

Investigating the Correlation between Reading Comprehension and Strategic Thinking among Iraqi EFL Preparatory School Students

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Abstract

L2 learning research has long focused on the significance of strategic thinking as a significant factor in academic performance. Individual variations in language acquisition are still as significant as intrapersonal and interpersonal abilities and learning methodologies. One of the receptive abilities that children should cultivate early in their English language education is reading. Students who develop this creative ability will be better able to master other language-related abilities including speaking, writing, and listening. The problem of the study is clarified as it is intended to answer the following questions: First, Do Iraqi EFL students possess sufficient reading comprehension and strategic thinking? The second is there a correlation between Iraqi EFL between reading comprehension and strategic thinking in Iraqi EFL preparatory school students? Because of this, this study is a correlational study, and the total number of participants is 100 students from various Iraqi EFL preparation schools in the 2024-2025 academic year. To accomplish the goals of this study, two tools are utilized: The British Council's reading comprehension exam is used to assess students' reading comprehension skills, while John Pisapia's (2014) questionnaire has been used to determine students' strategic thinking. The two instruments are used on the study sample after the psychometric properties have been verified. The results show that students' reading comprehension is moderate and their strategic thinking skills are strong. Moreover, the results also show a statistically significant relationship between the participants' reading comprehension and strategic thinking. Additionally, the strategic thinking of Iraqi EFL preparation school students assists to explain the difference in reading comprehension.

Keywords: strategic thinking, reading comprehension, preparatory school

تقصي العلاقة الارتباطية بين الفهم القرائي والتفكير الاستراتيجي لدى طلبة المرحلة الإعدادية من العراقيين دارسي اللغة الإيخليزية لغة أجنبية

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المستخلص

ركزت أبحاث تعلم اللغة الثانية منذ مدة طويلة على أهمية التفكير الاستراتيجي بوصفه عاملاً مهماً في الأداء الأكاديمي. لا تزال الاختلافات الفردية في اكتساب اللغة مهمة بقدر أهمية القدرات الشخصية والتفاعلية ومنهجيات التعلم. إحدى القدرات التقبلية التي يجب على الأطفال تنميتها في وقت مبكر من تعليمهم اللغة الإيخليزية هي القراءة. سيكون الطلاب الذين يطورون هذه القدرة الإبداعية أكثر

قدرة على إتقان القدرات الأخرى المتعلقة باللغة بما في ذلك التحدث والكتابة والاستماع. ووضحت مشكلة الدراسة لأنها تهدف إلى الإجابة على الأسئلة التالية: أولاً، هل يمتلك الطلاب العراقيون الذين يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية فهمًا كافيًا للقراءة والتفكير الاستراتيجي؟ ثانيًا، هل هناك علاقة بين فهم القراءة والتفكير الاستراتيجي لدى طلاب المدارس الإعدادية العراقية الذين يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؟ لهذا السبب، تعد هذه الدراسة دراسة ارتباطية، ويبلغ العدد الإجمالي للمشاركين ١٠٠ طالب من مختلف مدارس إعداد اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية العراقية في العام الدراسي ٢٠٢٤-٢٠٢٥. لتحقيق أهداف هذه الدراسة، استخدمت أداتان: اختبار فهم القراءة للمجلس الثقافي البريطاني لتقييم مهارات فهم القراءة لدى الطلاب، واستبيان جون بيسابيا (٢٠١٤) لتحديد التفكير الاستراتيجي لديهم. استخدمت الأداتان على عينة الدراسة بعد التحقق من الخصائص السيكمترية. أظهرت النتائج أن فهم القراءة لدى الطلاب متوسط، ومهارات التفكير الاستراتيجي لديهم قوية. وأظهرت النتائج وجود علاقة ذات دلالة إحصائية بين فهم القراءة لدى المشاركين والتفكير الاستراتيجي. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، يساعد التفكير الاستراتيجي لدى طلاب المدارس الإعدادية العراقية لتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في تفسير الفرق في فهم القراءة.

الكلمات الدالة: التفكير الاستراتيجي، الفهم القراني، المدارس الإعدادية

1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is a key component of the process of learning a second language and is one of the primary sources of information for students. Mastery of this language ability is a sign of language accomplishment, which is the primary goal of instruction[1]. According to[2], strategic thinking is the ability to create a plan or strategy to achieve a certain goal. Every choice is presented in terms of how it advances that goal. It entails analyzing probable responses based on a set of presumptions, outlining viable other solutions, and questioning presumptions and alternatives in order to possibly produce new, better solutions. The operational definition of Pisapia has been accepted.

According to[3,p.64], there is a connection between schoolchildren's reading comprehension and their strategic thinking, however it doesn't say which writing techniques they are influenced by. This study will highlight how crucial it is to support students' strategic thinking so they may better comprehend how it contributes to reading comprehension. Additionally, it will determine whether reading comprehension and strategic thinking a cognitive process that enables a student to retrieve previously learned content, track comprehension, rectify misconceptions, synthesize and draw conclusions, and more are related. This study gives teachers ideas on how to help EFL students think strategically so they may improve their reading comprehension[3]. However, responding to the following research question better captures the issue of the current study:

Does the strategic thinking of EFL preparatory school students correlate with their reading comprehension skills?

Because teaching students coping mechanisms for difficult and stressful situations, they may encounter throughout the learning process is one of the goals of education. It is believed that strategic thinking helps EFL students improve their reading comprehension. Since the relationship between reading comprehension and ST in EFL preparatory school students has not yet been thoroughly examined in the Iraqi EFL setting.

1.1 Aims of the study

This study aims to:

1. investigate the reading comprehension and strategic thinking skills of students at Iraqi EFL preparatory schools.
2. identify the relationship between reading comprehension and strategic thinking in Iraqi EFL preparatory school students.

2.Literature Review

2.1 Strategic Thinking

Thinking is "the mental process which begins by constructing thoughtful associations and representations of the world," according to [4, p. 138]. A concept, picture, sound, or even a method of controlling an emotional state can all be considered thoughts. The capacity to come up with ideas and tactics that will enable students to change environments while taking into consideration the many issues that lie ahead is known as strategic thinking[5]. Strategic thinking is "an intellectual methodology that organizes management processes and events in order to attain corporate goals and objectives," according to Kaufman[6,P.116]. Strategic thinking is the ability to develop a plan or strategy to achieve a certain goal.

Furthermore, according to[5], The cognitive process of strategic thinking gives students access to previously learned material, track knowledge, clear up misconceptions, synthesize and extrapolate information, and provide relevant clarifying questions. According to[7] strategic thinking is a continuous activity that aims to clarify ambiguity and reveal a complex environment. Strategic thinking is "the basis for creating new strategies to change competition rules as well as offering different prospects," according to[8,p. 40]. "A cognitive process that allows a students to access prior information, monitor comprehension, correct misunderstandings, synthesize and extrapolate information, and ask pertinent clarifying questions" is how[5,p. 130] defines strategic thinking. Strategic thinking, according to[8, is the practice of knowing the end goal while making decisions and working backward to make sure that activities are in line with the ultimate goal. Rather of relying on a more limited and imperceptible approach to problem-solving, it is a discipline that weighs possibilities and adjusts choices to arrive at the desired outcome.[5] presents a number of strong justifications for developing strategic thinking:

1. To assist the student in going to the fields and successfully competing.
2. To impart to the student the critical thinking abilities that are essential in all subject areas.
3. To teach broad social advantages, a student must be able to examine and manage issues pertaining to his or her educational institution.
4. To attain psychological comfort that successfully aids in adjusting to circumstances and factors related to the educational field.

Strategic thinking is something that many strategy theorists and practitioners think can be acquired as a talent and developed into a habit [9]. The habit of accepting this type of learning as a mental simulation is formed by daily training. Strategic thinking is a

logical extension of individual mind that turns individual idea into action. According to[10], one of the earliest researches on strategic thinking, strategic thinking is the combination of mental resistance and analytical procedure in order to get a competitive advantage. A well-written, perceptive analysis stimulates the strategic mind to function effectively. A strategic and inquisitive mind is necessary to generate the actual questions and frame them as problems that need to be solved in order to do a successful analysis.

2.2 Strategic Thinking Abilities

According to[3], because it is difficult to characterize the cognitive nature of strategic thinking, it is impossible to define, assess, teach, or learn thinking strategically. Therefore, since thinking is such a natural part of daily life, every student should be able to think strategically. According to[11], strategic thinking provides a path to achieving "perpetual invigoration" and identifying a vision. There are two concepts in this view: Two opposing perspectives on strategic thinking are included in the first concept. It all comes down to establishing a supportive atmosphere for the creation of concepts, inspiration, inventions, and vision. The second point of view is a systematic strategy for sustaining such an environment for a longer amount of time by utilizing tools and processes rather than just artistic impulse. As a result, strategic thinking is seen as a managerial/mental activity that aims to identify creative, novel approaches that can rewrite the competitive process's rules and forecast expectations that are significantly different from those of the present[12]. Three key traits that must exist for strategic thinking to occur are proposed by[3]:

1. A comprehensive comprehension of the organization and its surroundings, acknowledging the interdependencies and intricacy of the different sub-structures and interactions.
2. Creativity, or "thinking outside the box," for fresh concepts and regular reworkings of preexisting methods and ideas.
3. A plan for the organization's future.
4. Although acknowledging the significance of the qualities examined by[3] proposes that strategic thinking:
 - a. Promotes an emphasis on intent as opposed to attempting to combine opportunity and resources.
 - b. Involves time thinking as anticipating the future requires considering the past and present since they are intertwined.
 - c. Bridges the gap between analytical and intuitive thinking. This suggests that "experimental" thinkers are strategic thinkers as they can imagine and evaluate a wide range of potential actions.

2.3 Strategic Thinking Importance

In order to tackle strategic challenges, strategic thinking combines creative and divergent approaches with a logical and convergent approach[14]. By using strategic thinking, people may make sense of chaos and use the forces around them to their advantage rather than letting them destroy them[13]. A mental model of the entire system serves as the foundation for the judgments made by strategic thinkers. This strategic commitment considers both the internal and external settings of the company[15]. According to[16], strategic thinking not only maintains the strategy current but also

impartially assesses how it is being implemented. To monitor progress and determine if the organization is moving in the correct path, accomplishments are put up. If not, new strategies are developed to boost output and obtain a competitive advantage. Furthermore, according to[16], people may employ strategic thinking to help them make sensible decisions, prioritize tasks efficiently, and allocate scarce resources sensibly. Consequently, the person will function well, successfully, and effectively.

According to[16], strategic thinking is essential to developing a cohesive, logical plan that includes an integrative framework for choices on the allocation of resources and the course of a problem. Furthermore, strategic thinking is proactive and helps create a competitive domain for company strategic advantage, according to[2]. It utilizes a qualitative synthesis of perspectives in addition to internal and exterior data. According to[11], the goal of strategic thinking is to out-plan, out-think, and out-maneuver competitor forces or rivals. Without careful strategic planning, people are at risk of making quick decisions lacking the creativity and insight that come from a strategic thought process.

2.4 Strategic Thinking Process

Planning and thinking are two distinct cognitive processes that are involved in strategic thinking. Thinking is concerned with synthesis, which entails encouraging intuitive, unique, and creative thinking at all organizational levels, whereas planning is concerned with analysis, which entails developing and formalizing processes and procedures[17]. Strategic thinking, as defined by[14,p.337], is "a means of tackling strategic challenges that combines a rational and convergent approach with creative and divergent thought processes." [18, p.71] state that "Thinking about various scenarios and strategies in a creative manner is largely free of existing boundaries." According to Bonn, the process orientation focuses on how strategic thinkers understand and behave strategically in a very competitive, ambiguous, and complicated context. Therefore, new methods of thinking to succeed in a competitive and unpredictable world are the focus of strategic thinking. Therefore, it seems that strategy is not planned but rather develops over time.

Eisenhardt and Brown[19,p.438] contend that modern strategy should be "continually moving and evolving in ways that surprise and baffle the competition," despite the conventional belief that "strategy is about developing long-term defensible positions or sustainable competitive advantage." To create or preserve a competitive edge, strategic thinkers need to view the company as a complex system impacted by both internal and external factors. According to[20], the strategic thinking process consists of six sequential phases:

1. Recognize your starting point and your desired destination.
2. Investigate other routes.
3. Choose the best path.
4. Make a plan for the tools and resources you'll require.
5. Take an unbiased look at your map; and
6. Use your enthusiasm and dedication to begin on your journey.

2.5 Components of Strategic Thinking

The capacity to identify models and evaluate key issues in order to understand a situation or issue is known as conceptual thinking. Additionally, conceptual thinking integrates integrated challenges and aspects inside a conceptual framework. Conceptual thinking is the broad use of experiences, creativity, deductive reasoning, and intuitive processes to identify potential solutions and workable alternatives[20].

A systematic approach is a social practice that use systematic ideas to achieve certain changes or desired outcomes. When specific issues are seen as parts of broader systems, this kind of thinking offers a novel solution to challenges. Systems can be described holistically according to the systematic approach[22]. According to[5], a strategic thinker must first construct a mental model in their mind before fully understanding the relationships among its components. The strategy process is a comprehensive and integrated method, despite the fact that its components include several tasks.

In order to think strategically, learners must constantly adopt new ideas. In addition to giving access to real plans, this process might provide strategic opportunities. Finding and taking advantage of opportunities is the cornerstone of strategic thinking. The essence of this idea is to use fresh experiences to implement strategic opportunities in their learning environment[20].

[20] asserts that comprehension, reasoning, and intuition are all components of the process of cognition. Different methods can be used to achieve cognition. Making a distinction between the left and right hemispheres' activity is one of them. "Performance" is the ability of an individual to do the responsibilities assigned to them by an organization. Performance has been used in recent years to characterize how a student fulfills their obligations. According to[23], "performance" is commonly confused with "attempt" and should instead be evaluated according to the outcomes of activities.

A municipality is a geographic region where a city council has the political power to offer the general public local and state services. Services include firefighting, criminal prevention, and sewage system maintenance[24]. Municipalities are defined as independent, public, non-governmental organizations that are legally established in cities and are in charge of both serving the public and addressing local concerns.

2.8 Reading Comprehension

[26] defined reading as the interpretation of meaning-rich written or printed signals. At any time during the process of comprehending symbols, or even just after they are conveyed, readers may notice them and try to figure out what they imply. It is associated with specific reading characteristics of the reader. The second part focuses on the significance that symbols hold for us, whereas the first part treats symbols as though they were visual things. The combination of a reader's language and cognitive abilities, world knowledge, and ability to process visual information determines what the reader can read. This strategy involves the reader trying to precisely express the writer's intended meaning[27].

Reading comprehension According to[28], is a multifaceted intellectual process that calls on a variety of skills. The two main elements are verbal reasoning skills and word meaning. Reading is required for reading comprehension, and reading is required for reading comprehension. Reading therefore needs understanding.

To completely absorb the information, the reader must comprehend it while reading it. The capacity of the reader to understand what they are reading determines the purpose of reading a book. In other words, comprehension is a prerequisite for comprehending. The ability to grasp what has been read is the process of creating meaning or comprehending previously read material. Reading comprehension is a team effort that incorporates both the reader's past knowledge and the complete text. For understanding to be fully successful, you must connect what you read to your personal experiences. Full language comprehension is not achieved by just comprehending individual words, sentences, and texts[27].

[29] defines reading comprehension as the ability to comprehend literature, assimilate its meaning, and then integrate it with one's existing knowledge after reading it. A sentence's meaning is determined by the words that comprise the phrase.

Understanding the reading content is essential, especially in educational contexts, claims[30]. It aims to enhance students' linguistic abilities, expose them to rich concepts, educate them with pertinent information, teach them how to critique, and accustom them to voicing their thoughts and passing judgment.

[31] defines reading comprehension as the ability to infer meaning from any type of written material. Effective reading comprehension requires having a firm grasp of word definitions, being able to infer a word's meaning from its context, and being able to decipher paragraph structure and recognize allusions and antecedents. It is possible to identify the tone of a passage as a collection of literary or propositional structures, to infer its content from these structures, to identify the passage as a main idea, to answer the passage as a question, and to identify the passage as an arrangement of literary or propositional structures. Recognizing the tone of the situation through remarks, inquiries, requests, and refrains the final step is to construct discourse-semantic assessments of the writer by assuming their purpose, objective, and point of view[27].

Reading comprehension is the outcome of deliberate reading that expands and develops students' experiences, stimulates their cognitive abilities, and gives them the knowledge they need to address a variety of personal issues, such as recognizing their tendencies to deepen and broaden their understanding of themselves and others. It is suitable for them because it encourages introspection and curiosity, raises awareness of social concerns, cultivates a spirit of book criticism, and gives people a sense of cultural connection. The most crucial assumption is that the structure will be handled naturally by the instructor and the students[32].

3. Methodology

3.1 Population and Sampling

The study's population consists of Iraqi fourth-grade EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students enrolled in Al-Diwaniya Governorate during the 2024–2025 academic year. To reflect the population of fourth preparatory students, a sample of 100 students was chosen at random from this group.

3.2 Instruments

Two tools have been applied to accomplish the current study's aims. They are the Reading Comprehension Test and the Strategic Thinking Questionnaire.

The questionnaire developed by John Pisapia(2014) has been used to assess students' strategic thinking. There are thirty-three items on this survey. A four-point Likert scale, from always (3 points) to never (0 points), is used to answer each question in the survey.

The British Council's reading comprehension exam is used to assess learners reading comprehension abilities. It consists of two reading passages, with a multiple-choice and true/false question after the first passage. An essay question and a fill-in-the-gap question follow the second passage. The third, however, is a cloze test. With the exception of the multiple-choice question in the first passage and the cloze exam, which have five items each, each of these questions has six items.

3.3 Reliability

Cronbach Alpha and the test/retest technique are used to determine the Strategic Thinking Questionnaire's reliability. Cronbach Alpha is used to determine the reliability of the reading comprehension exam, and the results show that all reliability coefficients are satisfactory. The purpose of the pilot administration is to determine how clear the test's items and instructions are, as well as how much time participants need to finish answering it.

4. RESULTS

The research sample is administered the two instruments(the Reading Comprehension Test and the Strategic Thinking Questionnaire) in order to accomplish the study's first aim. The t-test for one independent sample has been used to identify any significant differences between the arithmetic and theoretical means after the arithmetic means and standard deviations have been calculated. According to Table (1).

Table (1): Arithmetic Mean, Standard Deviation, and T- Test Values of strategic thinking scale and Reading comprehension test

Variable	Sample	Arithmetic Mean	SD.	Theoretical Mean	t-value		Significance 0.05
					computed	critical	
Strategic Thinking	100	45,411	7,328	34,5	29,112	1,96	Significant
reading comprehension	100	15,186	4,281	15	0,798	1,96	Not significant

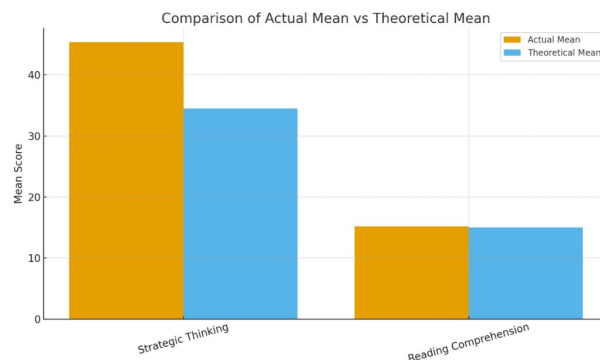


Chart (1): Arithmetic Mean, Standard Deviation, and T- Test Values of strategic thinking scale and Reading comprehension test

The importance of the variance between the theoretical and arithmetic means is determined, as indicated in Table(1) and chart(1). Because the calculated T-value for strategic thinking is (29,112), greater than the threshold T-value(1.96) with a degree of freedom at the significance level (0.05).(99), the difference is judged to be statistically significant. This indicates that a high degree of strategic thinking is present in the study population. There is no statistically significant difference in reading comprehension. At the level of significance(0.05) and degree of freedom(99), the calculated T-value is determined to be (0,798), which is lower than the critical T-value (1.96). This indicates that the research sample's reading comprehension is at a moderate level.

to fulfill the second purpose. Pearson's coefficient is used to examine the reading comprehension and strategic thinking questionnaire responses from the students. The results are displayed in Table(2) and chart (2).

Table (2): The Calculated Correlation Coefficient between Strategic Thinking and reading comprehension

Sample	The Calculated Correlation Coefficient	t-value		Significance 0.05
		computed	critical	
100	0,343	6,698	1,96	Significant

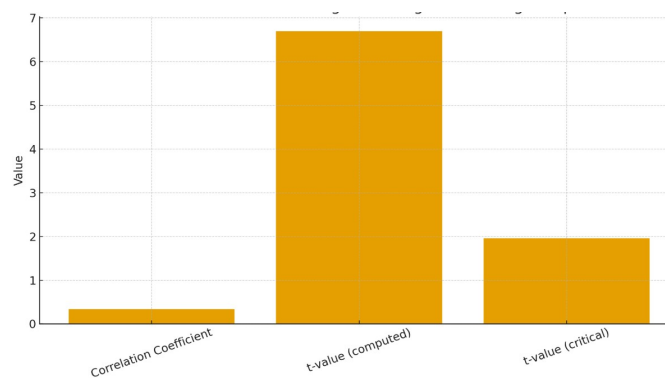


Chart (2): The Calculated Correlation Coefficient between Strategic Thinking and reading comprehension

There is a positive and statistically significant relationship between reading comprehension and strategic thinking; that is, the more strategic thinking the research sample possesses, the better their reading comprehension. Thus, the topic of whether reading comprehension and strategic thinking are related among Iraqi EFL Preparatory School students is addressed. According to Table(2) and chart(2), there is a 0,343-correlation coefficient between reading comprehension and strategic thinking. The correlation's significance is assessed using the t-test, and the calculated t-test result is (6,698), which is higher than the critical value (1.96), at the degree of freedom (99) and the significance level (0.05).

5. Discussion of Results

The results of this study indicate that students at Iraqi EFL preparatory schools had a high degree of strategic thinking. This shows that students are proficient in strategic thinking, planning, realization, synthesis, extrapolation, and information access. Regarding reading comprehension, it is discovered that the students possess a scientifically important moderate degree of comprehension. Furthermore, there is a statistically significant correlation between the students' reading comprehension and their strategic thinking, based on the data calculated from the study tools. Additionally, the strategic thinking of Iraqi EFL preparation school students helps to explain the difference in reading comprehension.

6. Conclusions

Based on previous findings and discussions pertaining to the study's aims, it is determined that Iraqi EFL preparatory school students possess a moderate degree of reading comprehension and an acceptable level of strategic thinking. Furthermore, the results of the study show that Iraqi EFL preparatory school students' reading comprehension improves with increasing levels of strategic thinking. Thus, there is a statistical correlation between the reading comprehension and strategic thinking of Iraqi EFL preparation school students. Additionally, the findings from the study instruments demonstrate that students' strategic thinking helps to explain the variance in reading comprehension. The future research might cover more sides of this study to be clearer and to be better clarified. In the light of the findings of this study, Future research could be expanded to incorporate similar investigations at various academic levels, such as university levels.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There are no conflicts of interest

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