out when or where something will happen;
6. To stay informed about events (through newspapers, reports, etc.);
7. To read for enjoyment or excitement.

As shown in this section, reading serves multiple purposes depending on the reader's goals and context. In the following section, strategies that readers can use to enhance reading comprehension will be discussed in more detail.

3 HOW DO WE READ?

In today's world, people are constantly surrounded by information, especially in digital environments such as the Internet, making the ability to read efficiently a crucial skill. Almost every activity involves reading in some form, whether it be instructions, messages, articles, or advertisements. However, due to the overwhelming amount of available content, readers often lack the time or motivation to read everything thoroughly. For this reason, it is essential to understand and apply different reading techniques that support purposeful and effective reading.

Below are some common reading types and techniques, each suited to different reading goals:

Techniques	Description
Receptive reading	A fast and automatic reading process, often used when the content is already familiar or predictable.
Reflective reading	A slower, more thoughtful process in which the reader frequently pauses to reflect on the content and make deeper connections with the text.
Scanning	Used to locate specific information within a text. This strategy involves paying attention to punctuation, formatting (e.g., italics, bold), and keywords.
Skimming	A quick reading technique used to grasp the general idea or overview of a text. It is often applied when the reader has limited time or needs to preview or review material.

Each of these techniques can be applied depending on the purpose of the reading task. Understanding how we read, and selecting the most appropriate approach for each situation, allows readers to navigate texts more efficiently and meaningfully.

Another widely used reading technique is the SQ3R method, proposed by Francis P. Robinson in his book *Effective Study* (1946). The name SQ3R represents the five steps of the strategy: Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review. This method is particularly effective for enhancing comprehension and memory, as it engages the reader intentionally before, during, and after the reading process.

Below is an overview of each step:

Step	Description
Survey	In this first step, readers quickly preview the material by observing elements such as headings, pictures (if any), summaries, introductions, bolded terms, and visual aids like charts or graphs to get an overall sense of the content.
Question	Readers formulate questions based on the headings and subheadings before engaging with the text. For instance, a text titled “Crimes in the US in 2022” might generate questions like: “Has crime in the US increased?” or “What are the main contributing factors?” This process provides a purpose for reading and helps guide comprehension.
Read	At this point, readers begin reading with a clear objective, based on their prior survey and the questions formed. It is helpful to take notes while reading and highlight key ideas after each section or paragraph.
Recite	Also referred to as <i>Retrieve</i> or <i>Recall</i> , this step involves answering the questions previously generated, using the reader’s own words—either orally or in writing—to reinforce understanding and retention.
Review	The final step focuses on retention and consolidation of learning. Readers revisit the material to mentally recall the main ideas, ideally within 24 hours, to prevent the natural loss of information over time.

Reading is an essential skill in daily life. It plays a fundamental role in acquiring knowledge, enhancing creativity, expanding vocabulary, and developing critical thinking. As discussed in this section, different reading strategies can help readers approach texts more effectively, according

to their specific needs and goals.

The next section will explore the challenges and characteristics of reading in a foreign language, along with strategies to support learners in navigating texts written in a language that is not their mother tongue.

4 READING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE.

To master a foreign language, it is essential to develop all four language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Among these, reading plays a key role, often acting as a foundation for developing the others. Through reading, learners can expand vocabulary, improve grammatical knowledge, and engage with the language in meaningful and authentic contexts.

Focusing specifically on reading, several scholars (e.g., Hervot & Norte, 1997; Brasil, 1998; Kleiman, 2004a; Paiva, 2005; Motta-Roth, 2008) argue that reading goes beyond decoding or literal understanding. From a linguistic and cognitive standpoint, reading involves the ability to identify and organize relevant information, infer meaning, and engage in critical interpretation. Readers interact with texts using both linguistic and extralinguistic knowledge, constructing new meanings as they read.

As Hervot and Norte (1997) emphasize, reading is not a passive act, but a process through which readers acquire new knowledge by reconstructing meaning. In this process, teachers play a crucial role as mediators, helping learners make connections between their first language (L1) and the foreign language (FL). Reading processes in the L1 and FL share many similarities, and learners can transfer skills from their L1 reading experiences to support FL comprehension.

Teachers, therefore, must have solid theoretical knowledge to effectively support students. Teaching reading in a foreign language—such as English—should aim to promote interaction, as reading is a dialogic process between historically situated subjects (SEDUC-RS, 2009, p. 55). In the interactive model of reading, texts are seen as mediating elements between writer and reader, in a continuous process of meaning-making and reinterpretation (Motta-Roth, 1998, p. 8).

Reading must also be understood as a cultural and critical practice, essential for citizenship and education (Brasil, 2006, p. 111). As stated in the PCN for Elementary School (1998, p. 92), “the student must project their knowledge of the world and textual organization onto the systemic elements of the text.” At this stage, inference strategies become particularly important, reducing the need for word-by-word translation.

Effective reading involves understanding key expressions, recognizing lexicogrammatical patterns, identifying semantic fields, and interpreting the functional structure of the text (Motta-Roth, 2008, p. 245). According to Paiva (2005), readers apply different strategies depending on

their goals, and many of these strategies are also used in L1 reading. Teachers are responsible for guiding learners in recognizing and applying these strategies in the FL context.

Based on these authors, the following are some of the most commonly used strategies in foreign language reading:

a) Anticipation

Activating the reader's prior knowledge to predict the theme or topic of the text. The reader reflects on what they already know and what they expect to find in the text.

b) Skimming

A quick reading technique used to gain a general understanding of the text. Readers pay attention to non-verbal elements, titles, subtitles, and the beginning and end of paragraphs.

c) Scanning

Used after obtaining a general idea of the text, scanning allows readers to locate specific information such as names, dates, and percentages. Unlike skimming, scanning involves a clear goal: the reader knows what they are looking for (Paiva, 2005, p. 131).

d) Layout Exploration

Observing external visual and textual features such as typography, layout, titles, authorship, publication data, and non-verbal elements like images and graphs.

e) Vocabulary and Contextual Inference

Using knowledge of cognates, false cognates, affixes, repeated keywords, and linguistic context to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words without relying on translation.

f) Noun Groups

Understanding noun phrases in English, which often have multiple modifiers before the head noun. This is especially challenging for Portuguese speakers and requires attention to English syntactic patterns.

g) Flexibility and Selectivity

As learners become more proficient, they develop the ability to adapt their reading strategies, choosing reading order and selecting only the most relevant information to achieve their reading goals.

h) Communicative Value and Genre Recognition

Identifying the communicative purpose and genre of a text (e.g., narrative, descriptive, argumentative). Recognizing the text type, such as news articles, emails, advertisements, supports comprehension and interpretation (Hervot & Norte, 1997, p. 60).

i) Chronological Sequencing

Recognizing the temporal order of events enhances textual cohesion and allows readers to

trace the logical progression of ideas.

j) Dictionary Use

Using a bilingual dictionary effectively, after attempting other strategies, is an important skill. Learners should be aware of grammatical categories, usage, and nuanced meanings, and use the dictionary selectively and strategically.

Considering the strategies presented here, it becomes clear that foreign language teachers must master these aspects in order to design meaningful reading activities. Well-planned tasks can promote student autonomy, comprehension, and critical engagement with texts in a second language.

5 LITERARY TEXTS

Regarding literary texts, it is important to be aware that there is not a unique or right definition for it. There are authors that defend the classic history of literature but there are also contemporary works that speak about the concept of it.

According to Perrone-Moisés (2016), there are three ways of conceiving literary texts, as it follows:

1. The classic concept is the one that takes Aristotle's consideration that literature is an art which can represent the reality of the world through words.
2. The Russian formalism author Jakobson considered literature as a communicative process which emphasizes the message itself.
3. The other concept that Perrone-Moisés takes in consideration to define literature is the Romanticism, in which literature can be seen as the expression of feelings by using words.

Thus, the definition of literature may change according to the author and the concept they take in consideration. According to Marisa Lajolo (2018, p. 47), literature can be understood as "the result of a specific type of language that uses different resources that suggest the arbitrary meaning and the fragility of the alliance between the substantial thing and its meaning."

It is possible to notice some particular features in literary texts, such as:

- 1) Specific language;
- 2) The author's intention;
- 3) Use of figure of speech in order to dramatize and create different meanings in the text;
- 4) Form and content, since they may lead to a specific meaning of the text.

6 READING STRATEGIES IN EFL LITERATURE CLASSES

Before discussing specific strategies for reading literature in EFL classrooms, it is important to consider what constitutes a literary text. There is no single, universally accepted definition of literature. Different perspectives emphasize various aspects. According to Perrone-Moisés (2016), literature can be conceived in three main ways:

1. The classical conception, rooted in Aristotle, views literature as an art form that represents reality through language.
2. The Russian formalist perspective (Jakobson) focuses on literature as a communicative process emphasizing the message itself.
3. The Romantic view sees literature as an expression of feelings and imagination through words.

Marisa Lajolo (2018) further highlights literature as a specific use of language that exposes the arbitrary relationship between signs and their meanings, often through ambiguity and figurative language. Literary texts typically exhibit distinctive features, such as aesthetic and expressive language, the author's intention, frequent use of figures of speech, and a close relationship between form and content.

Reading literature in a foreign language involves unique challenges due to these features. Therefore, readers need to employ specialized strategies to comprehend and interpret literary texts effectively. This is heightened when engaging with literary genres such as poetry and prose, which often use figurative language and unconventional structures. Researchers have studied reading comprehension processes in both first and second languages, focusing on factors such as language competence, prior knowledge, and strategic use during reading (Wade, 1990; McGeown & Getilucci, 2007; Block, 1986; Brantmeier, 2002).

Wade (1990) conceptualizes reading as the active construction of meaning, while McGeown and Getilucci (2007) describe it as a process actively controlled by readers to generate meaning from texts. Block (1986) defines reading strategies as resources that readers employ to aid understanding, and Brantmeier (2002) describes them as cognitive processes used to make sense of texts.

To explore the reading strategies employed by students in EFL literature classes, a study was conducted using a modified version of the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) questionnaire developed by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002). The study involved 25 EFL students and categorized strategies into three groups: Global (metacognitive) strategies, Problem-solving (cognitive) strategies, and Support strategies.

- Global (Metacognitive) Strategies: These are intentional, planned techniques used by readers to monitor and regulate their reading. Examples include setting a reading purpose, previewing the text's structure and length, and using typographical cues such as headings and figures (Block, 1986).
- Problem-solving (Cognitive) Strategies: These strategies involve the direct manipulation of text and use of prior knowledge to construct meaning. According to Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001), these localized techniques help readers overcome comprehension difficulties by adjusting reading speed, guessing meanings of unknown words, and rereading complex passages (Pang, 2008).
- Support Strategies: These encompass auxiliary actions aimed at facilitating comprehension, such as using dictionaries, taking notes, underlining, or highlighting text sections.

In summary, the effective teaching and application of diverse reading strategies are fundamental to enhance students' engagement and comprehension of literary texts in EFL classrooms. By fostering metacognitive awareness, encouraging problem-solving skills, and providing adequate support tools, teachers can empower learners to navigate the linguistic and interpretive challenges inherent in literary reading. The integration of these strategies not only improves reading proficiency but also promotes critical thinking and cultural awareness. The following conclusion will reflect on the implications of these findings for EFL teaching practices and suggest directions for further research in this field.

7 CONCLUSION

The main objective of this paper was to explore the various strategies employed to read literary texts in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. This study has highlighted that reading is a multifaceted process involving an interaction among several key elements: the reader, the text, and the broader world context, all mediated through the use of purposeful reading strategies.

By considering reading not only as a decoding activity but as a dynamic process of meaning construction, especially within literary texts, it has been demonstrated that such practice enhances learners' ability to recognize explicit and implicit meanings, engage with diverse interpretations, and connect the text to their own experiences and realities. These deeper reading experiences contribute significantly to the development of critical thinking and cultural awareness, which are essential components of language education.

Furthermore, the findings underscore the importance of integrating reading strategies in EFL instruction to support learners' holistic language development. Reading in a foreign language is not an isolated skill but one that synergistically fosters improvements in writing, speaking, and listening competencies. When teachers equip students with metacognitive, cognitive, and support strategies tailored for literary texts, they promote greater learner autonomy, confidence, and linguistic proficiency.

In conclusion, effective strategy instruction in literature reading has the potential to enrich EFL learners' overall communicative competence and engagement with the language. Future research could expand on these findings by investigating the long-term impact of specific strategies on different proficiency levels and exploring the role of cultural context in shaping reading comprehension. Such insights would further inform pedagogical approaches, ensuring that literature remains a powerful tool in language learning.

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