

From Skimming to Inference: Evaluating Effective Reading Strategies for ESL College Students in Kuwait

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Abstract: *This research paper examines a range of essential reading strategies used by English as a Second Language (ESL) students, focusing on how these strategies support comprehension, engagement, and overall language development. The study highlights seven key strategies: skimming, scanning, reading for gist, making inferences, predicting, asking questions while reading, and identifying main ideas along with supporting sentences. Each of these strategies plays a distinct yet interconnected role in helping learners construct meaning from texts, monitor their understanding, and read with greater purpose and efficiency. Skimming and scanning enable learners to approach texts strategically by quickly locating general or specific information, which is particularly beneficial in academic and real-world contexts where time and clarity are essential. Reading for gist helps students grasp overarching ideas, while inference and prediction encourage deeper cognitive processing by requiring students to connect textual clues with prior knowledge. Asking questions during reading enhances metacognitive awareness and keeps learners actively engaged, fostering a habit of self-monitoring and clarification. Finally, identifying main ideas and supporting sentences strengthens learners' ability to organize information, summarize effectively, and distinguish between essential and non-essential details. The paper emphasizes that these strategies are not only helpful but highly important in ESL classrooms. When integrated into instruction, they empower students to become independent, confident readers capable of approaching complex texts with skill and flexibility. This research is qualitative based research. Students and language instructors are interviewed in this research paper. Students were asked which reading strategy helped them the most in ESL classes. While language instructors were asked how these strategies were productive in their point of view. The findings underscore the broader importance of reading as a foundation for language acquisition: strong reading skills contribute to vocabulary growth, improved writing abilities, and greater overall academic success. By equipping ESL learners with diverse and purposeful reading strategies, educators can enhance comprehension, promote critical thinking, and support long-term language proficiency.*

Keywords: skimming, inference, effective reading strategies, ESL college students, Kuwait

INTRODUCTION



Reading is considered an effective strategy for ESL students, as it plays a central role in developing linguistic proficiency, expanding vocabulary, and enhancing overall communicative competence. Within second-language learning, reading serves not only as a means of acquiring new information but also as a cognitive process through which learners actively construct meaning, interpret context, and strengthen critical thinking skills. As ESL learners encounter diverse text types, they are exposed to authentic language structures, cultural references, and discourse patterns that support both academic success and real-world communication. Consequently, understanding and employing effective reading strategies—such as predicting, skimming, scanning, and inferring—becomes essential for overcoming comprehension challenges and promoting deeper engagement with texts. This research examines the significance of these strategies and explores how they contribute to improved reading comprehension and overall language development among ESL students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading is considered an effective strategy for ESL students. According to McNamara et al.(2012) as she mentions that reading strategies are important and helpful for those who have weak reading skills and that they are highly effective for the learners who lack the knowledge of reading. Hence, reading helps students to conceptualize the text and find specific information in a text. Some students struggle in comprehending a text because they are not utilizing the reading strategies as Souhila (2014) clarified. Understanding how to use these strategies is extremely important. For students to implement and understand the reading strategies, they need scaffolding and monitoring from the teacher. As Küçükoğlu, H. (2013) explained, “I had to guide and monitor the students in every step of the process, especially for the questioning, inferring, and summarizing strategies. After an intensive study, I have experienced the improvement in my students” (p.713). Understanding what is being read is crucial because understanding is part of learning, as Teele argues that understanding what is read is the all readers’ goal. (2004, p.92). When a strategy is utilized, it is crucial to name the strategy, explain it to the students, and then demonstrate it to ESL students in class. Modelling is significant when it comes to teaching, it helps students understand in a better way. When modelling is embedded in class, it means the teacher is identifying the strategy needed, providing the rules of how to use this strategy, and providing formative practice to students, making sure they understand the reading strategy. As Duke and Pearson put it, “Through teacher modeling, group practice, and individual practice, students learn to apply these rules.” (p.12). Teachers should use formative assessment to double-check that students understand the strategy needed.

Skimming and Scanning

On one hand, skimming is using the eye movement rapidly searching for specific information throughout the text (Nasution, 2023; Susanty, 2019). On the other hand, scanning is a reading strategy for locating a particular piece of information, as Dewi and Hita put it, “While skimming tells the readers about what general information is within a section, scanning helps the readers to locate a particular fact. Previous studies have shown that the implementation of the skimming and scanning techniques can increase students’ ability in reading comprehension.” (p.1182) Skimming is reading quickly throughout the text to decide where the text contains useful information or not. (Famelia et al. 2022). The difference between skimming and scanning is that in scanning, readers go through the text to locate a fact, a name, or any specific information. It is mostly used to locate the specific text. As explained by (Fauzi 2018), scanning is to locate a single fact, date, name or word in a text without understanding the text fully. Skimming is getting a key idea in a text it is like reading to understand the main idea of text but not reading intensively. Readers can get a key idea through skimming (Marliasari, 2017). Skimming technique is divided into three steps as Abdelrahman & Bsharah (2014) explained, the first step is to read the first sentence of a paragraph. The second step is to read the last sentence of the paragraph and the third step is reading the key words in between.

Read first sentence of paragraph.  Read last sentence of paragraph  Read key words in between

These steps function as an essential preliminary reading strategy that enables readers to gain a rapid, high-level understanding of a text before engaging in a comprehensive reading. This approach provides an initial sense of the text’s purpose, scope, and relevance. It is particularly valuable in contexts where readers must navigate large volumes of material, such as academic or professional research. By employing this strategy, readers can efficiently determine whether a given text is useful, credible, and aligned with their informational needs, thereby optimizing both time and cognitive resources. As (Yusuf et al., 2017) also agrees that skimming is extracting the most useful information rather than reading the text fully.

Prediction

Prediction is a reading strategy that enables students to anticipate the content of a text by drawing on prior knowledge, contextual cues, and available information. Through this process, students begin to conceptualize the text’s meaning and establish a preliminary understanding of its context. This strategy is particularly valuable when students encounter difficulties comprehending a given text, as it activates their background knowledge, guides their reading purpose, and supports deeper engagement with the material. as Awan and Anthony (2024) explained

“this reading strategy due to a lack of language knowledge which posed challenges for them during comprehending a piece of text. ESL tertiary learners often struggle with English text prediction due to several factors. Differences in syntax and sentence structure between English and other languages can confuse language learners. Lengthy and complex texts also pose challenges, as they make it difficult for learners to maintain concentration and retain information.”(p.388)

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Predicting is a metacognitive reading strategy that allows readers to actively anticipate the ideas, themes, and direction of a text before and during reading. It requires students to draw on prior knowledge, textual clues, structural features, and contextual information to form logical expectations about what the text will present. As a result, prediction transforms reading from a passive act into an engaged, meaning-making process that enhances comprehension and critical thinking.

To apply the predicting strategy effectively, readers begin by examining elements such as the title, headings, visuals, keywords, and introductory statements. Based on these cues, they generate informed assumptions about the text's content, purpose, and possible arguments. As they continue reading, they continuously test, confirm, or revise their predictions in response to new information. This iterative process strengthens comprehension because it encourages readers to monitor their understanding, make connections, and remain cognitively alert throughout the reading experience. As Handoko (2018) puts it,

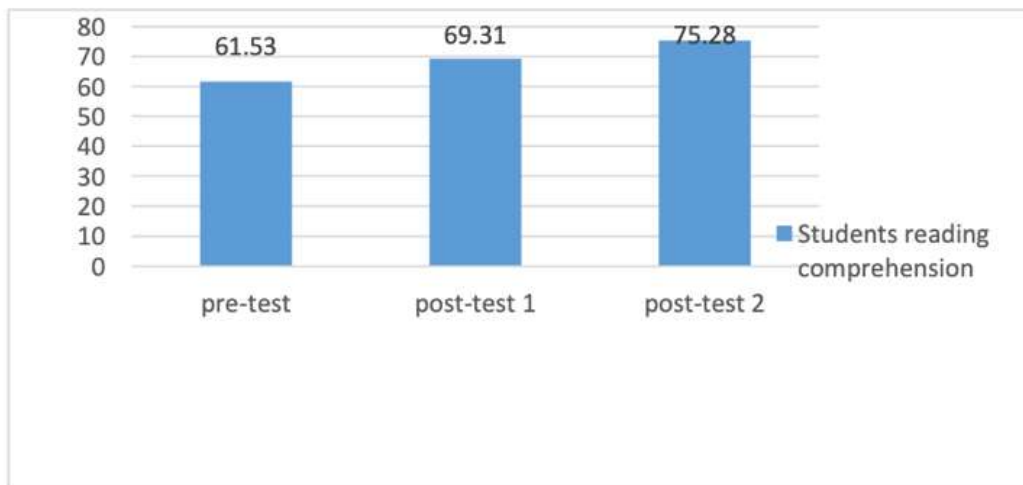
“According to Thomas SC. Farrel, when the teacher designs exercises/activities for prediction, they can consider the following steps:

Step 1: Prepare a text on the overhead projector

Step 2: Show the students the title/ picture/ first line/ first paragraph. Have students predicted what the text is about or what is going to happen next (narrative)

Step 3: The teacher repeats the cycle of step 2” (p.68)

The chart below, (Hondoko, 2018), shows the results of students who conducted a pretest, scoring 61.53 as an average score. After using the prediction strategy, students scored up to 69.31. Students leveled up higher in the second post-test, with an average score of 75.28, which means the prediction strategy is highly effective on students' comprehension.



“Based on the table above, it can be inferred that making prediction strategy can increase students’ reading comprehension. It was supported by the increasing score of the students.” (Hondoko, 2018,p73)

Asking Questions While Reading

Asking questions while reading generates curiosity about the text, in addition to permitting students to read more. As (Rosmayanti, 2021) puts it,

“The benefits of the questioning step led the students to formulate the questions they need to find. This step helped the students to focus and create curiosity toward the text. This motivates the students to read. It made the students find the information details easily. It also made them focus on the aspects that they should find in the text

3. It helped engage students actively and meaningfully in their reading. The students will be actively involved in comprehending the text.

4. This strategy made the students well-planned in reading in the text. It made the reading process more effective to reach the goals. “(p.42)

Asking questions is part of understanding. When students ask, it means there is a lack of knowledge. By asking questions, learners actively engage with the text and purposefully search for information to construct meaning and locate relevant answers. Another relevant research study (Hidayati 2021) agrees that reading builds curiosity in students,

“Questioning is a kind of strategy that enables learners to make question in reading. This activity is done before, during, and after reading. In those certain activities, students should keep questioning about the text. In this part, students are required to be active readers. Questioning builds students’ curiosity in reading.” (p.11)

As a matter of fact, questioning is not limited to the reading process itself; it can also be effectively employed before and after reading to activate prior knowledge, guide comprehension, and promote reflection on the text.

Below is a study (Hidayati 2021) showing the results of asking a question strategy.

No.	Cycle	Mean	Percentage
1.	Pre-test	55.81	2,70%
2.	Post-test I	67.35	18.91%
3.	Post-test II	76.72	81.91%

It shows that when conducting a pre-test without using the reading strategy, their percentage score was 2,70%. After the second post-test, when questions were asked, students leveled up to 81.91%. This study shows that asking questions while reading is an appropriately effective strategy that affected the students' scores.

Identifying Main Idea and Supporting Details

Identifying the main idea in a text is a crucial reading strategy. It is the building block of reading comprehension, and it is where students segregate the relevant information from irrelevant information to reach the main idea in a text (Lord, 2015). Supporting idea “is the key to understanding how the author develops and connects their ideas in the paragraph” (Kasriyati p.10 2016). A relevant case study (Kasriyati 2016) who tested the students on identifying main idea and supporting ideas. The test instructions were explained briefly in the case as (Kasriyati 2016) stated, “The students were given 90 minutes to finish all the text. After the students already done answer the questions. The researcher took all of answer sheets and analyzed the result of test to get the score of the students' ability in identifying types of supporting ideas. After that, the final score of the test will be calculated by using the certain formula.” (P.11) The result of this study was good, the students who identified the main idea and supporting details in the text understood the text and scored high. As (Kasriyati 2016) explained in their study that “From the data analyzing, the researcher concluded that the English students at the fourth semester FKIP UIR in identifying types of supporting ideas is categorized into good level ...the score of the students got Excellent” (p.12) Therefore, identifying the main idea and supporting details is considered an effective reading strategy because it helps students better understand and interpret a text. The main idea gives readers the general message or overall focus of the passage, allowing them to grasp what the text is mostly about. By recognizing the main idea, students can stay focused on the author's purpose and avoid confusion caused by unnecessary information. This skill also helps readers summarize the text more accurately and connect new information to what they already know. Another relevant study Boudah (2014) explained that explicitly teaching students to identify and relate essential details in order to infer the main idea leads to improved reading comprehension, particularly for struggling readers (p. 149).

Supporting details, on the other hand, provide deeper explanations and evidence that develop the main idea. These details include facts, examples, descriptions, or reasons that help clarify and strengthen the central message of the text. By identifying supporting details, students can better understand how ideas are connected and why the main idea is important. This strategy encourages critical thinking, improves comprehension, and enables students to analyze texts more effectively, leading to stronger reading and learning skills overall.

Reading for Gist and Inference

Readers sometimes read for gist, which means reading to understand the overall purpose of the text and what the author is intending to claim. In this type of reading, readers focus on grasping the general meaning rather than every specific detail, and they actively relate the text to their prior

knowledge, experiences, and expectations. This process aligns with Alderson's description of reading as an active and thoughtful activity, where readers go beyond simply decoding words. As Alderson (2000) explains,

“Not only is a reader looking at the print, deciphering in some sense the mark on the page, deciding what they mean and how they relate to each other. The reader is presumably also thinking about what he is reading: what it means to him, how it relates to other things he has read, two things he knows, to what he expects to come next in texts like this. He presumably thinks about how useful, entertaining, boring, crazy, the text is.” (p. 3)

Making inferences is a critical reading skill that allows students to move beyond surface-level understanding of a text. As Wijekumar (2020) explains, inference-making requires readers to recognize information that is implied rather than directly stated. Students often struggle with inference questions because the answers are not explicitly written in the text, even though they are supported by it. This difficulty highlights the difference between literal comprehension and deeper understanding, as readers must actively think about what the text suggests rather than what it plainly says.

Furthermore, inference-making involves combining textual information with prior knowledge, experiences, and logical reasoning. When students connect what they read with what they already know, they are able to construct meaning that is not immediately visible on the page. This process strengthens overall comprehension because it encourages active engagement with the text and promotes critical thinking. Wijekumar (2020) suggests, teaching students how to draw inferences helps them interpret texts more effectively and develop a more meaningful understanding of what they read. As Wijekumar (2020) puts it,

“Making inferences involves more than a literal understanding. The students may initially have a difficult time answering inference questions because the answers are based on material that is in the text but not explicitly stated. An inference involves students combining their literal understanding of the text with their own knowledge and intuitions.” (p.19)

Research Design

This paper argues that students in Kuwait can use skimming, scanning, prediction and ask while reading strategy in L2 classes but it is hard for them to use reading for gist and inference strategy using the second language classes. The students who were tested on the reading strategies were college students. Their ages are between 18-20. The reading strategies were tested on students during L2 classes throughout the course. This paper is qualitative research based, five teachers and five students have been interviewed. The questions are semi-structured. The teachers were asked the following questions.

- 1) From your perspective, which reading technique is the most highly effective in class?

- 2) Why do you think the technique you chose is highly effective?
- 3) Which technique do you think students are confident in using in class? and why?
- 4) How is reading strategies help students learn in your point of view?

The students were asked the following questions.

- 1) Which reading strategy works best for you?
- 2) Why you think this strategy is better?
- 3) How does this strategy help you learn?
- 4) How well do you understand the reading when using the strategy you chose?
- 5) Which strategy is the hardest? and why?

The author chose a semi- structured interview so she can create questions from the different answers she hears while interviewing, and to provide the freedom to the interviewees to answer long answers confidently.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS:

Language Instructors' Results

The first language instructor claimed that she used questions while reading in class and identifying the main idea as she thinks they are highly effective in class. as she claims “it is effective because it keeps the students thinking whether I give them questions, then they look for the answer while reading or while reading, questions are given automatically and they answer them” Interviewee one. She also claims that students don’t prefer using the main idea technique while reading; they would rather prefer to be guided and scaffolded by the language instructor through steps. She also stated that reading strategies help students learn by figuring out the main idea in each text. The interviewee agreed that the hardest technique to use in class is identifying the supporting details, as she claims, “it is easy for students to find out the main idea rather than finding the supporting details. They get mixed up between main ideas and supporting ideas, thinking that both are the same, which in fact they are not the same.”

Furthermore, the second language instructor who claimed that reading for gist is the most highly effective in class “because it allows them to focus more on every single detail in the reading passage” interviewee two. He also claimed that reading for specific detail is considered comfortable for students to use in class because they can take their time while the text is in front of them as he puts it, “students are more confident when they look for specific detail in class while having the text in front of them and the questions beside the given text. I do give them all the time they need to read the text closely and understand the purpose of the text. Sometimes I do allow them to translate some words if they needed to.” Interviewee two thinks that reading helps students to develop a unique understanding about the passage itself. When it comes to the hardest technique applied in class, he decided that inference reading is the hardest, as he claims “because they need to find clues in the reading passage and use their own background knowledge to know the answer. They face some hurdles when the answer is not clear” interviewee two.

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In addition, the third language instructor claimed that the most effective reading strategy is scanning. As she stated “from my perspective, scanning is the most highly effective reading technique in class. Students usually read the headlines or titles first and then look for specific words, numbers, or key phrases in the text to find the information they need” she proceeds with explaining why it is highly effective by claiming that “it is easy and timesaving, especially during exams or timed classroom activities. Students often rely on it when they are under pressure, as it helps them locate answers quickly without reading the entire text in detail.”. Moreover, according to question three, interviewee three stated that the students use scanning confidently as she stated, “they naturally combine it with reading headings first and searching for key words in the text to answer comprehension questions.” When answering question four the interviewee confirmed that reading help students become more independent as she stated during the interview and that students become confident readers when using reading strategies in class. She explains that reading techniques used in class teach students how to approach a text with clear purpose, improve overall comprehension, and support better performance in exams and academic tasks. According to question four she added “the most difficult reading techniques used in class are predicting and inference. Many students struggle with these skills, particularly if they are not very fluent in English, because they require deeper understanding of context, vocabulary, and meaning beyond what is directly stated in the text.” Interviewee three.

The fourth language instructor declared that asking questions while reading is the most highly effective technique to be utilized in class. He chose this technique because he thinks that when using this technique student interact with the content as he puts it, “students think critically, monitor their understanding and interact with the content instead of reading passively. It may also help them clarify meaning, make predictions and connect ideas, activate prior knowledge which leads to deeper comprehension”. As a matter of fact, the fourth language instructor claimed that in class students use scanning and identifying main idea confidently. As he explained that these techniques are “straightforward and task focused, especially in exam-based activities”. Like other language instructors he agreed that reading strategies help students become more independent and strategic readers, they improve comprehension, vocabulary acquisition and critical thinking skills. According to question four he stated that the inference reading is the hardest technique for students to use in class as he puts it, “from my perspective, reading for inference is the hardest technique for students to use and apply. It requires higher order thinking skills, background knowledge and the ability to read between the lines which many students find challenging”

The fifth language instructor agree that the most highly effective technique used in class is predicting as she claimed “to be honest we always start with predicting because this is how the students can understand the whole topic, so we look at the pictures that are there with the captions, the title, if it’s a long article we look at the first paragraph then the last paragraph this helps them understand what the text is about, so prediction first this is the first thing. Then we start with skimming and scanning, if it’s a long article again we ask them to look at the first sentence of each paragraph to understand the main idea. Main ideas are important and crucial”. She thinks that the

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techniques she mentioned are highly effective because as she says during the interview that it involves looking at visuals and involves looking at the surface of the article and it teaches them how in real life they can read and understand information by just looking at it.

According to question three she stated that “main ideas and details are more comfortable also prediction works well”. According to question four she thinks that reading techniques do help students learn as she puts it, “yes, in my case the books we have also have audios. What I do is I ask them to read from their book, they read from the screen or from the book, and I put the audio up so its two ways they are listening to the text, and they are reading it makes a double impact. It also helps them to learn certain words that are difficult for them to pronounce.”. The fifth language instructor was also asked that L2 learners face hardships when finding out the main idea and she claims “sometimes, but again I let them work into groups or in pairs. If somebody is weaker, I ask them to check answers with each other, it helps them to know if they are right or wrong”

According to question five she stated that the hardest technique to use is inference. She thinks inference is hard because it involves reading between the lines as she puts it, “when they use inference they have to read between the lines. It is very difficult for them because they are used to reading what is in front of them and analyzing it, but if you ask them to read between the lines sometimes the meaning is implied it must be inferred. We have those activities in all chapters. This is where I see them struggle. It is hard for them because they are L2 learners but honestly speaking sometimes for the mother tongue students still its not easy”

Students' Results

Student one claimed that skimming and scanning is the reading strategy that works best for him. He thinks it is the best strategy because it is easier for him to skim through the text. He also claimed that while scanning and skimming he puts some keywords in his mind and try to understand the context of the text that way it helps him learn. As he puts it, “while reading I focus and put in mind the important keywords in the text, and try to understand what the text is indicating, this strategy helps me understand the text in a better way because I am not much of a reader”. When he was asked which technique is the hardest he stated “inference is the hardest technique because it needs deep thinking through the text and between the lines, reading through the sentences and trying to understand what the sentence implements is hectic”

Student two like student one he agreed scanning is the reading strategy that works best for him. He claims that it's considered the best technique from his perspective because it is faster to skim through the text than to look for details or look for the main idea. As he stated also, “scanning is what I use most of the time it is like practicing my English when I scan through the text because I look for hard vocab words and translate them this way helped me to learn the English language in a better way.” He stated that he understands the text very well when he scans it as he puts it, “ I do understand the language that's why scanning works best for me, sometimes I match the question with the text given to find the answers” student two like student one he confirmed that inference

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is the hardest technique to use in class because as she puts it, “ some texts are hard to understand how would I use inference when the provided text is already hard to comprehend? And sometimes I don’t get what the author is trying to implicate so I lose track of the meaning

Student three claimed that reading for gist is the technique that works best for her. She stated that “it is easier to search for specific information than to look through the whole text looking for details or main ideas, finding the gist of the text is like looking for a single particular thing, I think it is the better technique to use in class or at home. I prefer to be given a set of questions with straight forward answers from the provided text it is more comfortable to use”. She also stated that this strategy helps her learn because the gist is like a straightforward task where students don’t have to dig deep down though every sentence to understand every meaning of the text, looking for the gist could be done through skimming and scanning. She also claimed, “I do understand the reading when I skim, scan or look for the gist because what I really do is read the topic sentence, skim the body and then read the conclusion, hence I will have a clear understanding of the text and could find the gist of it restfully”. Student three agreed that the hardest technique to use is the inference because she claimed that reading between the line is a hard task, and it consumes a lot of time. she may also misunderstand the meaning of the text when using inference.

Student four claimed that skimming works well for him because as he stated, “skimming summarizes the whole text, when I look at the text as a whole and skim through it, I understand what the text is about. Through skimming I find the main ideas, the details, and find out the gist. What I do in skimming I look at the words in the sentence and pick up the keywords needed in order to understand the provided text. Keywords in the text permit me to understand the text and grasp the grip of it. I find skimming as a fun task to use, easy and it doesn’t consume much time.” The fourth student agreed that inference is a hard task to use in class because it needs lot of reading. It is considered time consuming because it requires understanding and reading between the lines. As student four puts it, “Inference requires not only reading but finding the meaning behind the provided text, this makes the technique hard to use. Sometimes I misunderstand what the text implies so when the text is hard to understand it makes it hard to use inference reading technique”

Student five like other students she chose skimming as the best reading technique to be used. As she puts it, “I prefer skimming when reading comprehension or any text provided in college to save time. When I look at the text, I look for keywords that help me understand what the text is about.” She also claimed that this strategy did not help her learn but it helped her to find answers only for the comprehension questions provided in class. As she puts it, “honestly speaking skimming did not help me learn I use it for a homework, class works, or IELTS tests. I use skimming just to find answers, but I don’t use it to study. I usually use skimming because it saves time, as I said before to do the IELTS test it requires quick thinking skimming is the best solutions for these kinds of tests. In addition to timed class works or homework skimming remains the best technique due to time constraints.”. Like other students the she stated that inference reading is considered the hardest because as she said, “the text need to be understood when doing inference

reading and not all texts are easy to read specially when reading between the lines and activating the schema it becomes even harder this reading techniques takes a lot of time to achieve which I do not prefer using in class or at home”

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate clear differences in perceptions of reading techniques among students and language instructors. Students unanimously identified inference as the most challenging reading technique to use both in class and at home, as it requires higher order thinking skills, deep comprehension, and the ability to read between the lines. Additionally, students reported that inference is time-consuming, which contributes to their reluctance to use this technique. In contrast, many students considered skimming, scanning, and reading for gist to be the easiest and most comfortable strategies, as these techniques require less time and enable them to grasp the general meaning of a text efficiently.

Language instructors, however, expressed varied opinions regarding the most effective reading techniques. Their responses ranged from encouraging students to ask questions while reading to identifying the main idea and making predictions. Despite these differing perspectives, all instructors agreed that inference is the most difficult technique to implement in the classroom. This difficulty was largely attributed to the fact that students are L2 learners, for whom interpreting implicit meanings and reading beyond the explicit content of a text presents significant challenges.

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