

Enhancing University Students' Reading Comprehension through Metacognitive Reading Strategy Instruction

تعزيز الفهم لدى طلاب الجامعة من خلال تدريس استراتيجيات القراءة ما وراء المعرفية

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Abstract:

This research study seeks to examine the impact of metacognitive reading strategy (MCRS) instruction on the reading comprehension of second year (L2) EFL students enrolled at Tlemcen University. The quasi-experimental research method is implemented, precisely the non-equivalent control group design via the use of tests and a survey, in order to assess the effectiveness of teaching MCRS on a treatment group. Results, following the intervention, highlighted remarkable progress in both the comprehension of textual materials and analytical skills among participants, even those with poor reading abilities, which affirms the significance of MCRS, thus confirms the proposed hypotheses. This study, therefore, serves to strongly emphasize the pivotal role of effective MCRS instruction in enhancing university students' reading comprehension across a variety of academic texts.

Keywords: Metacognitive Reading Strategies; Reading Comprehension; EFL Students; University Language Teaching and Learning.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is the receptive process of identifying, comprehending and interpreting written texts (Yahya et al., 2014). It is not merely a source for information but rather a conduit for intellectual enrichment. Being one of the fundamental language skills, reading is central to all formal education, making it highly crucial to be well-mastered (Razkane et al., 2022). Accordingly, reading strategies are of paramount importance to help students bridge the gap between textual materials and their own understanding (Bernardo & Mante-Estacio, 2023). By applying these strategies, they can approach and tackle any information with greater confidence, and easily deconstruct it into manageable bits. A process which will significantly aid them to comprehend complex ideas and guide them towards effective analysis of the material at hand, which is central to the focus of this study.

Numerous undergraduate students aiming for higher education encounter several challenges throughout their academic journey, notably in the area of reading. At the university level, reading can be quite a hurdle for most students, particularly those undertaking EFL courses, who are tasked with processing and dissecting heaps of academic papers across different subjects and often within tight deadlines. Difficulties arise due to students' inability to extract the meaning, i.e., they can read the text but they often face difficulties in extracting the message or meaning behind it (Hashmi, 2024). Without receiving proper training on how to employ effective reading strategies, these students will struggle with textual comprehension and analysis, which will ultimately lead to a poor academic performance (Ahmadi et al., 2013).

Metacognitive strategy instruction, therefore, stands at the heart of academic learning, as it enables students to adeptly utilize their cognitive abilities so as to successfully engage with any language material. This instruction not only assists students on how to monitor &

control their reading but it also promotes autonomy and aids in developing analytical skills necessary for conducting textual analysis (Cherik & Aliouchouche, 2023). For this reason, integrating metacognitive strategies in the teaching of reading comprehension (hereinafter RC) is highly crucial. RC educators are thus toughly tasked with catering to diverse learning styles and cognitive processes in their pedagogical practices in order to effectively implement these strategies, thereby successfully help enhance their students' reading skill and overall comprehension.

In this regard, this study's main objective is to investigate the impact of teaching metacognitive strategies on the RC level of university students. Thus, it strives to answer the following questions:

1. How does the teaching of metacognitive strategies improve and sustain university students' RC?
2. In what ways does metacognitive strategy instruction affect the RC of students with poor reading abilities?

In response to the queries outlined above, the subsequent hypotheses have been formulated:

1. The teaching of metacognitive reading strategies could improve and sustain university students' RC by promoting autonomy and critical thinking, as it provides them with the necessary techniques that would aid them to actively assess and monitor their understanding of any material, leading to a long-term academic success.
2. Metacognitive reading strategy instruction caters to different learning styles, thus could greatly benefit students with poor reading abilities. By instilling confidence in their ability to consciously and effectively apply metacognitive reading strategies when engaging with texts, their RC could enhance significantly.

2. Literature Review

Mastering the skill of reading, especially when it comes to interpreting the true meaning of texts, can be quite challenging. As a result, several strategies have been developed to make this process smoother and more manageable. The practice of teaching reading strategies is deeply entrenched in history, and has been widely adopted by many educators. These strategies significantly aid students to take control of their reading and fully benefit from it. This section, therefore, is devoted to reviewing previous studies pertaining to reading strategies, most notably MCRS, and their importance in education.

2.1 Teaching English as a Foreign Language

The English language has come a long way from being merely a dialect to becoming a global language. In fact, it has been estimated that English is used by approximately one sixth of the human population worldwide (Broughton et al., 2003). Savignon (2007) posits that the advent and prolific spread of English as a global language has profoundly influenced the entire field of language education. As the primary language pertaining to modern technological innovation and various other significant domains, English has attained a prominent status in the sector of education, prompting its widespread incorporation into various schools. As a result, the international demand for teaching English has considerably risen, supporting, in the process, the emergence of the term “English as a Foreign Language” (EFL), which is particularly applied within the sphere of English language education (Miloudi, 2019).

The rising demand for EFL instruction in Algeria has prompted serious efforts by the government to improve the quality of English education (Slimani, 2016). Although it is currently taught in middle and secondary schools, and more recently has been integrated at the primary level, many individuals opt to pursue even higher education in English language. This preference is largely driven by to personal motives and this language’s growing prestige.

It is, however, worth noting that any language instruction is contingent upon the teaching and mastery of the main fundamental language skills; namely reading, listening, writing and speaking, however the most difficult among them is reading.

2.1.1 Teaching Reading Comprehension

RC is a highly complex and active process by which students make sense of a written material. Snow (2002) argues that the process of RC involves the joint extraction and construction of meaning through active engagement with written texts. In fact, as explicitly indicated by its name, the processes of reading and comprehending are interlinked and essential for understanding the entirety of the text (Yahya et al., 2014). Furthermore, current perspectives and theories on reading state that RC extends far beyond mere word-level comprehension to largely encompass the author's motives and contextual framework (Dianti, 2021).

In this regard, Boardman et al. (2010) consider RC as the multifaceted, most intricate process that involves the interplay between readers' approaches, background knowledge and the material itself. When engaging in reading, we utilize our cognitive abilities to draw upon all of our skills, knowledge, and personal experiences, so that we would be well equipped to tackle the material to the fullest (Oktavia & Fitriana, 2017). According to Woolley (as cited in Cherek & Aliouchouche, 2023), RC consists of three levels namely; literal, inferential and evaluative. The first one entails understanding the direct, most explicit meaning of text. The second one involves the interpretation of hidden, implicit meanings by connecting the dots within the text. The third one, on the other hand, pertains to the critical analysis of the text based on the reader's own personal knowledge and viewpoints.

Teaching RC, therefore, necessitates that students systematically progress through these levels for an effective and successful text comprehension. To achieve this, Yahya et al. (2014) strongly state that students should be able to advance from solely answering text

questions to evaluating and analyzing information to solve problems, relating information with specific contexts, and drawing conclusions based on insights gained from the reading material. For this very reason, integrating reading strategy instruction in RC lessons is utterly essential, which is the primary focus this paper.

2.2 Reading Strategies

As per Grabe (2009), reading strategies are viewed as techniques that readers consciously utilize to resolve reading issues. Hence, the chief purpose behind the employment of reading strategies is to overcome RC difficulties. They refer to the habitual practices and techniques used to assist in successfully grasping and interpreting the meaning of texts (U.S. Department of Education, 2008, as cited in Oktavia & Fitriana, 2017). According to Boardman et al. (2010), a strategy can be defined as a systematic plan for executing a task. However, its efficacy is contingent upon understanding the what, why, how and when; that is knowing its nature, the purpose behind its use, the way to implement it and the appropriate time to use it. Efficient application of these strategies, therefore, enables EFL students to confidently interact with any written material, thus mitigate their RC problems.

As vital as it is to employ reading strategies in order to help deepen one's processing, understanding and interpretation of textual information, distinguishing between their different types and purposes is also very crucial (Dianti, 2021). It provides EFL students with an awareness of how each strategy is put into action, hence permits them to shift between strategies when one does not yield the desired outcomes. Moreover, instructors draw from a diverse range of strategies to teach in the classroom, oftentimes merging multiple ones to obtain targeted results. Nonetheless, research shows that the teaching of one of the key strategies, which is often quite neglected in Algerian educational settings, is the metacognitive strategy for it is widely regarded as the most effective among all and of all the reading strategies combined (Bernardo & Mante-Estacio, 2023). Hence, it is essential that EFL

students receive adequate instruction on the importance and proper use of these strategies.

2.2.1 Metacognitive Reading Strategies

Flavell (1976), famously recognized as the founder of metacognitive research, defines metacognition as the individuals' awareness of their cognitive processes, and regards the metacognitive reading strategies (MCRS) as self-regulation processes that aid EFL students in effectively understanding and utilizing their knowledge for various tasks (Bensaad & Ouahmiche, 2020). According to Ahmadi et al. (2013), MCRS are "the notions of thinking about thinking" (p. 236). This implies that they represent the mental processes used to comprehend, extract meaning and correlate knowledge to the textual material under analysis. Additionally, MCRS differ from cognitive reading strategies in that they operate across a variety of domains, whereas the cognitive ones are usually restricted to specific subject areas (Bouali, 2022).

On this account, MCRS are considered as advanced skills that involve the application of cognitive processes to regulate one's own learning through systematic planning, monitoring and evaluation. In this sense, MCRS encompass three principal strategies that manifest through three distinct stages of the reading process, namely pre, during and post reading. At the pre-reading phase, several planning strategies are incorporated. Activating prior knowledge to set the pace for reading such as, for instance, exploring the text features to get an overview of its content is one of them. During reading, monitoring strategies like grasping the definition of complex terms, identifying key information, performing reflective questioning and summarizing main ideas are activated. In the post-reading stage, however, evaluation strategies are employed to deepen one's understanding by relating their constructed insights to new contexts and narratives (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Almasi, 2003; Paris et al., 1991; Pressley, 2002; Israel, 2007 & Hudson, 2007 as cited in Iwai, 2011).

Many studies have shown that there is a direct link between the effective employment

of MCRS and RC achievement. Gooden, Carreker, Thornhill and Joshi (2007, as cited in Rahmati & Widowati, 2017) conducted a study to inspect the changes brought about by MCRS instruction on the RC and lexicon of third graders. Results revealed significant improvement in student's RC. Similarly, Mahdi (2016) investigated the effect of direct MCRS teaching on the RC and attitudes of tenth-grader students. Findings indicated that MCRS instruction substantially and positively influenced their attitudes towards learning. Razkane et al. (2022) emphasize another study that was undertaken particularly to assess the impact of teaching MCRS to students with poor reading abilities. The results to that were remarkable as these very students, through effective MCRS training, successfully managed to overcome their RC obstacles and score higher grades in their RC evaluations. Accordingly, this study supports the perceptions made on the effectiveness of MCRS, and aims to rigorously evaluate them through empirical testing.

3. Methodology

This section is dedicated to describing the methodology implemented in this study. It comprehensively explains the sample chosen, and the reason for its selection, the research instruments used to collect data, and the software relied upon on the interpretation of findings. Furthermore, it presents an analysis of the results obtained from the study.

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a quasi-experimental design with non-equivalent control group design to systematically investigate the impact of a certain treatment on a given sample (Ramadhana & Allo, 2021). It is a comparative inquiry that relies on quantitative analysis to explore causal relationships between dependent and independent variables (Creswell, 2012). The rationale behind its use is to observe the efficacy of teaching metacognitive strategies on students' RC, even on those with poor reading abilities, by means of pre and posttests conducted on the group receiving treatment. Despite the absence of randomization, the non-

equivalent control group design with the quasi-experimental framework is a sound and solid methodical approach to collecting and interpreting data.

The sample of this study comprised total of 93 second year (L2) EFL students enrolled at Tlemcen University. It is worth noting that these students have at least a basic proficiency level since they had received no less than eight years of English language education. The study took place during the second term semester of the 2023/2024 academic year. Participants were portioned into two distinct cohorts; group A which was designated as the control group with a total of 43 students, and group B as the treatment group, comprising 50 students. Both groups were non-randomly chosen, and included students with varying levels of RC. The reason for choosing L2 students as the study's participants is that they oftentimes encounter greater difficulties with RC than L1, and the study conducted by Cherk and Aliouchouche (2023), on "The Use of Metacognitive Strategies in Reading Comprehension", strongly supports this claim. Additionally, the researcher's position as the teacher for both groups facilitated the engagement in experimental work and observation of real-time changes.

3.2 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

During the second term semester of the academic year 2023/2024, data were gathered by means of tests, particularly through the use of a pre- and posttest design, which constitute the fundamental tools for the inquiry, in addition to a survey. The research procedures included several key steps. Initially, two non-equivalent groups were chosen for the study; group A, which had already been taught how to effectively use MRCS during the first term semester, was designated as the control group, whereas group B, newly instructed by the researcher in the second semester, served as the treatment group. During the first meeting with the latter at the outset of the second semester, a diagnostic assessment was conducted to gauge the new students' level in RC, and was used as the pretest for the current

study. Following that, a short survey was carried out with the same group, to test participants' familiarity and/or application of MCRS. Given the negative results, the researcher proceeded with the intervention.

Intervention was implemented on the treatment group only (group B), and was achieved through the teaching of MCRS. The instructional period comprised five sessions, each with duration of one hour and a half. Group B students were taught how to consciously, proficiently and accurately plan, monitor and evaluate their reading throughout three important stages (pre, during, and post-reading) employing, each time, diverse IELTS-based texts. Contemporaneously, group A students, who already possessed prior knowledge in MCRS, continued to advance their learning by utilizing those strategies in exploring more advanced academic texts. Lastly, after finalizing the treatment, a posttest was conducted on the treatment group participants, and data were processed and analyzed in Microsoft Excel.

3.3 Research Findings

Subsequent to the phase of data collection, analysis was carried out. The latter involves the systematic interpretation the results, which were obtained by means of tests (both pre and posttests) and the survey. Hence, they are presented as follows:

3.3.1 The Pretest

Upon the first encounter with group B students at the start of the second semester in the 2023-2024 academic year, the pretest was administered. It was carried out as a diagnostic assessment, and aimed to evaluate their baseline RC level. The following results were gathered:

Table 1. Pretest Results for Group B

Types of Questions	Assigned Points	Scores of Group B	Percentage
True/False/Not Given.(with correcting the false ones)	5	2,5	50%

Matching Headings	4	1,75	43.8%
Matching Features	2,5	2	80%
Multiple Choices	2,5	1	40%
Short Answer	2,5	1	40%
Filling in the blanks	3,5	2,5	71.4%
Total	20	10,75	53.8%

Source: Benayad, Adder

Participants from the treatment group took a pretest, which was graded out of 20, the highest grading score in the Algerian grading system. The test, which was derived from an IELTS training guide, was of moderate difficulty, neither too easy nor overly complex. The results gathered, however, show that group B achieved a near-average level with a score of 10.75 out of 20, making up 53.8% of the total percentage. It is also observed that group B students scored less than average in matching headings, multiple choices and short answer questions.

Furthermore, the study also places a focus on students with poor reading abilities. They are identified as those scoring below 10/20 in the total result of the pretest, thus are outlined as follows:

Table 2. Pretest Results for Group B Participants with Poor Reading Abilities

Group B	Males		
	Number	Percentage	Total Pretest Score
	11	22%	7
	Females		
	Number	Percentage	Total Pretest Score
	8	16%	7.5

Source: Benayad, Adder

Among all the participants, it is observable that 19 individuals making up 38% did not

succeed to achieve a mark of 10 or above. Specifically 11 males and 8 females scored below 10 in the test, representing 22% and 16% respectively. Nonetheless, their results, ranging from 7 to 7.5, were relatively close to the passing grade.

3.3.2 The Survey

Subsequent to the pretest, a brief survey was administered. Nevertheless, it is crucial to mention that nine absences were recorded on the day the survey was conducted, hence reducing the number to 41 participants. The primary purpose of administering the survey was to ascertain whether group B had prior knowledge of MCRSs, or had previously used them in their reading, making this the central question of the survey. In total, the survey consisted mainly of four questions, which are analyzed as follows:

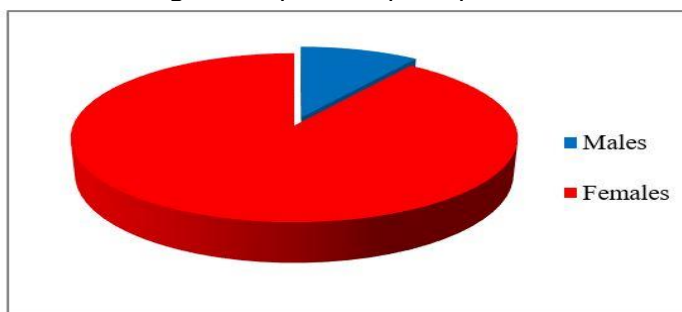
Question 01: What is your gender?

Table 3. Group B's Sample Population

Demographic	Percentage
Males	9.8%
Females	90.2%

Source: Benayad, Adder

Fig.1. Group B's Sample Population



Source: Benayad, Adder

This question intended to determine the gender ratio of participants taking part in the study. It is widely believed that females are more committed to their studies and invest more

effort than males in improving their academic performance. This study considers gender demographics to assess this claim. As depicted in the table and pie chart above, it is discernable that females dominate group B with a total of 90.2%, while males form only 9.8% of the total participation.

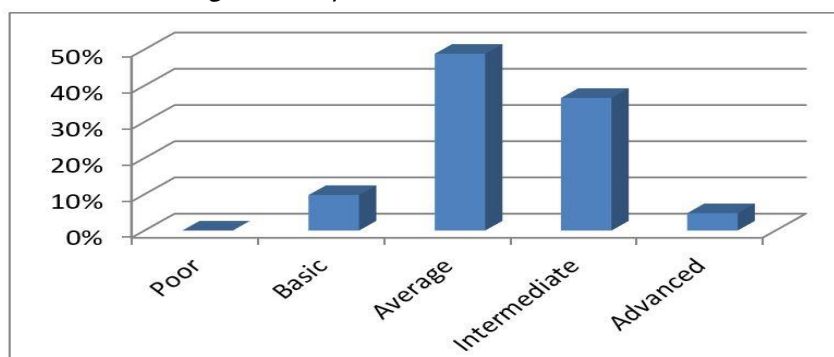
Question 02: How would you rate your level in reading comprehension?

Table 4. Participants' Self-Rated Levels in RC

Level	Percentage
Poor	00%
Basic	9.8%
Average	48.8%
Intermediate	36.6%
Advanced	4.8%

Source: Benayad, Adder

Fig.2. Participants' Self-Rated Levels in RC



Source: Benayad, Adder

Analysis of the both the table and graph illustrates that none of the participants report having a poor level in RC. The majority; i.e. 52% regard their level in RC as average, 36% as intermediate, 8% as basic and 4% as advanced. This indicates that most students perceive themselves as possessing at least an average proficiency in reading, meaning they are capable of grasping the main ideas of the text to a considerable extent, albeit not entirely.

Question 03: What strategies or techniques do you usually apply to facilitate your understanding of the reading text?

Table 5. Applied Practices to Facilitate Text Comprehension

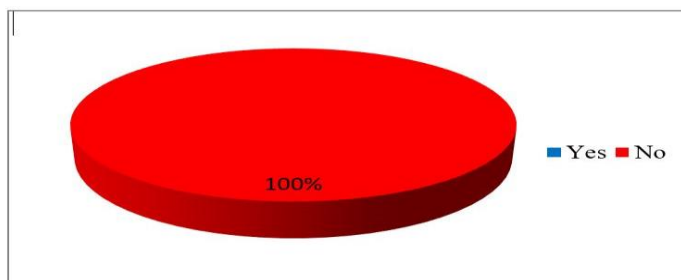
Suggested Practices	Frequency	Percentage
Re-reading the text multiple times.	41	100%
Highlighting key information.	37	90%
Using online dictionaries to define complex words.	41	100%
Engaging in discussions with classmates.	12	29%
Asking the teacher for clarification.	33	81%

Source: Benayad, Adder

When asked what practices they apply to facilitate their understanding of texts, all participants identified re-reading the text multiple times and using online dictionaries as the most common practices. Second and third most suggested techniques to improve text comprehension, cited by 90% and 81%, are highlighting key information and asking the teacher for clarification, respectively. Finally, 29% of the participants recommended peer collaboration as a method to deepen their understanding of the material.

Question 04: Are you familiar with the term 'Metacognitive Reading Strategies'?

Fig.2. Participants' Familiarity with MCRS



Source: Benayad, Adder

This question sought to ascertain participants' familiarity with and knowledge of

MCRS. The results demonstrate that none of group B participants is familiar with the term, which implies that their application of MCRS is very unlikely. It is, however, worth mentioning that some of the strategies they proposed for the previous question are, in fact, components of MCRS.

3.3.3 The Posttest

Following the end of the intervention, the posttest was conducted. It is important to highlight that, unfortunately, this test was also affected by 11 absences, thus only 39 participants actually sat for the test. However, all the students who were previously classified as having poor reading abilities were present for the assessment.

Table 6. Posttest Results for Treatment Group Participants

Type of Questions	Assigned Points	Group B Scores	Percentage
True/False/Not Given (with correcting the false ones)	5	4	80%
Matching Headings	4	3	75%
Matching Features	2.5	2	80%
Multiple Choice	2.5	1.5	60%
Short Answer	2.5	2	80%
Filling in the blanks	3.5	3	85.7%
Total	20	15.5	77.5%

Source: Benayad, Adder

Data indicates that the treatment group participants have significantly improved and obtained better marks compared to the pretest results. Through the successful application of MCRS, they have shown an incredible progress, advancing from a near average to an intermediate level with a score of 15/20. Furthermore, their performance in matching headings, multiple choice and short answer questions has also risen up from below 50% to 60% or higher.

Table 7. Posttest Results for Treatment Group Participants with Poor Reading Abilities

Group B	Males		
	Number	Percentage	Total Pretest Score
	4	9.3%	10.5
	Females		
	Number	Percentage	Total Pretest Score
	2	4.6%	13

Source: Benayad, Adder

The posttest results reveal that the RC level of group B participants, who initially had poor reading abilities, has significantly improved after the intervention. Only six participants, four males and two females, scoring below 10 out of 20 in comparison to being 19 prior to the treatment, mark this. It is also observed from these data that females with reading difficulties have, in fact, outperformed their male counterparts.

4. Discussion

Based on the results elicited from the pretest, we note that group B participants displayed a near average level in RC. Subsequently, the survey revealed that these students were neither familiar with the term MCRS nor had they made deliberate efforts to use them. Although some MCRS were applied unconsciously, the overall approach to reading was rather passive and teacher-dependent. The intervention, hence, was implemented on the treatment group through MCSR instruction. As a result, the posttest demonstrated a considerable advancement in group B's RC which is chiefly attributed to the effective application of MCRS. The findings are in line with Gooden, Carreker, Thornhill and Joshi (2007, as cited in Rahmati & Widowati, 2017) as well as Hashmi, S. M. Q. (2024), who in their works have concluded that MCRS instruction has a significant impact on the enhancing students' RC. Hence, it is reasonable to state that students who employ MCRS in their reading are more successful than those who do not.

Therefore, it is noteworthy to state that applying MCRS has massively aided participants in their struggle with grasping the underlying meaning of the text. Based on their pretest results, it was evident that their inability to provide accurate responses for short-answer questions, and failure to infer the author's purpose for writing the text, among others, were mainly due to a lack of training in planning, monitoring and evaluation strategies, which ultimately lead them to score badly in several tasks. Resultantly, implementing MCRSs has greatly assisted them in overcoming these issues and pushed them towards refining their analytical skills for a more precise analysis of the material.

The results also revealed notable improvements in students with varying initial reading levels. It was observed, as well, that the majority of female participants, including those with reading difficulties, have demonstrated greater effort than males in improving their performance. It is also quite evident that applying MCRS has been instrumental in developing students' confidence and promoting learner autonomy. As previously noted in the survey, group B participants shifted from strongly depending on the teacher's explanations and clarifications to becoming more self-directed and conscious readers. Drawing from the work of Rizkane et al. (2022), which highlighted the benefits of MCRS for students with poor reading skills, this study has put it to the test, thus recorded equivalent positive outcomes. All in all, the findings of the study have confirmed the hypotheses proposed at the beginning of this inquiry.

5. Limitations and Recommendations:

This study employed the non-equivalent control group design for data collection, which ultimately resulted in a lack of randomization. Since the control group had already undergone treatment, the focus was primarily on the experimental group, which had not received any prior instruction in MCRS. For future research, utilizing an equivalent group design or even opting for the experimental design is recommended, as these approaches are

likely to yield more fruitful and conclusive results.

The sample of this study was limited to second year EFL students, with the number of participants not exceeding 100. Choosing a different sample could allow for a different outlook, and provide a fresh perspective on the experiment. In addition to that, increasing the number of participants would ensure the collection of richer and more pertinent data, thereby offering credible and insightful findings on the subject matter.

6. CONCLUSION

The main objective behind undertaking this research inquiry was to probe the effect of MCRS instruction on the RC of L2 EFL students at Tlemcen University. A quasi-experimental design was employed to examine the impact of MCRS instruction on the treatment group through the administration of tests and a survey. The findings uncovered that the effective teaching of MCRS resulted in major improvements in group B participants' overall comprehension and critical analysis development; thereby validating the previously formulated hypotheses. The successful application of MCRS assisted even students with poor reading abilities to confidently and autonomously overcome their reading obstacles, which reinforces the assertions presented in previous studies. Consequently, teaching MCRS has become essential to enhance students' RC of academic texts and pave the path for their academic success.

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