

***From Decoding to Understanding:
A Comprehensive Review and Empirical Study of Reading
Strategies among Algerian EFL Students.***

Nadira BRIOUA.

- University of Djilali BOUNAAMA; Khemis Miliana
(Algeria).

- Email: *n.brioua@univ-dbk.m.dz*

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Abstract:

This qualitative study investigates the reading comprehension challenges faced by fifty first-year EFL students at Djilali Bounaama University, Algeria. Despite the academic expectations of the LMD system, many students struggle to progress from simple decoding to deep text comprehension. Through three focus group discussions, analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework, the research identifies three specific cognitive and metacognitive barriers: an over-reliance on digital translation tools, which encourages word-for-word processing; working memory overload, which hinders the formation of coherent mental models; and emotional factors, such as linguistic insecurity, which disrupt metacognitive regulation. The findings suggest that without explicit instruction in reading strategies, students remain trapped at the decoding level. Consequently, the study advocates for curriculum reforms in Algerian EFL programs to prioritize strategic information processing over rote knowledge accumulation.

Keywords: Reading comprehension; EFL; Algeria; First-year students; Metacognition.

Introduction:

In the complex process of learning a foreign language, reading serves as a foundational cognitive skill essential for language acquisition and academic success (cite a source, e.g., Grabe, 2009). In traditional teaching methods, reading is frequently mischaracterized as a passive skill something you just "do." However, for the university student, reading is the primary engine of intellectual growth and cultural adaptation. It serves as the essential pipeline for expanding vocabulary, the blueprint for internalizing complex sentence structures, and the only real access point to the global academic conversation in both the sciences and humanities.

This centrality is particularly acute within the contemporary Algerian higher education sector. The nation is currently navigating a major sociolinguistic transition. Government initiatives are increasingly positioning English, rather than French, as the language of future research, instruction, and international commerce. Consequently, the cognitive burden on the Algerian university student to not merely "know" English, but to process it with high-level academic proficiency, has never been heavier.

Yet, an observation of any first-year lecture hall at Djilali Bounaama University or indeed, almost any English department across the Maghreb region reveals a persistent and frustrating paradox. The students sitting in these rows are not beginners. They arrive at the university gates with a minimum of seven years of formal English instruction, comprising four years in middle school and three in secondary school. They possess the knowledge to recite grammar rules; they can read text aloud with acceptable pronunciation; and they can often translate isolated sentences with reasonable precision. However, when confronted with a five-page academic article or a dense literary chapter, students frequently experience severe comprehension breakdowns. They engage in what educational psychologists term the "decoding trap"—the mechanical, labor-intensive conversion of written symbols to

sounds without the simultaneous construction of actual meaning.

This disconnect is not merely a reflection of individual student aptitude or motivation; rather, it is a structural crisis born from the friction between two divergent educational cultures. The Algerian secondary school system, driven by the intense pressure of the Baccalaureate examination, heavily prioritizes declarative knowledge and rote memorization. Students are conditioned to pass tests: they memorize vocabulary lists without context, apply grammar formulas like math equations, and answer guided comprehension questions where success relies on matching keywords rather than synthesizing arguments. They are rarely challenged to critique a writer's bias, infer implicit meanings, or manage a text above their linguistic level without immediate teacher help.

When these students cross the threshold into the university, they encounter a pedagogical transition within the LMD system that demands high academic autonomy. Suddenly, the support scaffolding is taken away. They are presented with extensive reading lists and expected to function as autonomous researchers. They are required to navigate texts that are culturally remote and linguistically dense. However, because their prior training focused on translation rather than comprehension, they revert to the only strategy available to them: processing the text linearly, one word at a time.

The situation is further exacerbated by Algeria's unique and complex sociolinguistic fabric. The Algerian student inhabits a chaotic cognitive world: the mother tongue (typically Algerian Darja or Berber varieties), the language of early literacy (Modern Standard Arabic), the lingering dominant language of administration (French), and the target language (English). This creates an environment described as a state of "linguistic conflict" (Benrabah, 2013), characterized by constant, often unconscious, code-switching. When attempting to process English text, students often

subconsciously apply processing strategies suited for Arabic (a root-based morphology) or French (where they scan for cognates), leading to interference. The "false friend" cognates between French and English alone account for a significant portion of comprehension breakdowns, adding a layer of lexical confusion to an already taxing cognitive load. And as Benrabah stated: "The source of the conflict in Algeria is threefold: first, there are tensions between local languages, with one of them having an international status (Literary Arabic) and which is imposed by authoritarian means and top-down planning; second, Arabic is also in conflict with the ex-colonial language, French, which endures thanks to elites indoctrinated by colonial France, to a statist and rentist state, and its arm the inert bureaucracy (as we have seen, the future of this ex colonial language remains uncertain, especially with English standing on the sidelines.); and third, the authorities' attempt to use the latter as a substitute for French caused the struggle between these two European languages." (2014, p. 56).

Despite the urgency of this issue, the existing literature on reading in the Algerian context has been largely dominated by statistics and surveys. We possess ample data indicating that students utilize dictionaries or perceive reading as difficult. What remains conspicuously absent is the narrative texture of this struggle. We lack the "thick description" of the experience of being a first-year student confronting a wall of English text. This study aims to pivot the lens. By utilizing qualitative focus groups, we seek to uncover the internal cognitive and emotional processes of these students. We aim to answer the deeper questions: Why do they cling to translation even when they know it is inefficient? How does their background shape their choices? And most importantly, how can we help transform these decoders into comprehenders?

This study aims to provide a comprehensive, human-centered analysis of the barriers hindering reading

comprehension among Algerian EFL university students. The specific objectives are as follows:

- A. To investigate the lived cognitive and emotional experiences of first-year Algerian EFL students as they navigate authentic academic texts in English.
- B. To identify and analyze the dominant, often unhelpful, reading strategies (such as over-reliance on word-for-word translation) employed by students and their impact on comprehension.
- C. To examine the influence of Algeria's multilingual landscape and prior educational socialization on students' reading strategy choices and self-awareness.
- D. To propose a practical framework for explicit strategy instruction, aimed at bridging the critical gap between decoding and deep comprehension within the Algerian curriculum.

To situate this investigation, this study draws upon the interactive model of reading (Stanovich, 1980), metacognitive strategy theory (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002), and the role of affective filters in second language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). Viewed through these theoretical lenses, the following research questions guide this investigation:

1. What are the predominant cognitive and metacognitive strategies employed by first-year Algerian EFL students when reading academic texts, and how do these strategies play out in real time?
2. How does a dependency on digital translation tools shape students' approach to reading, and what are the consequences for their vocabulary growth and ability to synthesize text?
3. In what ways do emotional factors such as anxiety, avoidance, and self-confidence affect reading engagement and performance?
4. Based on the identified challenges, what specific teaching interventions can be designed to explicitly

teach strategic reading and foster a transition to understanding?

2. Literature Review and The Theoretical Landscap:

To accurately diagnose the ailment of the Algerian reader, one must first understand the anatomy of the reading process itself. The theoretical understanding of how humans extract meaning from print has undergone a radical evolution over the last half-century, and tracing this trajectory helps pinpoint precisely where Algerian students are stalling.

In the mid-20th century, the dominant model was "Bottom-Up" (Gough, 1972). This theory viewed reading as a precise assembly line. The eye captures letters; the brain converts letters to sounds; sounds build word parts; word parts construct words; and words are chained together to create meaning. In this context, Gough said that: "Reading involves a rapid succession of intricate events formation of a visual icon, letter-by-letter identification, and association with meaning through transposition into abstract phonemic representation..." (1972, p. 291). In this model, the text is supreme, and the reader acts as a passive decoder. While decoding is the foundation of literacy, this model cannot explain higher-order comprehension. Unfortunately, it perfectly describes the default operating mode of the struggling Algerian student. They treat the text as a cryptographic code to be cracked, operating under the fallacy that if they can identify every single linguistic brick, the "house" of meaning will construct itself. They fail to realize that meaning resides not in the bricks, but in the architectural design-the relationships between ideas.

The scholarly reaction to this was the "Top-Down" revolution of the 1970s, articulated notably by others (Goodman, 1967), who characterized reading as a "psycholinguistic guessing game." Goodman argued that proficient readers are effective minimalists; they sample the text only enough to confirm their predictions, relying on background knowledge to anticipate content. While this model empowers the reader,

for the EFL learner, it presents a dangerous trap. Here, Goodman wrote that: "Efficient reading does not result from precise perception and identification of all elements, but from skill in selecting the fewest, most productive cues necessary to produce guesses which are right the first time." (1967, p. 127). As demonstrated by the "Short Circuit Hypothesis" (Clarke, 1980), a learner cannot effectively utilize top-down strategies if they lack the linguistic proficiency to form a valid hypothesis. Furthermore, Algerian students often lack the cultural schema required for English texts. If a student is reading about "The American Dream" and lacks the cultural context, they cannot "guess" effectively. Their top-down processing fails, forcing them back into painful, resource-heavy bottom-up decoding.

Current academic consensus rests on the "Interactive Model" (Rumelhart, 1977; Stanovich, 1980), which views reading as a simultaneous process of decoding and predicting. In his retrospective analysis, Stanovich (1988) explains that he "married" this concept of interactive processing with the "Interactive-Compensatory Hypothesis." This hypothesis posits that "deficiencies at any level in the hierarchy of reading-related cognitive processes could be compensated for by a greater reliance on other knowledge sources" (p. 18). While this allows a native speaker to offset specific weaknesses such as using context to cover for poor decoding it creates a damning scenario for the subjects of this study. Stanovich explicitly notes that "it was the poor reader who relied more on context to facilitate word recognition" (p. 18). However, the typical EFL student often possesses neither the automatic vocabulary to decode effortlessly nor the cultural context to predict accurately. Lacking the necessary "knowledge sources" to trigger this compensatory mechanism, they are, in effect, cognitively bankrupt in the face of the text.

Recent scholarship (2015–2024) expands upon these foundational models by highlighting how the digital age has shifted EFL reading behaviors. Studies show that an over-reliance on digital translation apps alters cognitive processing,

often inhibiting rather than supporting metacognitive awareness (Klimova & Pikhart, 2020). When students persistently use digital tools for word-for-word decoding, they bypass the higher-order cognitive effort required to infer meaning, thereby stalling their vocabulary acquisition and comprehension.

Furthermore, contemporary research heavily emphasizes the affective dimension of reading. Park and Kim (2017) demonstrate that high levels of reading anxiety directly correlate with lower metacognitive strategy use and an increased reliance on bottom-up decoding. This affective filter not only disrupts the reading process but also entrenches counterproductive habits, creating a vicious cycle where poor comprehension breeds anxiety, which in turn further stifles effective reading strategies.

This leads to the crucial distinction between cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Cognitive strategies are the "hands-on" tools: summarizing, note-taking, skimming. Metacognitive strategies represent "executive management": planning, monitoring for confusion, and evaluating success. Research has consistently demonstrated (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002) that the defining characteristic of a weak reader is not necessarily a small vocabulary, but a deficit in metacognition. Weak readers do not recognize they are failing to understand until it is too late. They operate under the assumption that reading is a one-way path start at the first word, end at the last. They are unaware that proficient reading is a messy process involving reading, stopping, thinking, and re-reading.

In the Algerian context, this lack of metacognition is an inherited trait. It has been noted (Benayad & Adder, 2025; Kaci, 2022) that while the curriculum emphasizes "competencies," the classroom reality is often performative and "teacher-dependent." Benayad and Adder (2025) argue that metacognitive strategies are "quite neglected in Algerian educational settings," leaving students to rely on external clarifications rather than internal regulation. Consequently,

students arrive at university viewing reading as a transaction: "I give the text my attention, and the dictionary gives me the meaning." This reliance is empirically supported by Benayad and Adder's findings, which revealed that while 100% of surveyed students relied on dictionaries to decode texts, not a single participant was familiar with metacognitive strategies. When this surface-level transaction fails, the student feels betrayed and helpless.

3. Methodology:

To capture the nuance of these internal struggles, a quantitative survey was deemed insufficient. Surveys compel students to select from pre-determined options, often leading to "social desirability bias," where participants select what they believe they should do rather than what they actually do. Therefore, this study adopted a qualitative design centered on Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to generate real-world data. Reading is often conceptualized as a solitary act. However, in the university context, reading is a deeply social phenomenon. Students share notes, complain about difficult texts, and form collective strategies to cope. Focus groups allow the researcher to tap into this "hive mind." They create a psychologically safe environment where the admission of difficulty by one student encourages others to share their own anxieties, reducing the stigma associated with poor comprehension.

3.1. Participants:

The study engaged 50 first-year students from the Department of English at Djilali Bounaama University. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the criteria of being enrolled in their first year of the LMD system and having graduated from the Algerian public secondary school system, ensuring a shared educational background. The sample was selected to reflect the diversity of the cohort, though it mirrored the gender imbalance typical of Algerian humanities departments (38 females, 12 males).

3.2. Data Collection:

Three 90-minute sessions were conducted with subgroups of 8-10 students. The prompt structure followed a funnel approach, moving from general history to specific coping mechanisms.

- **Session 1: The Reading Autobiography.** How did you learn to read? What did "reading" signify in high school compared to university?
- **Session 2: The Strategic Toolbox.** What exactly do you do when you get stuck? Walk us through the process, step by step.
- **Session 3: The Emotional Landscape.** How does reading make you feel? What role does anxiety play?

A critical choice was the language of the groups. While English was the subject, mandating English-only responses would have silenced the very students most in need of representation. Thus, "translanguaging" was explicitly permitted. Students moved fluidly between English, Algerian Darja, French, and Modern Standard Arabic. This linguistic fluidity allowed for a raw, unfiltered expression of frustration that would have been sanitized in a formal English interview.

3.3. Data Analysis:

The sessions were recorded, transcribed, translated, and subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis following established frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding process was conducted manually to allow for a deep immersion in the data. Initial codes were generated line-by-line, which were subsequently collapsed into broader conceptual themes. To ensure reliability and mitigate subjective bias, inter-coder reliability was established by having a second researcher independently code a 20% sample of the transcripts. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until a consensus was reached.

3.4. Ethical Consideration:

Prior to data collection, all participants were provided with a clear explanation of the study's aims. Informed consent

was obtained from each student, explicitly stating that participation was entirely voluntary and would not impact their academic standing. To guarantee confidentiality and anonymity, all identifying information was removed during the transcription process, and pseudonyms were applied to any specific quotes used in the findings.

4. Findings: The Anatomy of the Struggle:

"I don't read the text," one male participant admitted, voicing the group's consensus. "I decode it. I have Google Translate open. I look at the sentence, I type the words I don't know, I write the Arabic above them. Then I try to make a sentence in my head."

This pattern was echoed across the groups. Another female student added, "If I see a paragraph with five new words, my brain just stops. I cannot guess. I have to translate each one before I move on."

This behavior represents a psychological crutch that directly illustrates the negative inverse of Stanovich's (1980) Interactive-Compensatory Hypothesis. Because these EFL students lack both the automatic bottom-up decoding skills and the top-down cultural background knowledge to compensate, they become entirely reliant on an external tool. The data revealed a profound intolerance for ambiguity. Proficient readers are comfortable with uncertainty; they trust that context will eventually clarify things. These students, however, treat every unknown word as a barrier.

4.2. Theme 2: The Synthesis Deficit and Cognitive Overload

A direct consequence of the translation addiction is the inability to synthesize information. Participants expressed immense frustration with tasks that required them to summarize a chapter or find the main argument.

"I can understand the sentences," a female student explained. "But when I get to the end of the paragraph, I have forgotten the beginning. It's like the meaning slips away."

This is a textbook example of working memory overload. Working memory is a finite resource. If a reader is

utilizing 90% of their cognitive capacity to decode words and manage translation, there is simply no "bandwidth" left to hold the information in memory or to connect ideas. They perceive the trees, but the forest remains invisible. This leads to the "copy-pasting" phenomenon in assignments. They transcribe sentences because they lack the cognitive space to reformulate the ideas. This results in verbatim copying rather than cognitive synthesis.

4.3. Theme 3: The Affective Wall - Anxiety and Avoidance

Perhaps the most distressing finding was the severe emotional toll. The focus groups were rife with language associated with pain and inadequacy. Words like "scared," "stress," "headache," and "useless" appeared frequently.

"I hate the reading module," one student confessed. "It makes me feel stupid. In high school, I thought I was good at English. Here, the texts are about British history or complex things, and I feel like I know nothing."

This affective filter blocks input. Because reading is associated with feelings of incompetence, students develop avoidance behaviors. They engage in reading only when forced by an exam, but completely avoid reading for pleasure. This creates a vicious cycle. Reading proficiency is cumulative; one learns to read by reading. By avoiding it, they ensure it remains difficult. The cultural disconnect of the texts—often focused on Western concepts alien to their lives—exacerbates this alienation.

5. Discussion: Interpreting the Disconnect:

The findings provide a granular validation of the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) in the Algerian context. These students fail to comprehend not because they cannot decode (they can read aloud), but because the cognitive cost of decoding is so high that it bankrupts their comprehension. In this regard Gough & Tunmer wrote: "So the fact that someone can decode but fail to read a language which they do not know is far from an embarrassment to us;

rather, it is exactly what we would predict. Decoding is not sufficient; comprehension is also necessary." (1986, p.7)

This finding aligns with Kaci (2022), who observed similar strategy deficits among Algerian students. However, this result contrasts with studies in environments where explicit strategy instruction is embedded early on. Similar patterns were observed in Benayad and Adder (2025), regarding the total reliance on dictionary decoding.

The prevalence of the "Translation Addiction" suggests these learners have not yet crossed the "Linguistic Threshold." They are suspended between the bilingual proficiency of the secondary school graduate and the academic proficiency of the university scholar. The strategies they employ translation, repetition, memorization are fossilized remnants of their secondary education. In high school, where the goal was accuracy on a grammar test, these strategies worked. In the university, where the goal is the critique of ideas, they are obsolete.

However, the culpability cannot be laid solely on the students. The university curriculum is implicated. By thrusting students into deep-end texts without explicit strategy instruction, the system assumes a level of autonomy that has not been cultivated. We are asking students to run a marathon when they have only been trained to walk. The lack of metacognitive monitoring points to a systemic failure in pedagogy. We teach the content of the reading, but we rarely teach the *process* of reading.

Furthermore, the data highlights the friction between the multilingual environment and English acquisition. The "interference" here is strategic. Students are applying the rote-learning strategies of the traditional Arabic curriculum to the analytic demands of English academic prose. They are attempting to memorize the text rather than interrogate it.

6. Pedagogical Implications: A Call for Reform:

We cannot expect the transition from decoding to understanding to occur by magic. It must be engineered

through deliberate design. Based on these findings, this paper proposes a framework for the Algerian First-Year English curriculum.

1. Institutionalize Explicit Strategy Instruction: This recommendation directly addresses the metacognitive deficit identified in Theme 1. The "Reading Comprehension" module must be rebranded. It should not be a venue for testing reading, but a laboratory for teaching it. We must implement frameworks like the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA). Instructors should model "Think-Alouds." A teacher should stand before the class, read a difficult passage, and verbalize their confusion: "I don't know this word, but I see 'however,' so I know a contrast is coming." We need to demonstrate that even experts struggle, and that the struggle is navigated through strategy, not just a dictionary.

2. The "Glossing Ban" and Tolerance of Ambiguity: We must break the translation addiction. This requires bold interventions. Teachers should introduce short reading sessions where phones are prohibited. Using texts with "cloze" gaps can force students to utilize context clues. Assessments must grade them on their ability to infer, not just their ability to be correct. We must normalize ambiguity as a stage of learning. This intervention targets the 'translation addiction' (Theme 1) and forces students to rely on top-down processing models.

3. Prioritize Extensive Reading: The anxiety barrier must be lowered. The department should invest in Graded Readers-books written with simplified vocabulary. We need to implement a "Drop Everything and Read" component where students read accessible books for pleasure, without the threat of grades. As argued in the field (Day & Bamford, 1998), fluency is built through quantity. If students only encounter painful texts, they will never develop automaticity. As the research concludes, "Reading is the only way, the only way we become good readers, develop a

good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammar, and the only way we become good spellers” (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 190). This specifically mitigates the anxiety and avoidance behaviors identified in Theme 3, lowering the affective filter.

4. Leverage the Native Language: By reducing working memory overload (Theme 2), this allows students to synthesize information more effectively. Rather than banning the mother tongue, we should use it strategically. Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) groups can allow students to discuss the meaning of a text in Darja or Arabic before formulating their response in English. This separates the cognitive task of understanding from the linguistic task of production, reducing anxiety and allowing for deeper engagement.

Conclusion:

The chasm between decoding and understanding remains the defining challenge of the Algerian EFL university experience. This study has illuminated the depth of that gap, demonstrating that students are not failing due to a lack of effort, but rather because they apply highly resource-intensive, bottom-up decoding strategies to academic tasks that demand higher-order cognitive synthesis.

By pivoting away from traditional survey methods, this research contributes a much-needed qualitative, student-centered perspective to the predominantly quantitative literature on Algerian EFL reading. It exposes the lived reality of these students, highlighting how an over-reliance on digital translation, working memory overload, and severe reading anxiety collectively paralyze their academic progress.

However, the findings of this study should be interpreted in light of its limitations. The research was confined to a specific sample of fifty first-year students within a single institution, which may restrict the generalizability of the results to the broader Algerian higher education context.

Furthermore, while the focus group format yielded rich narrative data, it relies on self-reported experiences.

Therefore, future research should adopt mixed-methods approaches across multiple universities to confirm these patterns on a larger scale. Additionally, longitudinal studies are highly recommended to empirically test the efficacy of the pedagogical interventions proposed in this paper, particularly the impact of explicit strategy instruction and structured extensive reading programs.

Ultimately, the LMD system demands academic autonomy, but such autonomy is not a given; it is a complex skill that must be deliberately taught. By shifting our instructional focus from the product of reading (evaluating correct answers) to the process of reading (teaching how to strategically construct meaning), we can equip our students with the necessary cognitive tools. Only through this systemic pedagogical shift can we help Algerian EFL students stop merely deciphering texts, and start truly understanding them.

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