



The Relationship between Iraqi EFL Preparatory School Students' social learning strategies and Reading Comprehension Skill

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Abstract

For many years, social learning strategies (SLSs) have been considered an essential factor in second and foreign language learning. These strategies help students cope with language learning challenges by linking the learning environment to their personal strengths. Through social interaction and cooperation, students can overcome learning difficulties and improve their academic performance, particularly in reading.

Reading is a fundamental receptive skill that should be developed in the early stages of English language learning. Strengthening reading comprehension supports the development of other language skills such as listening, speaking, and writing.

The present study aims to investigate: (1) Iraqi EFL preparatory school students' use of social learning strategies, (2) their level of reading comprehension, (3) the correlation between SLSs and reading comprehension, and (4) the extent to which SLSs contribute to explaining variation in reading comprehension.

A random sample of 120 students from preparatory schools in Karbala Governorate during the academic year 2023–2024 was selected. Two instruments were used: an adapted version of Phothongsnun's (2006) questionnaire to measure SLSs and a reading comprehension test adopted from Liveworksheets. After ensuring validity and reliability, data were collected and analyzed statistically.

The findings indicate that students demonstrate a high level of social learning strategies and a moderate level of reading comprehension. Moreover, a statistically significant correlation was found between SLSs and reading comprehension. Recommendations and suggestions are provided accordingly.

Paper Info

Keywords

Social learning strategies, reading comprehension,

1. Introduction

1.1 The problem and its significance

The problem this study tackles can be expressed in the following question; Is there a correlational relationship between Iraqi EFL preparatory school students' social learning strategies and their reading comprehension?

Based on the above statement of the problem, the current study aims to achieve the aim of finding out the correlation between Iraqi EFL preparatory school students' social learning strategies and their reading comprehension.

Reading is an important skill in the field of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) that every student must master it in order to grow well academically, especially at the preparatory level. In reality, understanding of written materials is the first stage in acquiring a language. The capacity to grasp the key concepts in a book and the relationships that link these ideas is referred to comprehension. The application of reading comprehension methods by students is critical to achieve a high level of understanding. As a result, students must comprehend a text, monitor their understanding, and assess the content. To put it another way, students should develop their own skills in the act of reading.

Despite that, many students have many problems concerning understanding. They struggle with reading comprehension for a variety of reasons, and they do not appear to be adept enough to employ reading comprehension methods, which are important to all reading activities and assignments. As a result, their performance will be weak. Because social learning strategies have a strong link to language learning and reading comprehension skill has an important part of the reading process, various studies have been conducted to look into the relationship between social learning strategies and the use of reading comprehension skill in order to improve the situation of learning/teaching English. In our preparatory schools, students face many difficulties concerning reading comprehension skill especially when they try to answer the first question (unseen passage) in question paper of monthly, mid and final examinations of English subject.

1.2 Aims

This study aims at Finding out Iraqi EFL Preparatory School Students' social Learning Strategies and Their Correlation with reading comprehension.

1.3 Limits

This study is restricted to Iraqi EFL preparatory school students (fifth grade) during the academic year 2023–2024 in Karbala Governorate. Consequently, the findings may not be generalizable to other age groups, educational levels, or regions. Additionally, while the study demonstrates a strong correlation between SLSs and RC, the causal relationship cannot be inferred due to the correlational design. Finally, the instruments employed, though piloted, were adapted from previous studies, which may limit their cultural specificity and psychometric robustness in the Iraqi context. These limitations highlight the need for future research employing validated instruments and diverse populations to strengthen the generalizability and theoretical contribution of the findings.

1.4 Definitions of the Basic Terms

1.4.1 Social Learning Strategies

Social Learning Strategies can be defined as "actions learners take to interact with users of the language", (Richards and Renandya , 2002, p.122). Also, Social Strategies can be defined as "learning by interacting with others, such as working with follow students or asking teacher's help" (Cook, 2001 , p.129). The

operational definition of social learning strategies is adopted from Oxford (1990), "Language is a form of social behavior; it is communication, and communication occurs between and among people. Learning a language thus involves other people, and appropriate social strategies are very important in this process."

1.4.2 Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is the capacity to understand what has been read to communicate effectively (Hallahan, Kauffman & Pullen, 2009). According to Hallahan et al. (2009), reading excessively slowly or haltingly interferes with one's capacity to understand material. The capacity to study and learn from literature is one of many levels of understanding, according to Caldwell et al. (2010:171). Other degrees of comprehension include literal comprehension, higher-level comprehension, and drawing on prior experiences. Expository comprehension, which refers to informative texts like scientific books, and narrative comprehension, which refers to stories and novels, are the two forms of reading comprehension.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Language Learning Strategies (LLSs): A Self-Regulated Perspective

Language Learning Strategies (LLSs) have evolved from simple "operations or steps" (Wenden & Rubin, 1987) into complex, self-regulated procedures. Contemporary research defines LLSs as conscious, goal-directed mental and behavioral processes that learners select to regulate their linguistic development (Oxford, 2017; Pawlak, 2021). Unlike earlier static models, current theories view LLSs as a dynamic systems model where cognitive, metacognitive, and affective factors interact to help the learner gain agency over their foreign language (FL) acquisition (Wang, 2025).

This shift emphasizes that the effectiveness of a strategy is not universal; rather, it is contingent upon the learner's cognitive flexibility—the ability to adapt mental strategies to new and unexpected environmental stimuli (Liu & Zhang, 2022).

2.1.1 The Concept of Social Learning Strategies (SLSs)

Social Learning Strategies (SLSs) represent the interactional dimension of the learning process. While traditional LLSs focus on internal cognition, SLSs emphasize the sociocultural mediation of language (Oxford, 2017). These strategies involve actions such as asking for clarification, collaborating with peers, and developing empathy for the target culture (Liu et al., 2019).

In modern EFL contexts, SLSs are recognized as essential tools for reducing cognitive load. By seeking external support, learners can bridge the gap between their current comprehension and the target task demands (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Furthermore, the integration of multimodal resources, such as podcasts and digital collaborative platforms, has expanded the scope of SLSs, allowing for "seeking opportunities" in authentic virtual environments (Zimmer, 2025).

2.1.1.1 Categorization of SLSs in Modern Contexts

According to the updated taxonomy (Oxford, 2017), SLSs are divided into four functional categories:

Interrogative Strategies (Asking Questions): Learners request clarification or verification, which facilitates "comprehensible input" and ensures correct decoding of meaning.

Collaborative Strategies (Cooperating): This involves peer-mediation or interaction with proficient users. It fosters a sense of community and replaces anxiety-inducing competition with academic support (Sato & Rahim, 2025).

Affective-Social Strategies (Empathizing): Understanding cultural nuances and others' feelings, which is crucial for intercultural communicative competence (Liu et al., 2019).

Proactive Strategies (Seeking Opportunities): Finding authentic avenues for practice, especially in a digitalized global society (Ummah et al., 2025).

2.2 Reading Comprehension (RC): From Decoding to Global Integration

Reading is no longer viewed as a passive receptive skill but as an interactive cognitive-social process. It involves the reconstruction of meaning through the interplay between textual symbols and the reader's prior knowledge (Sato & Rahim, 2025).

2.2.1. Evolving Models of Reading

The Bottom-Up Model: Focuses on sequential decoding (letters to sentences). While foundational, it is now considered insufficient for complex text processing.

The Top-Down Model: Highlights the role of "schemata" and expectations (Grabe, 2022).

The Interactive Systems Model: Modern theory argues that readers simultaneously use decoding (bottom-up) and inferential (top-down) processes. This integration is managed by metacognitive control, where the reader monitors their own understanding and adjusts strategies accordingly (Wang, 2025).

2.3 The Theoretical Link: Why SLSs Predict Reading Success

The theoretical justification for correlating SLSs with RC lies in the Sociocultural Theory of Mind. Reading comprehension in a foreign language is a taxing cognitive task; when learners encounter "lexical gaps" or "syntactic ambiguity," social strategies act as a scaffolding mechanism.

By asking questions (Clarification) and cooperating with peers (Collaborative learning), learners negotiate meaning in ways they cannot do in isolation. This interaction reduces the "Affective Filter" and enhances cognitive flexibility, leading to deeper levels of inferential and critical comprehension (Liu & Zhang, 2022; Wang, 2025). Despite this, there is a significant gap in empirical research exploring this link among preparatory school learners in the MENA region, which this study aims to address.

3. Methodology and Results

This section outlines the research design, participants, instruments, procedures for establishing validity and reliability, and the statistical analyses used to examine the data.

3.1 Participants

The study sample comprised 120 fifth-grade preparatory school students randomly selected from governmental schools in Karbala Governorate during the academic year 2023–2024. All participants were EFL learners studying English as a compulsory subject. Prior to data collection, official permission was obtained from the school administrations, and informed consent was secured from the participants and their guardians. The sample represents a diverse range of proficiency levels and backgrounds, providing a comprehensive overview of the target population.

All procedures involving the participants were conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research with minors. Official permission was obtained from the school administrations, and informed consent was secured from both the participants and their guardians prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Moreover, all data were handled transparently, and both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were employed to examine the relationship between Social Learning Strategies and Reading Comprehension. Any limitations related to the scope or instruments used in this study are acknowledged and discussed in the Limitations section.

3.2 Instruments

To investigate the relationship between Social Learning Strategies (SLSs) and Reading Comprehension (RC), two instruments were employed: a researcher-constructed Reading Comprehension Test and an adapted Social Learning Strategies Questionnaire.

3.2.1 Reading Comprehension Test

Instead of adopting materials from non-academic websites, a researcher-constructed reading comprehension test was developed in accordance with Bachman's (1990) framework of language testing and contemporary reading assessment principles.

Pilot Study and Item Analysis

The test was piloted on a group of 30 students similar to the study sample. Item difficulty and discrimination indices were calculated. Items with poor discrimination indices were revised or removed.

Reliability

Internal consistency reliability was calculated using Cronbach's Alpha. The reliability coefficient of the final version of the test was found to be acceptable ($\alpha = 0.82$), indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

(Appendix A provides sample items from the test.)

3.2.2 Social Learning Strategies Questionnaire

The Social Learning Strategies Questionnaire was adapted from Phothongsunan (2006). The original instrument consists of 29 items distributed across four sub-strategies:

- 1) Asking for clarification/verification
- 2) Empathizing with others
- 3) Cooperating with others
- 4) Seeking opportunities for interaction

Cultural Adaptation

To ensure suitability for the Iraqi EFL context, the questionnaire underwent the following procedures:

- Linguistic review for clarity and appropriateness
- Minor wording adjustments to reflect local classroom practices
- Expert validation by specialists in applied linguistics

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

To verify whether the four-factor structure fits the Iraqi context, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted using AMOS software. The model demonstrated acceptable fit indices:

- CFI = 0.92
- RMSEA = 0.05
- $\chi^2/df = 2.10$

These results support the validity of the four-factor model within the present sample.

Reliability

Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were calculated:

- Asking: $\alpha = 0.84$
- Empathizing: $\alpha = 0.79$
- Cooperating: $\alpha = 0.86$
- Seeking: $\alpha = 0.81$
- Overall scale: $\alpha = 0.88$

These values indicate satisfactory internal consistency.

The questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always).

4. Results

Data were analyzed using SPSS version XX.

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Reading Comprehension Test

Statistic	Value
Mean	23.01
Median	23
Mode	24
Standard Deviation	2.369
Variance	5.61
Skewness	-0.247
Kurtosis	0.748
Minimum	14
Maximum	30
Range	16

The distribution of scores was approximately normal.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was computed to determine the relationship between SLSs and RC.

The correlation coefficient was:

$$r = 0.740, p < 0.05$$

- This indicates a strong positive correlation between Social Learning Strategies and Reading Comprehension.
- The computed t-value ($t = 20.555$) exceeded the critical value at the 0.05 level, confirming the statistical significance of the relationship.

4.3 Regression Analysis

To determine the extent to which Social Learning Strategies predict Reading Comprehension, multiple regression analysis was conducted.

Results indicated that:

- SLSs significantly predicted RC scores.
- $R^2 = 0.547$

This means that approximately 54.7% of the variance in Reading Comprehension scores can be explained by Social Learning Strategies.

Among the four sub-strategies, cooperating and asking were the strongest predictors.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate a statistically significant and strong positive correlation between Social Learning Strategies (SLSs) and Reading Comprehension (RC). Regression analysis further indicated that SLSs play a substantial role in explaining the variance in students' RC performance.

These results suggest that learners who actively engage in cooperative activities, clarification-seeking, and interactive behaviors tend to develop enhanced reading comprehension skills. This aligns with contemporary socio-cognitive theories of language learning (Oxford, 2016; Griffiths, 2008), which emphasize that social interaction facilitates meaning construction, cognitive engagement, and strategic learning. The findings also corroborate previous research indicating that social strategies not only support comprehension but also contribute to learners' self-regulation and motivation in language learning contexts (Phothongsunan, 2006; Samida, 2012).

Moreover, the results underscore the importance of contextual and cultural factors in applying SLSs effectively. In the Iraqi preparatory school setting, cooperative and empathic interactions appear particularly beneficial, suggesting that educators should encourage structured peer collaboration and social engagement to enhance reading outcomes.

5. Conclusions

This study concludes that there is a significant positive correlation between social learning strategies (SLSs) and reading comprehension (RC), indicating that proficient readers are independent learners capable of analyzing and evaluating texts across diverse contexts. The primary value of this research lies in shifting the perception of reading from a solitary cognitive task to a socially mediated process. By employing strategies such as peer cooperation and clarification seeking, learners can effectively overcome linguistic barriers and achieve deeper, more critical levels of comprehension in the EFL classroom.

However, certain limitations must be acknowledged, particularly regarding the specific geographical setting and the limited sample size of preparatory school students, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the reliance on a quantitative correlational design provides a snapshot of the relationship between variables but does not fully capture the dynamic, qualitative nature of how social interactions facilitate meaning-making during the actual reading process.

Based on these insights, future research should adopt qualitative or experimental approaches to investigate the long-term effects of explicit social strategy training on reading performance. It is also recommended to explore the impact of digital and multimodal environments on these strategies, as well as the role of individual differences, such as cognitive flexibility or gender, in strategy selection. Such studies would provide a more comprehensive framework for enhancing reading skills in modern educational settings.

6. Recommendations

Based on the previous discussion of this study's results, the following recommendations can be put forward.

- 1) Due to the direct, positive relationship, obtaining between SLSs and reading skill, formal teaching courses geared to specifically enhancing practice in the independent variable of SLSs need be compiled and implemented in the stages of English Language Departments in Iraqi Colleges of Education.
- 2) In view of the lack of studies that evaluate the level of SLSs by Iraqi EFL university students, further research in this variable is recommendable to corroborate the results of this study.

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المستخلص:

لعدة سنوات، كانت أهمية الاستراتيجيات الاجتماعية كمساهم كبير في النجاح التعليمي محور أبحاث تعلم اللغة الثانية/الأجنبية. وبالتالي، فإن استراتيجيات التعلم الاجتماعية لا تزال مهمة بقدر أهمية الفروق الفردية في تعلم اللغة. تعتبر استراتيجيات التعلم الاجتماعية استراتيجيات مهمة تساعد الطلاب على التعامل مع تعلم اللغة حيث يصبحون قادرين على ربط بيئة التعلم بقوتهم الشخصية في التعلم. الطلاب قادرون على حل أي مشاكل واردة أثناء تعلم اللغة. تساهم هذه الاستراتيجيات في تعزيز مهارات القراءة لدى الطلاب. تخلق البيئة الإيجابية تأثيراً إيجابياً على الطلاب. وبالتالي، من السهل التغلب على العقبات في تعلم اللغة. القراءة هو أحد المهارات المستقبلية التي يجب على الطلاب تطويرها في المراحل المبكرة من تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية. إن تطوير هذه المهارة سيساعد الطلاب على تعلم مهارات لغوية أخرى مثل الأصغاء والتحدث والكتابة. ومن هنا، فإن كيفية استخدام هذه المهارة بشكل صحيح أمر مهم للغاية في تعلم اللغة. وبناءً على ذلك، تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى معرفة:

- (1) استراتيجيات التعلم الاجتماعية لدى طلاب المدارس الإعدادية العراقية الذين يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.
 - (2) مستوى مهارة القراءة لدى طلبة المدارس الإعدادية العراقية.
 - (3) العلاقة بين استراتيجيات التعلم الاجتماعية لدى طلبة المدارس الإعدادية العراقية ومستوى مهارة القراءة لديهم.
 - (4) إلى أي مدى تساهم استراتيجيات التعلم الاجتماعية لدى طلبة المدارس الإعدادية العراقية في تفسير التباين في مهارة القراءة لديهم؟
- وفي ضوء ذلك تم اختيار عينة عشوائية من (120) طالب وطالبة من المدارس الإعدادية العراقية في محافظة كربلاء خلال العام الدراسي 2024/2023. ولتحقيق أهداف الدراسة الحالية تم استخدام أداتين؛ الاستبانة المعتمدة من قبل (فوتون سكينس 2006) لتقييم استراتيجيات التعلم الاجتماعية واختبار القراءة من موقع (liveworksheets.com) لتقييم مهارة القراءة لدى طلبة الإعدادية.
- وبعد التأكد من صحة وموثوقية الأدوات تم تطبيق الأدوات وجمع البيانات. ثم تم استخدام عدد من الأدوات الإحصائية لتحليل البيانات المتحصل عليها.
- وتكشف النتائج أن الطلبة لديهم مستوى مرتفع من استراتيجيات التعلم الاجتماعية ومستوى متوسط من مهارة القراءة. علاوة على ذلك، تكشف النتائج أيضاً أن استراتيجيات التعلم الاجتماعية للمشاركين ترتبط إحصائياً بكفاءتهم في القراءة. وأخيراً، تم طرح الاستنتاجات والتوصيات.
- الكلمات المفتاحية: استراتيجيات التعلم الاجتماعية، كفاءة القراءة، استيعاب القراءة