



## IMPROVING READING COMPREHENSION: COGNITIVE AND PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES

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**Abstract.** Reading comprehension is a critical skill for language learners, particularly in contexts such as second language acquisition (SLA) and standardized language testing (e.g., IELTS, CEFR). A prevalent challenge among learners is the ability to understand the overall meaning of a passage despite being familiar with individual words or their translations. This paper examines the cognitive processes underlying reading comprehension and suggests pedagogical strategies to enhance understanding by focusing on the meaning rather than relying on word-for-word translation. Key approaches discussed include active reading, contextual understanding, vocabulary acquisition, and paraphrasing techniques, alongside a review of relevant research.

**Key words:** Reading comprehension, word-for-word translation, language learning, contextual understanding, active reading, text interpretation

### INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is a multifaceted cognitive skill that extends beyond word recognition and individual vocabulary knowledge. For learners of a second language (L2), one of the most common hurdles is the tendency to translate texts word-for-word into their native language (L1), which often disrupts their ability to grasp the overall meaning. Despite a learner's knowledge of individual vocabulary items, the process of word-for-word translation can obscure the context, structure, and intent of the text. This phenomenon has significant implications for second language acquisition (SLA) and academic language proficiency, as seen in testing frameworks such as the IELTS or CEFR.



This article explores the cognitive underpinnings of reading comprehension, particularly in a second language context, and offers evidence-based strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of overreliance on translation.

Reading comprehension involves complex cognitive processes that integrate decoding, background knowledge, and the interpretation of linguistic and contextual cues. According to Kintsch's [6] **construction-integration model**, readers construct mental representations of a text by integrating information from both the text itself and their prior knowledge. This process is dynamic and contextual, where readers shift between their mental representations of the text and the surface features of the text (e.g., syntax, vocabulary).

When readers engage in word-for-word translation, they tend to bypass this integrative process, leading to fragmented comprehension. This approach often results in superficial processing, where individual words or phrases are understood in isolation, disconnected from the broader meaning of the text. [4] Such an approach disrupts the natural flow of reading and impedes the formation of a coherent mental model of the passage.

### **The role of translation in reading comprehension**

The strategy of translating every word in a text into one's native language is a common pitfall for foreign learners. While initial translation may assist in understanding individual words, it has been shown that excessive reliance on translation can hinder overall comprehension. [2] Translation is often more effective when it focuses on the meaning of the text rather than the exact words. [8] The direct translation of individual words or phrases may distort the text's original intent and miss contextual nuances.

For example, in English, the preposition "in" can have multiple meanings depending on the context, and word-for-word translation into another language may result in misinterpretation. [5] Instead, learners should focus on understanding the passage as a



whole, interpreting words within their broader context rather than isolating them for translation. [3]

## **METHODS**

Several strategies can be employed to enhance reading comprehension, particularly by reducing the reliance on word-for-word translation and fostering a more holistic understanding of texts.

### **1. Focus on context, not translation**

A critical strategy in improving reading comprehension is to shift focus away from translating individual words. According to Grabe, comprehension is a global process that requires understanding the overall message of the text. Learners should aim to understand the meaning conveyed by the entire passage, using context as a guide. By prioritizing meaning over word-for-word translation, learners are more likely to integrate the information and retain the key ideas [1].

### **2. Active and passive reading techniques**

Regular practice is essential for improving reading skills. Active reading, where learners engage with the text through critical analysis and questioning, is particularly effective for enhancing comprehension. For instance, learners can take notes, summarize key points, or paraphrase sections of the text. Passive reading, such as reading for enjoyment without focusing on understanding every word, helps increase fluency and build a sense of the language's rhythm and structure [7].

Moreover, active reading techniques like paraphrasing and summarizing assist learners in internalizing the material and focusing on meaning, rather than becoming fixated on individual vocabulary items [9].

### **3. Vocabulary acquisition and use of thesauri**

Expanding vocabulary is crucial for improving comprehension. However, instead of translating words directly into L1, learners should focus on acquiring English-to-



English definitions to better understand terms in context. By using tools such as thesauri, learners can expand their vocabulary and understand multiple word meanings and synonyms [10]. This enables a deeper understanding of the passage by providing a richer mental representation of the text.

#### 4. Paraphrasing and Rewriting

Engaging in paraphrasing exercises allows learners to solidify their understanding of a text by rewording it in their own terms. This practice reinforces the concept that comprehension involves grasping the essence of the message rather than simply translating words [11]. Learners should also attempt rewriting passages in simpler language or summarizing them without losing the core message.

**Paraphrasing and comprehension.** Consider the following passage:

*“Many theorists agree that social contact early in a child’s life is crucial for healthy personality development. This is the most significant relationship of the child development period, as it is from this that the child derives its confidence in the world. A break from this relationship is experienced as highly distressing and constitutes a considerable trauma.”*

In this example, key concepts like “social contact” can be paraphrased as “emotional exchanges” and “break from this relationship” can be reworded as “separation trauma”. By recognizing paraphrases, learners can answer comprehension questions more accurately, even without a direct word-for-word translation [2].

#### CONCLUSION

Improving reading comprehension requires a concerted effort to develop cognitive and linguistic skills. By avoiding overreliance on word-for-word translation and focusing on the overall meaning, learners can better integrate new information with existing knowledge. Effective strategies, such as active reading, paraphrasing, and vocabulary acquisition, play a critical role in strengthening comprehension skills.





With regular practice and a focus on contextual understanding, learners can significantly improve their ability to interpret and analyze texts in a foreign language.

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