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Role of Reading Strategies In Improving English Academic Performance Among secondary schools in Edo State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT
This study investigated the role of reading strategies in improving English academic performance among secondary school students in Esan West Local Government Area, Edo State. Using a descriptive survey design, data were collected from 400 students selected through stratified random sampling and 25 purposively selected teachers, via a Student Questionnaire on Reading Strategies (SQRS) and a Teachers' Interview Guide (TIG), respectively. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression were used for quantitative analysis, while qualitative data were thematically analysed. Findings revealed that students predominantly employed cognitive and metacognitive strategies, including underlining, note-taking, summarising, re-reading, and self-questioning, while affective and social strategies were less frequently adopted. English academic performance was generally moderate, and a strong positive relationship existed between reading strategy use and performance. Cognitive and metacognitive strategies emerged as the strongest performance predictors. The study recommends explicit strategy instruction, guided collaborative reading, and motivational classroom support.

KEYWORDS: Reading strategies; English academic performance; Cognitive strategies; Metacognitive strategies

INTRODUCTION

Secondary school education is pivotal in the Nigerian educational structure. Secondary school education serves as a link between the primary level and the tertiary system. One major objective of secondary education in Nigeria, as outlined in the National Policy on Education, is to prepare learners for higher education and equip them with functional literacy skills required for personal development and contribution to national growth (FRN, 2014). This implies that secondary education is not merely a schooling phase, but a decisive stage for intellectual formation, skill acquisition, and academic maturity. Since students at this level are expected to acquire competencies that will enable them to function in modern society, mastery of core subjects, particularly the English language, becomes indispensable. English language therefore plays a dual role in Nigerian secondary schools, as a subject taught as well as a vehicle through which knowledge in other subjects is transmitted. Since classroom instruction, textbooks, examinations, and assignments are predominantly delivered in English, students' proficiency in the language determines to a large extent how well they understand lessons, interpret academic texts, and express ideas coherently (Lumi & Aliyu, 2021). While the importance of English language proficiency is well established, evidence from Nigerian secondary schools continues to suggest that many students experience persistent difficulties in reading comprehension and overall English language achievement despite years of formal instruction.

Reading, as a receptive language skill, represents a critical literacy component that supports knowledge acquisition and meaning construction. Reading is not merely an act of decoding letters and words, but a complex cognitive process that involves interpretation, reasoning, connection of prior knowledge with new information, and the ability to draw conclusions from a written text (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). This understanding is rooted in early reading research by Anderson et al. (1985), which emphasises that successful readers actively interact with texts by constructing meaning rather than merely recognising

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words. For students to excel academically, they must therefore possess effective reading skills that enable them to access and process written materials across disciplines. Reading ability affects how students learn concepts in science, social studies, mathematics word problems, and even how they internalise classroom instructions. Reading is more than simply identifying words on a page; it involves the ability to decode text, make sense of it, interpret meaning, make inferences, and relate new information to existing knowledge. Reading comprehension in academic learning involves both deriving and building meaning by actively engaging with written text. In other words, reading comprehension is not a passive skill but an active, cognitive process that requires engagement, reflection, and strategy. Similarly, it has been argued that successful comprehension is achieved not merely through reading ability but through the strategic regulation of cognitive processes during reading (Sun et al., 2021; Duke & Cartwright, 2021). This perspective shifts attention from whether students can read to how they read, emphasising the importance of deliberate reading strategies in facilitating meaningful learning.

Reading strategies refer to a set of intentional, goal-oriented mental processes and behaviours that readers deliberately use to regulate their reading activity, decode written text, understand vocabulary, construct meaning, and monitor their comprehension during reading. (Sun et al., 2021). The concept of strategic reading is closely associated with metacognition, which Flavell (1979) described as learners' awareness and regulation of their own thinking processes during learning. Consequently, effective readers consciously plan their reading, monitor comprehension, identify breakdowns in understanding, and evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies they employ. Therefore, readers who are skilled make use of these strategies consciously or subconsciously to derive meaning, while struggling readers often engage in linear reading without strategic processing (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). Reading strategies are deliberate and intentional techniques used by readers to facilitate understanding of written texts, process, and remember what they read. Strategies may be cognitive (e.g., summarising, inferring, predicting, visualising), metacognitive (e.g., planning, self-monitoring, evaluating one's understanding), or social/interactive (e.g., discussing texts, peer summarising). The use of such strategies helps readers navigate complex texts, integrate prior knowledge, monitor understanding, and repair comprehension when needed. Despite the fundamental importance of reading in academic learning, concerns continue to grow regarding declining reading habits and low reading proficiency among secondary school students in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, concerns regarding declining reading culture and poor reading proficiency remain persistent. Successive West African Examinations Council (WAEC) Chief Examiners' Reports have consistently identified weaknesses in candidates' performance in comprehension and summary writing, noting that many students fail to interpret passages accurately or provide appropriate responses to comprehension questions (WAEC, 2024). Similarly, Ihedioha (2021) attributed poor academic performance among secondary school students to weak reading culture, inadequate reading skills, and limited exposure to reading materials, while Nadeem and Omar (2018) argued that insufficient strategic reading instruction significantly contributes to students' comprehension difficulties. Although these studies have identified factors associated with poor reading performance, they primarily emphasise reading challenges without sufficiently explaining how students' actual use of reading strategies influences their English academic performance within specific educational settings.

Furthermore, empirical studies have increasingly examined the effectiveness of reading strategies among secondary school students. Nevertheless, most existing investigations have concentrated on reading comprehension, literacy development, or the effectiveness of isolated instructional interventions, with comparatively limited attention given to English academic performance as a broader educational outcome. In addition, many of these studies rely exclusively on quantitative methods, thereby providing limited insight into teachers' perspectives regarding students' reading practices and the classroom factors that shape strategy use. Consequently, important questions remain regarding the extent to which students' reading strategies translate into improved English academic performance within Nigerian secondary schools and how teachers perceive this relationship in everyday classroom practice.

Academic performance, on the other hand, represents the degree to which students achieve expected learning outcomes and is often measured through test scores, assignments, examinations, and continuous assessments (Aturamu, 2025). Since

English language serves as the medium through which learning occurs across subjects, ineffective reading strategies may hinder students' ability to interpret examination questions, identify relevant information, organise ideas coherently, and communicate appropriate responses. This is to say that strategic readers are more likely to comprehend texts effectively, retain information, and perform better academically. Despite growing scholarly interest in reading strategies, empirical evidence specifically examining their role in improving English academic performance among secondary school students in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State remains limited. This geographical and methodological gap, together with the persistent concerns over students' performance in English Language examinations, provides the justification for the present study.

Statement of the Problem

English Language is a compulsory subject and the official medium of instruction in Nigerian secondary schools, making proficiency in the language essential for students' academic success across all disciplines. Despite this importance, students' performance in English Language has remained a persistent concern, particularly in the areas of reading comprehension and summary writing. Recent WAEC Chief Examiners' Reports (2024) consistently indicate that many candidates struggle to comprehend passages, identify relevant information, organise ideas logically, and express responses coherently. The reports repeatedly attribute these weaknesses to poor comprehension skills, inadequate vocabulary development, and ineffective reading habits, suggesting that many students are inadequately equipped with the strategic reading skills required for successful academic performance. Although poor performance has been attributed to factors such as weak reading culture, inadequate instructional practices, and limited access to reading materials (Ihedioha, 2021), increasing evidence suggests that students' ability to employ effective reading strategies is equally critical. Learners who rarely utilise strategies such as summarising, predicting, note-taking, inferencing, and self-monitoring often demonstrate weak comprehension and lower academic achievement (Nadeem & Omar, 2018). Previous studies, including Eze and Eze (2020) and Owolabi and Aremu (2019), have established positive relationships between reading strategies and students' reading comprehension. However, these studies largely focused on comprehension outcomes rather than overall English academic performance, relied predominantly on quantitative evidence, and provided limited evidence from secondary schools in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State. This conceptual, methodological, and geographical gap necessitated the present study, which investigated the role of reading strategies in improving English academic performance among secondary school students in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State. Hence, the study intended to:

- Identify the reading strategies commonly used by secondary school students in Esan West Local Government Area.
- Determine the level of English language academic performance among secondary school students in Esan West Local Government Area.
- Examine the relationship between the use of reading strategies and English academic performance among secondary school students.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What reading strategies are commonly used by secondary school students in Esan West Local Government Area?
- What is the level of English academic performance among secondary school students in Esan West Local Government Area?
- What relationship exists between the use of reading strategies and English academic performance among these students?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in the Schema Theory. A British psychologist named Frederic Bartlett developed the schema theory in 1932, and it was later expanded by scholars such as Richard Anderson and Pearson. Schema Theory suggests that comprehension is an active process in which readers construct meaning by interpreting and assimilating new information by relating it to their prior knowledge, experiences, and cognitive structures, known as schemas. A schema refers to an organised body of knowledge stored in an individual's memory, which helps in the interpretation and processing of new information (Anderson, 1984). According to the theory, reading goes beyond simply decoding words and sentences; it is an active exchange between the reader and the text. As readers engage with new material, they draw upon prior knowledge and weave the fresh information into their existing understanding. Comprehension therefore depends largely on the extent to which readers can access and apply appropriate schemas during

reading. When readers possess adequate background knowledge and employ effective reading strategies, they are more likely to understand, interpret, and retain textual information successfully.

Schema Theory is relevant to the present research because it provides an explanation of how reading strategies contribute to English academic performance. Schema Theory provides a clear theoretical basis for understanding this relationship by asserting that comprehension and learning occur when readers actively connect new textual information with existing knowledge structures. Cognitive reading strategies such as summarising, note-taking, and re-reading help students process information and activate relevant schemas, while metacognitive strategies such as self-monitoring and self-questioning enable them to regulate comprehension and identify gaps in understanding. Through these processes, students are able to comprehend texts more effectively, retain information, and perform better in English Language examinations.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, which was considered appropriate because it enabled the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data to investigate the relationship between reading strategies and English language academic performance without manipulating the variables under study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The study population consisted of all Senior Secondary School (SSS 1–3) students and English language teachers in public secondary schools within Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State. According to the Edo State Ministry of Education (2025), there are seventeen public secondary schools in the area. A sample of 400 students and 25 English language teachers participated in the study. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to select students in order to ensure proportional representation across the three senior secondary school levels and the selected schools, while purposive sampling was employed to select English language teachers because of their direct involvement in the teaching of reading and their ability to provide informed perspectives on students' reading strategy use and academic performance.

Data collection was carried out using two instruments designed by the researchers: the Student Questionnaire on Reading Strategies (SQRS) and the Teachers' Interview Guide (TIG). The SQRS consisted of 34 items designed to elicit information on students' use of cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social reading strategies. Responses were measured on a four-point Likert scale of Always (4), Often (3), Rarely (2), and Never (1). The TIG was a semi-structured interview schedule comprising ten open-ended questions aimed at obtaining qualitative insights into the effectiveness of reading strategies, challenges encountered by students, and instructional practices that support strategy use.

The instruments underwent face and content validation by experts in Language Education and in Measurement and Evaluation, whose feedback was incorporated to improve precision, appropriateness, and consistency with the study's objectives. The reliability of the SQRS was determined using Cronbach's Alpha, which produced a coefficient of 0.87, signifying a high degree of internal consistency. Reliability of the interview guide was ensured through inter-rater agreement, with one independent researcher analysing responses from a pilot sample and achieving a consistency coefficient of 0.85.

The questionnaire was directly administered to the student respondents by the researchers. The researchers also conducted face-to-face interviews with the teachers over a three-week period. Participants were adequately informed about the purpose of the study, and issues of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were strictly observed.

Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, percentages, and mean scores, while Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was employed to determine the relationship between reading strategies and English academic performance. Qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis through coding, categorisation of recurring themes, and interpretation of emerging patterns in relation to the objectives of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic data of students, showing a balanced representation of male and female students, with the majority aged 14–16 years. Class levels are evenly distributed, suggesting the sample accurately represents students across secondary school stages in the study area.

Table 1: Student Respondents (n = 400)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	210	52.5
	Female	190	47.5
Class Level	SS1	140	35
	SS2	130	32.5
	SS3	130	32.5
Age (Years)	10–13	60	15
	14–16	240	60
	17–19	90	22.5
	Above 19	10	2.5

Table 2: Teacher Respondents (n = 25)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	13	52
	Female	12	48
Years of Teaching	1–5	8	32
	6–10	10	40
	11+	7	28

Table 2 shows that teacher respondents were mostly experienced (40% with 6–10 years of teaching), ensuring the interview data reflect informed professional perspectives on reading strategies and English performance.

RQ1: What reading strategies are commonly used by secondary school students in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State?

Table 3 shows that cognitive strategies (underlining, taking notes, re-reading) are most frequently used. This aligns with teacher observations from interviews, where many noted that students rely on highlighting and note-taking for comprehension. Teachers also reported that planning and summarising are strategies they encourage in lessons. One teacher said, "Students often underline and take notes, but few consistently summarise passages or monitor their understanding." Another observed, "Group discussions are rare, even though they help students clarify difficult points."

Table 3: Frequency of Use of Reading Strategies by Students (n = 400)

Reading Strategy	Always f (%)	Often f (%)	Sometimes f (%)	Rarely f (%)	Never f (%)	Mean Score
Underlining key points	160 (40)	140 (35)	60 (15)	30 (7.5)	10 (2.5)	4.0
Taking notes	150 (37.5)	135 (33.75)	70 (17.5)	30 (7.5)	15 (3.75)	3.9
Summarizing ideas	140 (35)	130 (32.5)	80 (20)	35 (8.75)	15 (3.75)	3.8
Re-reading texts	150 (37.5)	140 (35)	60 (15)	35 (8.75)	15 (3.75)	3.9
Using a dictionary	100 (25)	120 (30)	90 (22.5)	50 (12.5)	40 (10)	3.5
Guessing from context	120 (30)	130 (32.5)	80 (20)	40 (10)	30 (7.5)	3.6
Attention to sentence structure	140 (35)	130 (32.5)	80 (20)	35 (8.75)	15 (3.75)	3.8

RQ2: What is the level of English academic performance among students in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State?

Table 4: Distribution of English Performance Scores (n = 400)

Score Range	Performance Level	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
70–100	High	120	30
50–69	Moderate	210	52.6
40–49	Low	60	15
Below 40	Very Low	10	2.8

Table 4 shows that most students (52.6%) fall within the moderate range. Teachers corroborated this, noting that while some students excel, a significant proportion struggles with comprehension and exam performance, especially those who fail to use structured reading strategies. Teachers highlighted that students who regularly employ strategies like re-reading, note-taking, and discussion perform noticeably better in English exams. Challenges such as low motivation, distractions, and lack of guided reading practice were commonly reported.

RQ3: What relationship exists between reading strategies and English academic performance in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State?

Table 5: Pearson Correlation Between Reading Strategies and English Performance

Variables	Reading Strategies	English Performance
Reading Strategies	1	.76**
English Performance	.76**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$

Table 5 shows that there is a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.76$) between reading strategies and

English performance, indicating that frequent use of effective strategies is associated with higher achievement. Teachers' responses support this: students who actively engage with strategies such as summarising, questioning, and monitoring comprehension perform better academically.

Thematic analysis of the 25 teacher interviews revealed:

Theme 1: Students' Reading Habits

Most teachers described students' reading habits as inconsistent and largely examination-oriented. According to participants, many students tended to skim passages or underline important points without engaging in deeper comprehension activities such as summarising or self-questioning. One teacher remarked, "Students often underline important points but rarely revisit the passage to check whether they truly understand it." This suggests that although students demonstrate some awareness of cognitive reading strategies, their application of metacognitive strategies remains limited, thereby affecting comprehension and academic performance.

Theme 2: Teachers' Use of Reading Strategy Instruction

Teachers generally reported that they deliberately incorporated reading strategies such as summarising, questioning, prediction, and vocabulary pre-teaching into their English lessons to improve students' comprehension. However, they noted that the implementation of these strategies was often constrained by limited instructional time, large class sizes, and examination-oriented teaching. One teacher explained: "We try to teach students how to summarise and identify key ideas, but because of the syllabus and time available, we cannot always practise these strategies extensively." This finding suggests that while teachers recognise the value of explicit reading strategy instruction, classroom realities often limit its consistent implementation. Consequently, students may not receive sufficient guided practice to internalise and apply these strategies independently.

Theme 3: Challenges Affecting the Use of Reading Strategies

Teachers identified several factors limiting students' effective use of reading strategies, including poor reading culture, inadequate access to reading materials, low motivation, and overdependence on examination preparation. One teacher remarked: "Many students only read their notes before examinations and hardly read other materials that can improve their comprehension." The responses indicate that the successful use of reading strategies depends not only on classroom instruction but also on students' reading habits and the availability of supportive learning resources. These challenges may reduce opportunities for students to develop strategic and independent reading behaviours necessary for sustained academic success.

Theme 4: Perceived Influence of Reading Strategies on Academic Performance

Most teachers agreed that students who consistently applied reading strategies performed better in comprehension exercises, classroom assessments, and English language examinations than those who relied on passive reading. As one teacher observed: "Students who summarise, ask questions while reading, and monitor their understanding usually answer comprehension questions more accurately than others." This perception reinforces the quantitative findings of the study, which revealed a positive relationship between reading strategies and English language academic performance. It further suggests that strategic reading enhances students' comprehension, retention of information, and ability to respond appropriately to examination questions.

Theme 5: Suggestions for Improving Students' Reading Strategies

Teachers recommended that schools should strengthen reading instruction by creating opportunities for regular reading practice, establishing functional libraries, and organising reading clubs and literacy programmes. They also emphasised the need for continuous professional development to equip teachers with effective approaches for teaching reading strategies. One participant stated: "Schools should encourage reading clubs and provide more books because students cannot develop good reading habits without adequate materials."

These suggestions underscore the need for collaborative efforts among teachers, school administrators, parents, and educational authorities to create environments that promote strategic reading. Such interventions are likely to improve students' reading competence and, ultimately, their academic performance in the English language.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study revealed that secondary school students in Esan West Local Government Area employ a variety of reading strategies, with cognitive and metacognitive strategies being the most

prevalent. Specifically, students frequently engage in underlining key points, taking notes, re-reading, and summarizing passages. This observation aligns with the findings of Akubo et al. (2024), who found that secondary school students exposed to metacognitive reading strategies such as planning, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation demonstrated significantly higher reading comprehension achievement. The study suggests that strategies requiring active engagement with texts facilitate deeper comprehension and improved academic performance. Similarly, Lazarus and Anwalimhobor (2023) found that learners who demonstrated higher levels of metacognitive awareness through planning, monitoring, and evaluating their reading activities achieved better comprehension outcomes, suggesting that metacognitive strategies enhance students' engagement with texts and promote deeper understanding. The qualitative data from teacher interviews further support these observations, with teachers noting that while students routinely underline and take notes, few consistently evaluate their comprehension or participate actively in collaborative reading. One teacher remarked that students often rely on highlighting without fully integrating new information, a practice that limits deeper comprehension. This is consistent with the principles of schema theory, which suggest that comprehension is enhanced when learners actively link new material to existing knowledge structures.

The analysis of English academic performance among students indicated that the majority achieved moderate scores, with only a small proportion attaining high performance. This trend corroborates earlier studies (Aluko & Nwajiaku, 2023; Aturamu, 2025), which found that secondary school students' academic outcomes in English are often constrained by inconsistent application of reading strategies. The correlation analysis in this study revealed a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.76$) between the use of reading strategies and English performance, suggesting that students who employ strategies such as summarising, re-reading, and self-questioning perform better in comprehension tasks and examinations. Teacher interviews corroborated this finding, with many respondents highlighting that students who regularly apply structured reading strategies demonstrate improved comprehension and higher examination scores. These findings are also in line with Habók and Magyar (2024), who reported that effective reading strategies directly influence learning outcomes by facilitating the organisation, retrieval, and interpretation of information.

Overall, the findings suggest that the frequent and strategic use of reading strategies enhances English academic performance by enabling students to connect new information to prior knowledge, monitor understanding, and organise content effectively. The qualitative insights provided by teachers highlight practical challenges, including low motivation, limited collaboration, and inconsistent application of strategies, which partially explain why many students remain in the moderate performance category despite using some strategies. The convergence of student questionnaire data, teacher interviews, and prior empirical studies provides strong evidence that instruction in cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies should be emphasised in secondary schools to maximise students' English language achievement. Moreover, the findings reaffirm the central tenet of schema theory, demonstrating that comprehension and learning are optimised when learners actively integrate new textual information with existing knowledge frameworks.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that reading strategies are critical determinants of English academic performance among secondary school students. Students who frequently employ cognitive and metacognitive strategies demonstrate better comprehension and higher academic achievement, confirming that active engagement with text and self-monitoring enhance learning outcomes. Affective strategies, such as maintaining motivation and confidence, provide additional support, while social strategies are effective only when properly structured and guided. Teacher perspectives reinforce the quantitative findings, emphasising the importance of deliberate strategy instruction and the provision of practice opportunities. However, the study affirms that systematic teaching and consistent application of reading strategies can significantly improve students' English language performance, thereby contributing to their overall academic success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- English language teachers should integrate cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies into daily classroom instruction, providing regular modelling, guided practice, and reflective exercises.

- Students should be encouraged to consistently apply reading strategies, actively link new information to prior knowledge, and engage in self-monitoring to improve comprehension and performance.
- Curriculum planners and policymakers should include explicit instruction on reading strategies within the secondary school English curriculum to ensure that students acquire essential skills for academic success.

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