Investigating Memory Strategies to Enhance Reading Skills Among Year 6 ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension poses persistent challenges for Year 6 English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in Malaysian primary schools. This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of specific memory strategies — repetition, chunking, visualization, highlighting, and mnemonics — in improving reading comprehension. A quasi-experimental method was employed with 20 Year 6 students divided into experimental and control groups. Pre- and post-tests assessed reading performance, and a strategy-use survey captured learners' perceptions. The experimental group, trained in memory strategies, showed significant improvement (mean score increased from 3.3 to 8.6 out of 12; Cohen's d = 5.59). Repetition and highlighting were most commonly used, while mnemonics were less favored. The findings underscore the value of integrating memory strategies in ESL reading instruction and suggest implications for curriculum design and teacher training.

Keywords: ESL, reading comprehension, memory strategies, Year 6 learners, strategy-based instruction

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill necessary for academic success, especially for learners of English as a Second Language (ESL). In the Malaysian primary school context, Year 6 students often struggle to understand English texts due to limited vocabulary, unfamiliar grammatical structures, and minimal exposure to English beyond the classroom (Azman, Rahman, & Ibrahim, 2020). These challenges hinder their ability to identify main ideas, infer meanings, and retain key details.

Previous studies have emphasized the importance of strategy-based instruction in improving language outcomes, but many classrooms still rely heavily on rote memorization and traditional reading exercises. This creates a gap between learners' needs and the instructional methods employed (Ismail & Abdul Aziz, 2021).

One promising approach is the use of memory strategies, which are techniques that help learners encode, retain, and retrieve information. These include repetition, visualization, chunking, highlighting, and mnemonics, all of which have been found effective for enhancing reading comprehension when explicitly taught (Oxford, 1990).

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Despite their potential, there is limited research exploring the use of memory strategies in the context of Year 6 Malaysian ESL classrooms. This study seeks to address that gap by examining the impact of selected memory strategies on reading comprehension and identifying which strategies learners find most helpful.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

To what extent do memory strategies improve the reading comprehension skills of Year 6 ESL learners?

Which memory strategies are most frequently used and perceived as effective by the learners?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies (LLS) are deliberate actions or techniques learners use to enhance their language acquisition. According to Oxford (1990), these strategies help learners store, retrieve, and use information effectively, especially in second language contexts. LLS can be categorized into cognitive, metacognitive, compensation, affective, social, and memory strategies. Among these, memory strategies are particularly relevant for reading comprehension as they focus on internalizing and recalling linguistic input through association and retrieval techniques.

Oxford (1990) identifies memory strategies as techniques that support learners in linking new information with existing knowledge. These include grouping, imagery, rhyming, reviewing, and employing physical response methods. Such strategies are especially useful for young ESL learners, as they simplify complex information and promote long-term retention.

Memory Strategies and ESL Reading

Memory strategies play a crucial role in helping learners understand and retain reading material. Repetition, visualization, chunking, highlighting, and the use of mnemonics are widely recognized as effective techniques in this domain (Lim & Ahmad, 2020; Rahim & Roslan, 2021). For example, visualization allows learners to create mental images of textual content, which strengthens memory encoding and enhances comprehension. Highlighting key phrases also enables learners to focus on and revisit essential points in a passage.

Chunking, which involves breaking information into smaller units, assists in managing cognitive load and improves learners' ability to process and recall textual data. Similarly, repetition through reading aloud or verbal rehearsal reinforces understanding and aids in information retention. Mnemonics, although powerful, are less frequently used among younger learners due to their complexity (Khamis, Johari, & Razali, 2024).

These strategies must be taught explicitly and practiced consistently to become effective tools. Tan, Wong, and Lee (2022) emphasize that strategy-based instruction significantly improves ESL reading outcomes, particularly when learners are guided through practical applications of the strategies.

Empirical Studies on Memory Strategies in Reading

Numerous studies have validated the effectiveness of memory strategies in improving reading skills among ESL learners. Rahim and Roslan (2021) found that Year 5 students who received training in chunking and highlighting outperformed their peers in comprehension tasks. Similarly, Chee and Lee (2023) reported increased learner autonomy and reading confidence when strategy instruction was integrated into classroom activities.

Lim and Ahmad (2020) observed that visualization techniques improved both short-term and long-term recall, while Hussin, Alias, and Rahim (2023) highlighted the role of retrieval practices and mental imagery in ESL

primary classrooms. However, the use of mnemonics was found to be less common, primarily due to the lack of scaffolding and students' limited exposure to such techniques (Khamis et al., 2024).

Despite this growing body of evidence, many Malaysian primary ESL learners remain unaware of how to use these strategies effectively. Ismail and Abdul Aziz (2021) point out that strategy-based instruction is often underutilized due to curriculum constraints and limited teacher training.

Research Gap

While existing studies have explored various language learning strategies, there is limited research focusing specifically on the application and effectiveness of memory strategies among Year 6 ESL learners in Malaysian primary schools. Furthermore, many of these studies do not examine learners' preferences and perceptions regarding different memory strategies. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating both the outcomes and learners' feedback after explicit instruction in selected memory strategies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quasi-experimental design to examine the effectiveness of memory strategies in improving reading comprehension among Year 6 ESL learners. The design included an experimental group, which received targeted instruction in memory strategies, and a control group, which followed the standard reading curriculum. Both groups undertook pre- and post-tests to measure their reading comprehension progress.

The participants of the study were 20 Year 6 ESL pupils from a government primary school in Johor, Malaysia. All participants were 12 years old and were selected based on similar English proficiency levels determined by their Year 5 academic records. None of the participants had prior formal training in memory strategies. Using a random assignment technique through sealed envelopes, the students were evenly divided into an experimental group (n = 10) and a control group (n = 10). Prior to the study, written consent was obtained from the school and parents of all participants.

Two instruments were used for data collection. The first was a 12-item reading comprehension test, developed based on the Year 6 Malaysian English syllabus. The test assessed four major domains: identifying main ideas, vocabulary in context, inferencing, and recalling key details. Each item was scored dichotomously (0 = incorrect, 1 = correct), and the test demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78$) based on a pilot study involving 15 non-participant students. The second instrument was a strategy-use survey, designed to evaluate learners' frequency and perception of five specific memory strategies: repetition, chunking, visualization, highlighting, and mnemonics. The survey employed a 7-point Likert scale (1 = never, 7 = always) and included two open-ended questions to gather qualitative feedback. The content validity of both instruments was reviewed by TESL experts, and the survey was piloted with eight Year 6 learners to ensure clarity and suitability.

The intervention took place over a period of seven weeks. In the first week, both the experimental and control groups completed the pre-test under standardized conditions. From weeks two to five, the experimental group received weekly 40-minute lessons, each focusing on a specific memory strategy. Each lesson followed a structured sequence, beginning with an explanation of the strategy, followed by teacher modeling using think-aloud methods, guided practice using scaffolded reading passages, and independent application tasks. A fidelity checklist was employed and monitored by an independent observer to ensure consistency in lesson delivery. During this period, the control group continued their regular reading lessons as outlined in the school syllabus, without any exposure to memory strategy instruction. In week six, all participants completed the post-test, and the experimental group additionally responded to the strategy-use survey.

The collected data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Paired-sample t-tests were conducted using SPSS Version 27 to compare pre- and post-test mean scores within each group, with a significance level set at $\alpha = .05$. Cohen's d was also calculated to assess the magnitude of the intervention's effect. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to analyze the frequency of

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strategy use from the survey data. Open-ended responses were subjected to thematic analysis, with two independent coders reviewing and categorizing responses to ensure inter-rater reliability above 85 percent.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants were informed of their right to confidentiality and voluntary participation, and were assured they could withdraw at any point without consequence. Parental and institutional consent was obtained in writing, and all assessments were conducted following standardized and ethically appropriate procedures.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection for this study was conducted systematically over a period of seven weeks. In Week 1, all participants completed a standardized pre-test measuring reading comprehension skills across four domains: identifying main ideas, understanding vocabulary in context, making inferences, and recalling key details. The pre-test was administered under exam-like conditions to ensure uniformity.

Following the pre-test, the experimental group participated in four weeks of memory strategy instruction (Weeks 2 to 5), where each week introduced and practiced a specific strategy: repetition, chunking, visualization, highlighting, and mnemonics. Lessons incorporated explicit explanations, teacher modeling, guided practice, and independent reading tasks. Meanwhile, the control group continued with their regular reading curriculum without direct exposure to memory strategies. Lesson delivery in the experimental group was monitored using a fidelity checklist to ensure consistency across sessions.

In Week 6, both the experimental and control groups sat for the post-test, which was identical in structure and difficulty level to the pre-test. Additionally, the experimental group completed a strategy-use survey designed to assess the frequency of strategy application and gather qualitative feedback on the perceived effectiveness and challenges of using memory strategies during reading activities. To ensure reliability, all assessments and surveys were administered under controlled and consistent conditions.

Data Analysis

Experimental Group		**Controlled Group**	
Pupils	Marks	Pupils	Marks
Pupil 1	2/12	Pupil 11	5/12
Pupil 2	3/12	Pupil 12	5/12
Pupil 3	3/12	Pupil 13	5/12
Pupil 4	3/12	Pupil 14	6/12
Pupil 5	3/12	Pupil 15	6/12
Pupil 6	3/12	Pupil 16	6/12
Pupil 7	4/12	Pupil 17	8/12
Pupil 8	4/12	Pupil 18	8/12
Pupil 9	4/12	Pupil 19	9/12
Pupil 10	4/12	Pupil 20	10/12

TABLE 1 : PRE-TEST RESULTS

Experimental Group		**Controlled Group**	
Pupils	Marks	Pupils	Marks
Pupil 1	8/12	Pupil 11	8/12
Pupil 2	8/12	Pupil 12	8/12
Pupil 3	7/12	Pupil 13	7/12
Pupil 4	9/12	Pupil 14	9/12
Pupil 5	8/12	Pupil 15	8/12
Pupil 6	8/12	Pupil 16	8/12
Pupil 7	11/12	Pupil 17	8/12
Pupil 8	8/12	Pupil 18	10/12
Pupil 9	9/12	Pupil 19	10/12
Pupil 10	10/12	Pupil 20	10/12

TABLE 2 :POST-TEST RESULTS

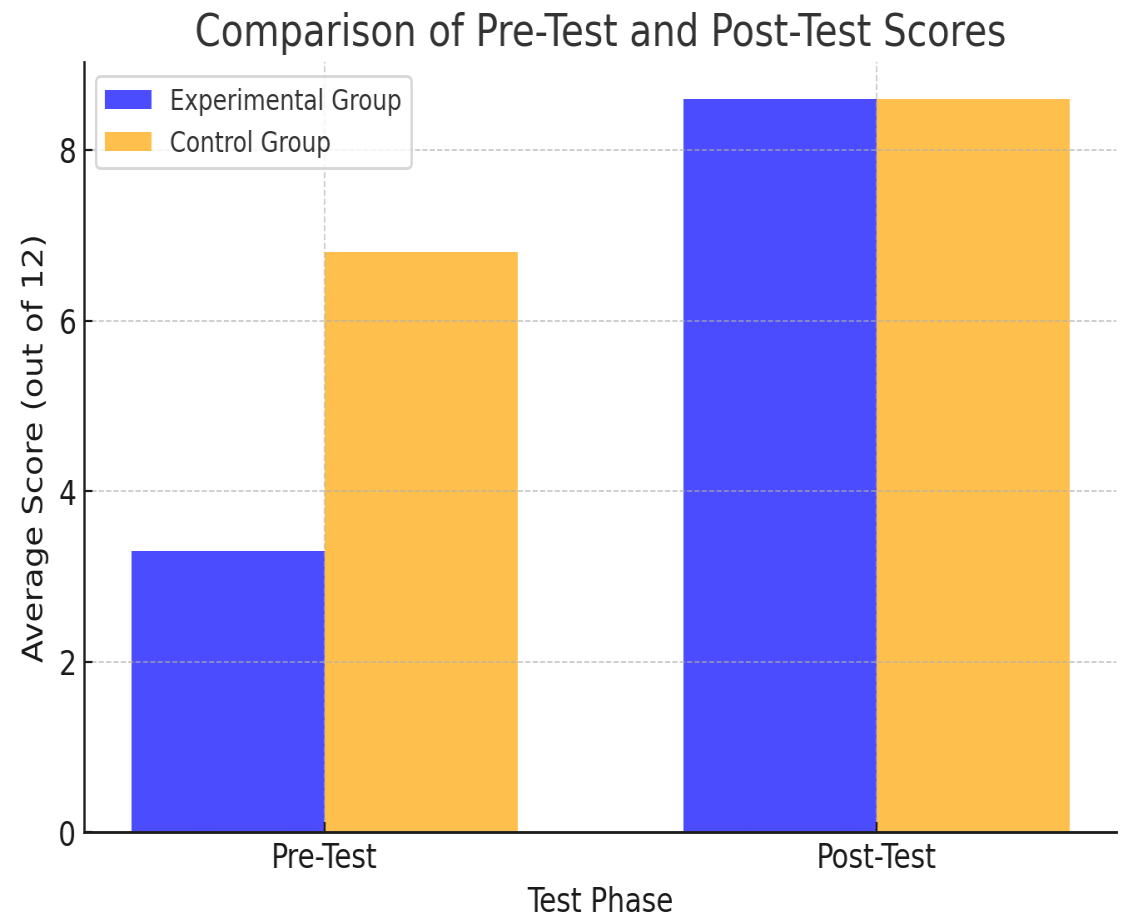

Chart 1 : Comparison Of Post Test And Pretest Results

Inferential Statistics

Analysis of Pre-Test and Post-Test Results

The paired t-test results reveal a statistically significant improvement in both the experimental and control groups. However, the experimental group demonstrated a much stronger improvement. The experimental group's pre-test mean score was 3.3/12, which increased significantly to 8.6/12 in the post-test. The control group, which started with a higher pre-test mean score of 6/12, also improved to 8.6/12 post-test, but with a less pronounced effect.

The statistical significance of these improvements is evident from the p-values: $p < 0.0001$ for the experimental group and $p = 0.00073$ for the control group. These results confirm that the improvements observed are not due to chance, and both groups benefited from their respective learning methods. However, the magnitude of improvement varies considerably between groups.

To further evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention, Cohen's d effect size was calculated. The experimental group achieved a huge effect size of 5.59, while the control group showed a large effect size of 1.59. This data suggests that the experimental group's intervention had a significantly stronger impact on learning outcomes compared to the control group's traditional methods.

In conclusion, while both groups experienced improvement, the experimental group showed superior gains, indicating that the intervention was highly effective in enhancing learning performance. The results suggest that implementing the experimental method more broadly could yield substantial educational benefits.

Descriptive Statistics Analysis of Memory Strategies in Reading

The analysis of the survey responses reveals significant variations in the use of different memory strategies in reading. The most frequently used strategies are repetition (mean = 4.85, SD = 0.65) and highlighting/underlining (mean = 4.60, SD = 0.58). Repetition stands out as the most preferred technique, with an overwhelming 95% of respondents reporting that they always use it. This evidence suggests that learners find verbal repetition effective in reinforcing memory and comprehension. Similarly, highlighting or underlining key information is a common habit, likely because it requires minimal effort while helping students focus on essential details in a text.

Moderately used strategies include chunking (mean = 3.75, SD = 0.99), visualization (mean = 3.25, SD = 0.94), and prior knowledge connection (mean = 3.35, SD = 1.15). These strategies are Although a reasonable number of students use them, they do not dominate reading habits as much as repetition or highlighting. Chunking, which involves breaking down information into smaller parts, seems somewhat popular, possibly because it helps organize data more effectively. Visualization and connecting prior knowledge are also used occasionally, though their slightly lower mean values and higher standard deviations suggest that their use is inconsistent among students.

On the other hand, the least frequently used strategies are mnemonics (mean = 1.90) and keyword association (mean = 3.15). Mnemonics, despite being a well-documented memory-enhancing tool, appear to be underutilized, with 50% of respondents reporting that they never use it. This might indicate a lack of awareness or training in using mnemonics effectively in reading tasks. Keyword association is slightly more common but still less preferred compared to other strategies.

Overall, the findings indicate that students gravitate toward straightforward and less cognitively demanding strategies, such as repetition and highlighting, while more complex memory techniques like mnemonics and keyword association remain underutilized. The variability in responses, as seen in the standard deviations, suggests that while some learners rely on a wide range of strategies, others may need guidance or instruction in using more diverse and effective memory techniques to enhance their reading comprehension.

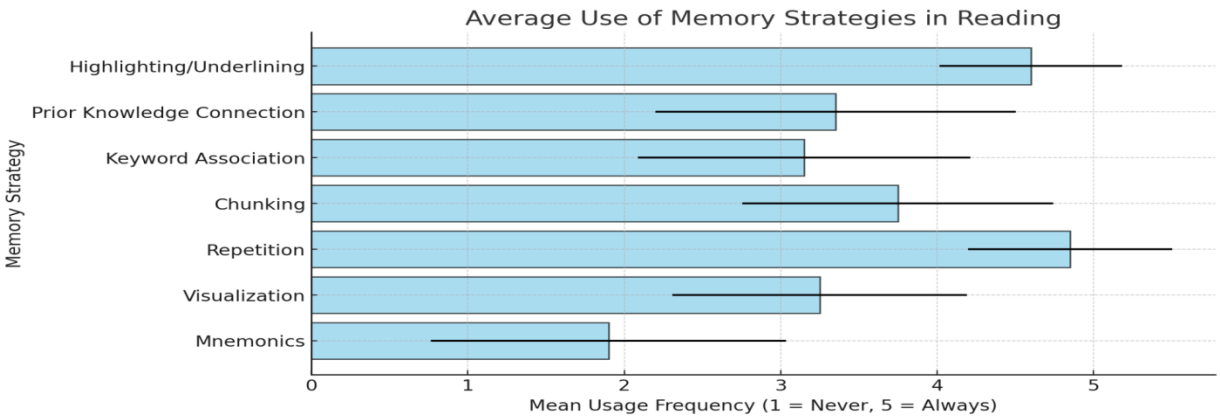

Chart 2: Summary Of Memory Strategy Used

Correlation Analysis

Relationship Between Memory Strategy Use and Reading Improvement

The analysis of pre-test and post-test scores clearly demonstrates the impact of memory strategies on reading improvements. In the experimental group, where students applied memory strategies, the pre-test scores were relatively low, ranging from 2/12 to 4/12. However, after the intervention, their post-test scores increased significantly, with most students scoring between 7/12 and 11/12. This substantial improvement suggests that memory strategies such as repetition, visualization, highlighting, and chunking played a crucial role in enhancing their reading comprehension and retention.

In contrast, the control group, which did not receive training in memory strategies, showed only moderate improvement. Their pre-test scores were slightly higher than those of the experimental group, ranging between 5/12 and 10/12. However, their post-test scores, while improved, remained within a narrower range of 7/12 to 10/12. This evidence suggests that natural learning progress contributed to their development, but without the structured application of memory strategies, their improvement was not as pronounced.

The comparison between the two groups highlights a strong positive correlation between memory strategy use and reading performance. The experimental group's significant gains indicate that structured memory strategies can enhance comprehension, recall, and overall reading ability more effectively than relying on natural learning progression alone. The findings support the idea that incorporating memory strategies into reading instruction can be a highly beneficial approach to improving students' academic performance.

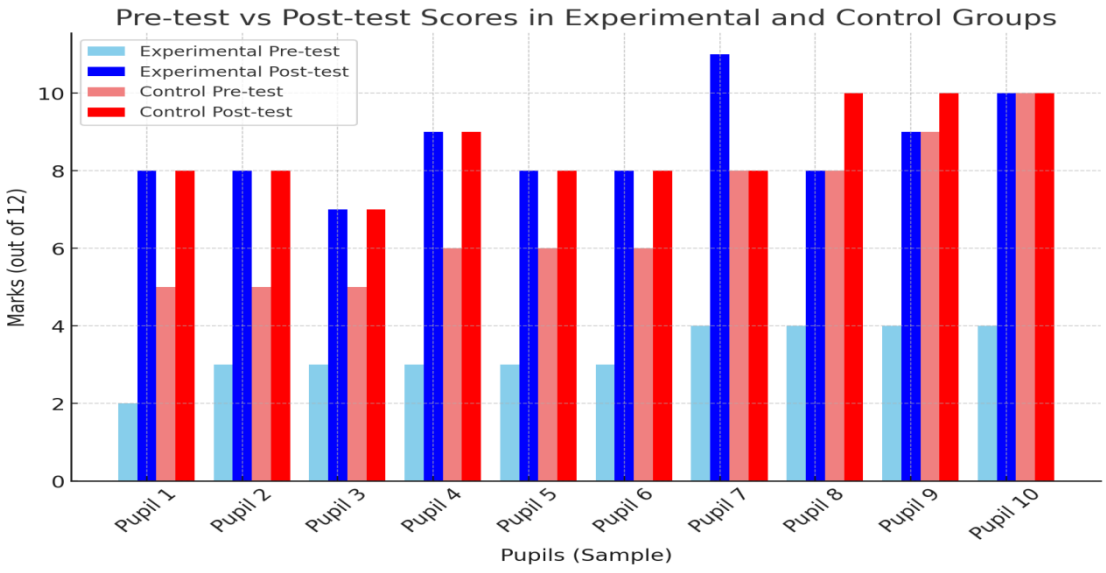

Chart 3: Individual Comparison of Scores Between Experimental and Control Group Results.

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Section C: Open-Ended Questions

PUPILS	Q1: Which memory strategy do you find most effective when reading? And why?	Q2: Are there any challenges you face when using memory strategies for reading?
Pupil 1	I prefer highlighting and underlining; it is easier for me to remember.	I often cannot really focus throughout my reading, so I highlight and underline the main ideas to help my understanding.
Pupil 2	I love to repeat words or sentences aloud to remember the key points.	For longer information, I sometimes cannot memorize it easily.
Pupil 3	I like singing to remember words and information.	I can focus only for a short time.
Pupil 4	I often break the texts into smaller parts (chunking); it helps me to understand better.	
Pupil 5	I prefer visualizing images or scenes and also repeating the words and sentences aloud because it helps my memory retention.	I often face challenges to memorize.
Pupil 6	I always repeat words or sentences aloud when it comes to reading and memorizing. It helps me to stay focused and understand better.	I sometimes find it difficult to highlight and underline to remember the key points, especially when I do not understand the whole idea of the text.
Pupil 7	I prefer to memorize through songs.	I have a very limited attention span.
Pupil 8	I always highlight and underline the main points when I read the text.	I can’t stay focused for a long time.
Pupil 9	I often break the long sentences into parts	It is challenging for me to memorize

	to help me understand better.	easily, especially in a short time.
Pupil 10	I repeat words and sentences aloud to help me understand and memorize them better.	I have difficulty understanding and memorizing the text easily.

The pupils use various memory strategies when reading, with the most common being repetition, highlighting and underlining, chunking, visualization, and singing. Several pupils find repeating words or sentences aloud helpful for remembering key points and staying focused, while others prefer highlighting and underlining to mark important information. Some pupils break texts into smaller parts (chunking) to aid understanding, while others use visualization by imagining scenes or pictures to retain information. One pupil even enjoys using singing as a memory aid.

Despite these strategies, pupils also face challenges when using memory techniques. Some struggle with maintaining focus, making it harder to retain information. Others find it difficult to memorize longer texts, while a few experience difficulties in highlighting and underlining, especially when they do not fully understand the content. These insights highlight the need for reading strategies that support pupils' memory and comprehension skills, such as interactive activities, guided reading sessions, and differentiated instruction based on their learning preferences.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the effectiveness of memory strategy instruction in enhancing reading comprehension among Year 6 ESL learners. The experimental group, which initially had a lower mean score than the control group, demonstrated remarkable improvement after receiving explicit instruction in selected memory strategies. Their mean score rose from 3.3 to 8.6 out of 12, resulting in a very large effect size (Cohen's d = 5.59). In contrast, while the control group also improved—from 6.0 to 8.6—the effect size (Cohen's d = 1.59) was notably smaller, indicating that traditional reading instruction alone was less impactful. These results suggest that structured, strategy-based teaching produces significantly stronger gains in reading performance compared to regular instructional methods.

One reason for this improvement may be the practical and engaging nature of the memory strategies used. Strategies like repetition and highlighting were among the most frequently applied by learners, likely due to their simplicity and immediate usefulness. Repetition, for instance, supports verbal rehearsal and strengthens memory retention, while highlighting helps learners focus on key points in a text. These techniques, being easy to implement and less cognitively demanding, were highly favored by students and had a positive impact on their performance.

On the other hand, more complex strategies such as mnemonics were underutilized. This aligns with findings from Khamis et al. (2024), who observed that primary school learners often struggle with advanced memory techniques unless they receive sustained guidance. In this study, the short four-week intervention may not have provided sufficient time for learners to become confident in applying mnemonics. Moreover, the cognitive demands of creating memory associations without strong scaffolding may have discouraged their use.

The qualitative data further support these conclusions. Many pupils expressed that they preferred repetition, highlighting, chunking, or visualization because these strategies helped them stay focused and retain information more effectively. However, several also reported challenges such as limited attention span, difficulty memorizing longer texts, and problems understanding how to apply certain strategies. These insights highlight the importance of differentiated instruction and the need for teachers to model and support strategic reading practices based on learners' individual needs and cognitive readiness.

Overall, the results of this study align with prior research indicating that memory strategies—when taught explicitly and practiced consistently—can lead to substantial improvements in reading comprehension. Studies

by Lim and Ahmad (2020), Rahim and Roslan (2021), and Tan et al. (2022) have similarly demonstrated that strategy-based instruction fosters improved reading performance and learner autonomy. The findings of this study strengthen that body of evidence and highlight the value of integrating memory strategies into primary ESL reading instruction.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to investigate the effectiveness of memory strategies in enhancing reading comprehension among Year 6 ESL learners. The findings provide strong evidence that strategy-based instruction, particularly involving techniques such as repetition, highlighting, visualization, and chunking, significantly improves reading performance. The experimental group, which received explicit instruction in these memory strategies, showed a notable improvement in post-test scores compared to the control group that followed the regular syllabus. The large effect size observed (Cohen's d = 5.59) further confirms the strong impact of the intervention on learner outcomes. These results reinforce the importance of equipping young ESL learners with cognitive tools that enable better comprehension, retention, and engagement with reading tasks.

Among the strategies introduced, repetition and highlighting emerged as the most frequently used and effective techniques, as reported by the learners themselves. These strategies were perceived as accessible and practical, allowing learners to reinforce understanding and remember key details. Conversely, strategies such as mnemonics were less favored, possibly due to their complexity and the limited time available for mastery during the intervention. These observations suggest that while memory strategies are beneficial, their effectiveness depends on both the learners' cognitive readiness and the quality of instructional support provided by teachers.

Despite the positive outcomes, the study faced several limitations. The small sample size of twenty pupils restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Additionally, the four-week duration of the intervention may not have been sufficient for learners to internalize more complex strategies or demonstrate long-term retention. The absence of a delayed post-test further limits conclusions about the lasting impact of the strategy training.

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made. First, ESL teachers should be trained in strategy-based instruction and encouraged to model memory strategies explicitly during reading lessons. Repetition, highlighting, and visualization should be prioritized as foundational techniques, especially for younger learners. Teachers can gradually introduce more advanced strategies, such as mnemonics, with appropriate scaffolding to build learner confidence and competence. Second, curriculum developers should consider incorporating strategy-based activities into reading materials to support the development of independent reading skills. Lastly, future research should explore the long-term effects of memory strategy instruction, extend the duration of interventions, and examine its applicability across different language skills such as writing, speaking, and listening.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of research supporting the use of language learning strategies in ESL classrooms. It demonstrates that targeted memory strategies can significantly enhance reading comprehension among primary school learners and offers practical implications for teaching, curriculum planning, and further academic inquiry.

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