

Good vs. Poor Readers' Strategies in Narrative Comprehension: A Think-Aloud Study among Chinese EFL Learners

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Abstract

The use of reading strategies is closely linked to readers' proficiency levels. While extensive research has examined strategy use among EFL readers with varying proficiency, there remains a gap in qualitatively understanding the characteristics that distinguish good and poor EFL readers in narrative texts. The study addresses this gap through a qualitative case study involving four good and four poor Chinese college EFL readers. Data were collected primarily through think-aloud protocols to gain in-depth insights into their strategy use. Findings indicate that good readers effectively employed inference-making strategies to enhance comprehension and actively monitored their reading progress. Conversely, poor readers relied heavily on translation, struggled with making inferences, and demonstrated ineffective comprehension monitoring. These contrasting behaviors revealed three key differences between the two reader groups: approaches to assisting comprehension, inference-making abilities, and monitoring of comprehension. The study concludes that successful narrative comprehension depends on both linguistic competence and strategic reading awareness. It recommends explicit instruction on rephrasing and inference-making strategies, alongside guidance for active comprehension monitoring and adaptive strategy use. Future research is suggested to examine how strategy use evolves over time and how targeted instruction influences EFL readers' strategic behavior.

Keywords: reading strategy, good readers, poor readers, think-aloud protocol, narrative text

1. Introduction

Reading is a vital means of acquiring language input, involving an active reconstruction of written messages. It is essential for both academic and lifelong learning (Daguay-James & Bulusan, 2020). For second-language (L2) readers, the challenge increases due to factors like language proficiency, text complexity, and the need for effective strategies (Khreisat, 2022). Narrative texts, in particular, present unique demands for L2 readers. They involve intricate features such as plot development, character relationships, and thematic interpretation. Furthermore, the cultural and contextual nuances embedded in narratives can add to the complexity in readers' assumption-making, emotional engagement, and linguistic interpretation, making effective strategy use crucial for comprehension (Schmitz & Dannecker, 2023).

Recently, researchers have become increasingly interested in examining the strategies L2 learners use during reading. Studies suggest that the effective employment of reading strategies enhances reading skills in proficient readers, and helps less proficient students overcome weaknesses (Wang; 2016; Bećirović et al., 2018; Nilforoushan et al., 2023). Notably, proficient L2 readers demonstrated greater use of questioning, paraphrasing, translation, and contextual cues (Lin & Yu, 2015). They also employ more metacognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating their comprehension, whereas less proficient readers tend to rely on local or surface-level strategies and demonstrate limited metacognitive control (Öztürk & Şenaydın, 2019). These findings highlight the need to examine the strategic behaviors that distinguish proficiency levels, particularly in terms of when, where, and how strategies are applied. However, existing research has primarily focused on isolated strategies and their frequency of use, with limited attention to the broader cognitive and metacognitive patterns involved in narrative reading across proficiency levels. Addressing this gap, the present study employs a think-aloud approach to examine Chinese EFL college students' use of reading strategies, comparing the characteristics of strategy use across proficiency levels in narrative text comprehension.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Reading Comprehension and Reading Strategy

Recent research emphasizes reading as an interactive process shaped by cognitive and metacognitive efforts in L2 comprehension (e.g., Alkhaleefah, 2017; Al Roomy & Alhawsaw, 2019). According to the interactive model (Stanovich, 1980), effective reading involves the coordination of bottom-up decoding and top-down integration of prior knowledge. Bernhardt's (2005) compensatory model (see Figure 1) further extends this perspective by attributing approximately 50% of comprehension variance to L2 language knowledge and L1 literacy, with reading strategies constituting one component of the remaining unexplained variance. The three dimensions operate interactively, allowing readers to compensate for weaknesses in one area by relying more heavily on others. Complementing these models, Flavell's (1979) theory of metacognition highlights the reader's ability to monitor, evaluate, and regulate

comprehension processes. Empirical studies (Khreisat, 2022; Larouz et al., 2024) affirm that metacognitive awareness enables readers to manage cognitive resources, detect comprehension failures, and apply repair strategies. Although no single model fully accounts for the complexity of L2 reading (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014), integrating cognitive and metacognitive perspectives offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding meaning construction.

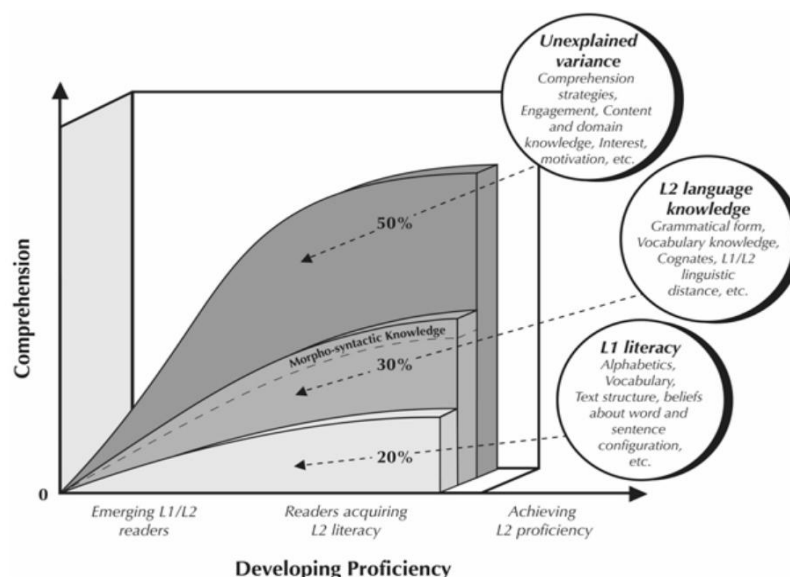


Figure 1. A compensatory model of second language reading (Bernhardt, 2005, p. 140)

The conceptual understanding of reading as an interaction between cognitive and metacognitive processes has informed the classification of reading strategies into two broad categories: cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Cognitive strategies operate to facilitate the efficient retrieval, storage, and absorption of information, enabling readers to extract and construct meaning from textual content effectively (Idris et al., 2022). Research literature in both L1 and L2 often categorizes cognitive strategies into two main types: bottom-up strategies, which involve aspects like sound-letter relationships, vocabulary, and syntax, and top-down strategies, which focus on grasping the overall meaning, background knowledge, and the organization of the text (Erler & Finkbeiner, 2007). Metacognitive strategies are used to assess readers' understanding of cognitive processing, recognize the processes taking place in their thinking, and adapt their strategies accordingly (Deliany & Cahyono, 2020). They are responsible for assessing problem-solving outcomes, planning the next steps, monitoring the efficiency of actions taken, and testing and revising the strategies adopted (Brown, 2014).

2.2 Reading Proficiency and Reading Strategy

Reading proficiency has long been recognized as a key factor influencing strategy use in L2 contexts. A systematic review by Li et al. (2024) identified it as the most extensively studied variable affecting EFL/ESL learners' reading strategies in the past decade. Quantitative studies generally indicate that proficient readers use a wider range of strategies more frequently than less proficient readers (e.g., Alfarwan, 2021; Chen & Intaraprasert, 2014; Do & Phan, 2021). For instance, Do and Phan (2021) found that higher proficiency predicted greater metacognitive

awareness and more frequent strategy use. However, the heavy reliance on self-report questionnaires in these studies raises validity concerns, as learners may misreport or misinterpret items (Oxford et al., 2004). Moreover, such instruments reflect awareness rather than actual strategy implementation (Adunyarittigun, 2021).

To overcome these limitations, think-aloud protocols (TAPs) have emerged as a popular qualitative instrument for examining learners' reading processes. TAP involves asking participants to verbalize their thoughts while reading, solving problems, or learning, thereby revealing cognitive and metacognitive processes that are typically silent and unobservable through retrospective measures such as questionnaires and interviews (Hu & Gao, 2017). For instance, Lin and Yu (2015) employed TAPs with 36 EFL college students and found that proficient readers used a broader range of effective strategies, while less proficient ones relied mainly on language-oriented, locally focused strategies.

Despite the potential of TAPs, several gaps remain in the literature. First, research on reading strategies in mainland China over the past decade have been dominated by quantitative methods. Li et al. (2024) reported that studies on EFL college students' reading strategy use in the region relied exclusively on quantitative designs in the past decade, underscoring the lack of qualitative insights into the actual reading processes of Chinese EFL learners. Second, existing TAP studies have predominantly employed expository texts to examine strategy use (e.g., Al Qahtani, 2020; Endley, 2016; Lin & Yu, 2015), leaving narrative reading under-explored, even though narrative texts involve distinct comprehension processes such as visualization, inference-making, and story-line monitoring. Third, although some TAP studies have compared strategy use across text types, including narratives (e.g., Pattapong, 2022), they have mainly emphasized frequency counts rather than exploring how and when strategies are applied or how readers flexibly switch strategies in response to comprehension challenges.

Responding to these gaps, the present study adopts think-aloud protocols to examine the strategic behaviors of Chinese EFL college students when reading a narrative text. By focusing on underlying patterns in students' reading behaviors, it seeks to uncover deep, recurring tendencies that characterize how readers of different proficiency levels engage with narrative comprehension. Specifically, it aims to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What are the characteristics of good EFL readers' strategy use in narrative text?
- (2) What are the characteristics of poor EFL readers' strategy use in narrative text?

3. Methodology

This study aimed to explore the characteristics of Chinese EFL students' use of reading strategies through a multiple case study approach. As a research design, a case study is well-suited for addressing research questions that explore processes or underlying mechanisms, as it allows for a more in-depth and multifaceted investigation than quantitative methods or experiments (Yin, 2018). In this study, each participant—whether a good or poor reader—was treated as an individual case. The units of analysis were the two reader groups (good and poor

readers), allowing for within-case and cross-case comparisons based on reading proficiency. Studying multiple cases allows researchers to uncover patterns across cases, thereby contributing to the development of "analytic generalizations" (Yin, 2018, p. 58).

3.1 Participants

Using purposeful sampling, eight cases were selected from 135 second-year English major students at a comprehensive university in Shaanxi Province, China. Selection was based primarily on the reading section scores of the TEM-4 (Test for English Majors Band 4), a standardized national English proficiency test for English majors in China. Participants were categorized based on their performance in the reading section, which has a total score of 20. Four good readers (May, Sue, Ella, and Jack) scored 16 or above ($\geq 80\%$), while four poor readers (Amy, Lily, Raymond, and Mike) scored below 12 ($< 60\%$). In addition to test performance, the participants were purposefully selected based on shared background characteristics. They: (1) were native Chinese speakers learning English as a foreign language, (2) were English majors who had received similar instruction in reading and reading strategies, and (3) had comparable pre-university educational, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds.

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 Reading Material

The narrative text used in this study was a 644-word excerpt from *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens (1843), depicting a spirit visiting the protagonist. The text falls under the theme of "supernatural element," a cultural topic familiar to the participants. As an original English literary work, it incorporates key features of narrative texts, including setting, character, and plot, while showcasing typical rhetorical and structural characteristics. The readability level of the text, as assessed by the Flesch Reading Formula and Fry Readability Graph, matched TEM-4 passages, ensuring an appropriate level of cognitive challenge. This level was sufficient to prompt participants to engage in strategic reading processes without overwhelming them (Ericsson & Simon, 1993). Additionally, participants confirmed they had no prior exposure to the text before the data collection.

3.2.2 Think-aloud Protocol (TAP)

Think-aloud protocols have been extensively used to capture strategy use during specific reading tasks. This method provides valuable insight into students' employment of comprehension strategies and the support these strategies provide (Hu & Gao, 2017). In this study, the think-aloud protocol served as a primary instrument for exploring participants' thought processes and strategy use in reading the text. Specifically, it enabled the identification of real-time decision-making, the types of strategies employed, and how these strategies contributed to meaning-making during comprehension.

3.2.3 Retrospective Interview

In reading research, think-aloud protocols are often followed by immediate retrospective interviews to triangulate and enrich the data (Lau, 2006). In this study, these interviews allowed participants to reflect on their reading performance, recall how they approached the text, and

elaborate on the strategies used to construct meaning. They also clarified specific behaviors observed during the think-aloud session, such as pausing, rereading, or showing confusion. This reflective process deepened the interpretive understanding of cognitive and metacognitive activity and enhanced the credibility of think-aloud findings.

3.2.4 Field Notes

Qualitative field notes play a vital role in ensuring methodological rigor by capturing contextual details, refining data interpretation, and supporting researcher reflexivity (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). In this study, field notes were recorded during participants' think-aloud tasks to achieve three key purposes: (1) to capture nonverbal behaviors (e.g., pauses, re-reading) that supplemented verbal reports, (2) to guide the development of follow-up interview questions, and (3) to strengthen data triangulation by offering an additional perspective on participants' reading processes. These notes ensured a more comprehensive analysis by preserving observational details that might otherwise have been overlooked.

3.3 Procedures

Data collection took place over six weeks. Following participant selection, all eight students received think-aloud training comprising scaffolded instruction and independent practice to ensure familiarity with the procedure and reduce disruption during reading. The training session included a video demonstration of think-aloud tasks accompanied by the researcher's explanations and instructions. For practice, they worked on an English narrative text, carefully chosen to be different from the main study material. Two weeks later, individual think-aloud sessions were conducted in a regular classroom during out-of-class hours. To encourage rich verbalization, participants were allowed to express their thoughts in English, Chinese, or a mix of both. Before starting, they were informed that their think-aloud reports would be audio-recorded for transcription. During the think-aloud sessions, the researcher observed without interfering, taking field notes on participants' reactions and behaviors. If a participant remained silent for over 15 seconds, prompts such as "Why did you stop?" or "What are you thinking now?" were provided to encourage continued verbalization. Immediately following each think-aloud session, a retrospective interview was conducted in the same room. Participants were invited to reflect on their reading behaviors and strategies. These interviews were audio-recorded. As in the think-aloud sessions, participants could respond in Chinese, English, or a combination of both.

3.4 Data Analysis

The study employed data triangulation through multiple sources: think-aloud protocols (TAPs), retrospective interviews, and field notes. Data from the TAPs and interviews were transcribed, and Chinese segments underwent a back-translation procedure for accuracy. Nonverbal cues (e.g., laughter, pauses) were systematically annotated to preserve communicative context. Subsequently, the eight TAPs were thematically coded using the Reading Strategy Scheme (see Appendix 1), developed by synthesizing established taxonomies from L1 and L2 reading literature (e.g., Block, 1986; Lau, 2006; Pritchard, 1990; Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002). The scheme categorized 29 distinct reading strategies into ten subcategories (labeled A through J),

organized under three overarching categories: cognitive bottom-up, cognitive top-down, and metacognitive strategies. Coding was conducted independently by the researcher and a TESOL Ph.D. with extensive experience in reading strategy instruction. Inter-rater reliability reached 88%, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion to ensure consistency. Interview responses were analyzed alongside TAPs to triangulate strategy use and deepen understanding of the participants' approaches. Field notes further reinforced validity by documenting behavioral cues (e.g., gestures, re-reading), adding observational depth to verbal reports. Data saturation was confirmed when no new strategies emerged across successive TAPs and interviews, ensuring comprehensive coverage of reading behaviors.

Based on the identified strategies, this case study examined the reading experiences of good and poor readers. Each group's engagement with the text served as the unit of analysis. During analysis, coded instances of strategy use were compared within each group to identify recurring patterns. For example, in the good reader group, repeated cycles of guessing a word and inferring textual ideas from context emerged consistently across participants, often accompanied by self-correction or rephrasing to verify comprehension. Poor readers were also observed to be making inferences, but these occurred less frequently and with less confidence, often interrupted by reliance on L1 translation or surface-level decoding. These patterns were then clustered and abstracted into higher-order themes that captured each group's typical approach to comprehension challenges. A cross-case analysis allowed comparison between groups, revealing not only differences in strategy use but also how strategies were flexibly coordinated in real time. These findings illuminate how each proficiency group navigated the cognitive and metacognitive demands of narrative comprehension.

4. Results

4.1 Characteristics of Good Readers' Strategy Use in Narrative Text

The good readers' use of strategies was characterized by skillful use of higher-level strategies. Specifically, they employed a top-down approach to effectively infer the meanings of unknown words and contextual ideas, and used metacognitive approaches to actively monitor and assess their comprehension progress.

Theme 1: Skilled contextual inference

The good reader group consistently used contextual clues to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words, phrases, or ideas, often supported by rephrasing complex expressions in simpler terms. This strategy clarified ambiguity and deepened their understanding of thematic elements and character dynamics. A notable example is Sue's reading of Excerpt 1. When processing the section describing the character's psychological state, Sue accurately inferred his anxiety about developing events, as evidenced by her quiet verbal confirmation ("so he was waiting and panicking") and physical markers like nodding recorded in field notes. She then rephrased the section in her own words, interpreting it as the man anxiously awaiting the outcome. Her conclusion reflected a thoughtful consideration of the context and the emotions conveyed by the character, demonstrating her ability to integrate textual cues with inferred meaning.

Excerpt 1 (Sue):

Original text: He resolved to lie awake until the hour was passed; and, considering that he could no more go to sleep than go to Heaven, this was perhaps the wisest resolution in his power.

Sue's TAP: The protagonist was still very puzzled and had no idea what would happen and what to do next ... so he was waiting and panicking (TD_INFER_IDEA). He decided to stay awake because he was so nervous that sleeping felt impossible (BU_REPHRASE).

Note: The codes within the parentheses are the coding of reading strategies identified from participants' TAP.

A key strength of the good readers' inferencing was their ability to combine lexical guessing with broader contextual interpretation. This was evident in Ella's response to the phrase "First of Exchange" (Excerpt 2). Field notes recorded her physically tracing the phrase and rereading the preceding context twice while hypothesizing its meaning. Though her interpretation of the financial term was not entirely accurate, her integration of linguistic and contextual clues allowed her to infer Scrooge's miserly nature. Her rephrasing of the sentence alongside contextual cross-referencing illustrated how good readers coordinated multiple strategies to construct meaning despite lexical difficulty.

Excerpt 2 (Ella):

Original text: This was a great relief, because "three days after sight of this First of Exchange pay to Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge or his order," and so forth, would have become a mere United States' security if there were no days to count by.

Ella's TAP: "First of Exchange" is related with money ... here it might mean some money paid to this person (TD_INFER_WD). [rereading the previous sentence] (BU_READ). The money to be paid to another person would become the security if the world ended (BU_REPHRASE). Oh, I see ... when the apocalypse comes, he will not have to pay money to others any more. From this, it can be inferred that he may be a rather stingy person, as his immediate thought is that he might not have to give money to others any more (TD_INFER_IDEA).

Note: Descriptions in square brackets denote participants' actions during reading.

Sue's and Ella's use of these strategies, as well as their understanding of them, was confirmed in the retrospective interview.

Sue: In class, the teachers have taught us to guess the implied meaning ... or the author's intention... this is a question often appearing in the reading test. Later, I got to know this process is called "inferring" ... right? I believe it is a very important skill in reading, as it is impossible for the author to state everything to the surface... you need to have your own understanding.

Ella: When I do not fully understand something, I try to put it into my own words. That helps me figure out what the author is trying to convey, especially if it is something not directly stated.

The good readers' reading practices and explanations reflected their abilities to infer implied meaning by reinterpreting unclear information in their own words and making connections between events and underlying intentions. This combination of strategies allowed them to clarify ambiguous sections, reinforce their interpretations, and bridge gaps in understanding. Consequently, they could obtain richer inferences, which ultimately enhanced their overall reading experience.

Theme 2: Effective monitoring of reading comprehension

This theme reflected the good readers' ongoing awareness of their comprehension and their ability to regulate it during reading. They recognized challenges, took deliberate steps to resolve them, and verified their understanding. Excerpt 3 illustrates Jack's use of metacognitive strategies, showing how he actively monitored and evaluated his comprehension process.

Excerpt 3 (Jack):

Original text: When Scrooge awoke, it was so dark, that looking out of bed, he could scarcely distinguish the transparent window from the opaque walls of his chamber.

Jack's TAP: The first paragraph seems to tell that the character is seeking something in the darkness (TD_SUMMRAIZE). It is creating the atmosphere, maybe a little eerie (TD_INFER_IDEA). Actually, I am still not clear what he intended to do (MC_PROBLEM) ... so I will read on to see what he wanted indeed (MC_PLAN). This is a typical characteristic for narrative text... setting suspense at the beginning (TD_TEXT TYPE).

As illustrated in Excerpt 3, Jack summarized key points after reading the opening paragraph and identified a gap in understanding the protagonist's intention. His decision to continue reading for clarification reflected a planned reading strategy. He also noted how the imagery of darkness and Scrooge's limited vision heightened the eerie atmosphere, demonstrating awareness of narrative techniques. A reflective pause, noted in field observations, suggested deliberate processing. Together, his verbal reports and behavioral cues confirmed active monitoring and regulation of comprehension, illustrating the metacognitive awareness typical of good readers.

Another good reader, Sue, demonstrated purposeful selective attention while engaging with the text. Upon encountering the name "Marley" for the first time, she identified it as a potential source of confusion but anticipated that the subsequent sections might provide additional context to clarify her uncertainty. Consequently, she chose to read the following passages more attentively, showcasing her active engagement and strategic approach to resolving ambiguities in the text (see Excerpt 4).

Excerpt 4 (Sue):

Original text: Marley's Ghost bothered him exceedingly.

Sue's TAP: At this moment, a new character showed up...This should be a ghost (TD_INFER_IDEA). This part might be helpful for understanding Scrooge's confusion. I will pay more attention (MC_ATTEND).

Sue's metacognitive awareness was further demonstrated in how she managed lexical challenges. Instead of passively interpreting unfamiliar words, she marked unclear phrases by underlining or circling them as intentional checkpoints. In the retrospective interview, she explained that these markings helped her verify inferences or seek clarification later. Field notes confirmed her frequent visual returns to these sections, indicating active monitoring and efforts to maintain coherence in comprehension.

The above descriptions show that good readers demonstrated strong metacognitive awareness by continuously monitoring and evaluating their comprehension during narrative reading. They remained attentive to potential gaps in understanding and adjusted their strategies accordingly. This ongoing regulation enabled them to maintain a coherent grasp of the text, reflecting a high level of control and adaptability in their reading processes.

In summary, the good reader effectively integrated three processing levels crucial for narrative comprehension: bottom-up textual analysis through active rephrasing, top-down conceptual inferencing using prior knowledge and context, and metacognitive regulation of the comprehension process. This coordinated processing enabled them to follow character motivations, grasp plot development, and resolve comprehension challenges, resulting in coherent and meaningful interpretations of the story.

4.2 Characteristics of Poor Readers' Strategy Use in Narrative Text

Compared with the good readers, the poor readers encountered more challenges in reading the text, including vocabulary gaps, difficulties in syntax parsing and connecting context ideas. These difficulties were often reflected in their characteristics of strategy use.

Theme 1: Heavy reliance on L1 translation

One characteristic of the poor readers' strategy use was their heavy reliance on translating the text into L1. This reliance was largely triggered by challenges in syntactic processing. Specifically, they struggled to integrate individual words or short phrases into coherent sentence structures. As a result, their translations were often awkward, incomplete, or grammatically incorrect, and frequently failed to convey the intended meaning within the context.

Excerpt 5 (Lily):

Original text: ... considering that he could no more go to sleep than go to Heaven, ...

Lily's TAP: 认为他可以去天堂，而不是睡觉 ...*thinking he could go to heaven, rather than sleep* (BU_TRANS)

Note: The italicized texts represent the English equivalents of the Chinese contents.

In Excerpt 5, Lily misinterpreted the sentence as a choice between sleep and heaven, overlooking that the structure conveyed impossibility rather than contrast. Field notes recorded similar instances where poor readers relied on simplified, Chinese-based structures, often compromising semantic accuracy. These patterns highlight a key limitation: without a grasp of syntactic structures and their functions, readers may recognize individual words but still misinterpret the overall meaning.

For longer sentences, poor readers faced even greater challenges. In Excerpt 6, Amy managed to decode most of the sentence and consulted the dictionary for the word “spring,” as its contextual meaning was unclear to her. However, she became confused about the subject of the verb “presented,” largely due to the interruptions caused by the embedded structures within the sentence. These interruptions disrupted her ability to follow the sentence structure and accurately identify its main subject.

Excerpt 6 (Amy):

Original text: Every time he resolved within himself, after mature inquiry, that it was all a dream, his mind flew back again, like a strong spring released, to its first position, and presented the same problem to be worked all through, “Was it a dream or not?”

Amy’s TAP: 每次他自己决定...这就是梦...他的思绪就会飞回来...像一个什么回到最初位置...什么呈现出同样问题 *Every time he decided by himself...this is a dream...his mind would fly back...like a something going back to the initial position...something present the same problem* (BU_TRANS) [skipping “after mature inquiry”] (BU_SKIP) [checking “spring”] (BU_DIC).

Note: Descriptions in square brackets denote readers’ behaviors.

The poor readers’ limited familiarity with sentence structures and syntactic rules hindered their comprehension, despite their reliance on translation. This suggested that a lack of alternative strategies, as Amy mentioned in the interview, contributed to their difficulties in understanding complex sentences.

Amy: ... but when the grammar gets more complicated, it becomes much harder for me to understand. My goal is to read and understand the text directly. That is what I am aiming for, but with more complex grammar, it is much tougher for me. I need to translate sections of it and then get a general sense.

Amy’s comments revealed that her reliance on translation stemmed from difficulties with complex grammatical structures, which hindered direct comprehension in English. Like other poor readers, she attempted to simplify long sentences by breaking them into smaller parts. However, lacking a strong grasp of grammar, they often struggled to reassemble these fragments meaningfully, leading to confusion rather than clarity.

Theme 2: Hesitant inferring

Despite difficulties with lower-level processes, poor readers did attempt inferences, though with noticeably less confidence than good readers. For instance, when asked about strategies beyond dictionary use for unfamiliar words, Lily admitted she rarely inferred word meanings due to frequent errors. Similarly, in his interview, Mike acknowledged his limited vocabulary and “struggled with understanding the meaning behind words.” His challenges with inferential reading were especially evident in Excerpt 7.

Excerpt 7 (Mike):

Original text: The curtains of his bed were drawn aside; and Scrooge, starting up into a half-recumbent attitude, found himself face to face with the unearthly visitor who drew them.

Mike’s TAP: 他的床帘被拉开了 *His curtains were drawn aside...* Scrooge 和非地球拜访者面对面 *was face to face with the visitor not from the earth...* (BU_TRANS) [Checking “recumbent” in the dictionary] (BU_DIC) His gesture is partly reclining and partly upright (BU_REPHRASE).

In Excerpt 7, Mike first tried translating “recumbent” into Chinese before checking the dictionary. According to field notes, he read slowly and hesitated at “unearthly visitor,” showing signs of confusion before moving on. While his translation captured the literal meaning, he missed the supernatural implication that a ghost had arrived. This tendency toward surface-level interpretation, while avoiding deeper meaning, was a consistent pattern in his reading.

While poor readers often lacked confidence in making inferences, some of their attempts were accurate or partially accurate. These typically resulted from effective use of context clues or prior knowledge.

Excerpt 8 (Amy):

Original text: The more he thought, the more perplexed he was; and the more he endeavored not to think, the more he thought.

Amy’s TAP: He just couldn’t stop thinking about it (BU_REPHRASE). Generally, I only think like this when I am worried about something, and it’s only in those moments of concern that such thoughts occur to me (TD_KNOW) ... worried about something (TD_INFER_IDEA). Is it the time? Or the ghost? (TD_QUESTION)

In Excerpt 8, Amy employed rephrasing and personal reflection to infer the man’s worry. While she accurately grasped the main idea, she remained uncertain about the character’s internal conflict, reflecting a thoughtful but tentative reading approach. During the interview, Amy noted that she relied on context clues primarily to understand main ideas rather than to infer unfamiliar word meanings, and she expressed doubt about the accuracy of this strategy.

Narrative texts often convey meaning through subtle cues and character motivations. The poor readers’ diffidence to make inferences hindered their ability to track events and understand how

characters' actions shaped the plot. This difficulty appeared rooted in broader challenges with causal reasoning, often resulting in fragmented or incomplete comprehension.

Theme 3: Ineffective monitoring of reading comprehension

The poor readers' metacognition predominantly focused on identifying difficulties, particularly with challenging words and sentences. Unlike the good readers, they showed limited ability in planning, self-monitoring, and evaluating their comprehension effectively.

When reading the first paragraph, the poor readers demonstrated a more superficial approach compared to the proactive strategies of Jack, the good reader (see Excerpt 3). In Excerpt 9, Lily encountered two unfamiliar words: "opaque" and "chamber". She consulted a dictionary and translated the sentence into Chinese. Similarly, Mike rephrased the sentence based on his understanding of the narrative style. While both interpretations were technically accurate, neither reader reflected on the underlying information in the paragraph or considered what to expect from the following content. This lack of reflection and planning revealed a more passive reading approach.

Excerpt 9 (Lily and Jack):

Original text: When Scrooge awoke, it was so dark, that looking out of bed, he could scarcely distinguish the transparent window from the opaque walls of his chamber.

Lily's TAP: I don't know these two words: o-p-a-q-u-e and c-h-a-m-b-e-r. I'm going to look them up in the dictionary (BU_DIC). 当 Scrooge 醒来的时候, 天色很暗, 他看向窗外...几乎无法分辨透明的窗户和房间不透明的墙 *When Scrooge woke up, it was very dark. He looked out the window and ... could hardly tell the difference between the clear glass and the opaque walls of the room.* (BU_TRANS)

Mike's TAP: It is like telling a story, and "Scrooge" seems to be a character in it (TD_TEXTTYPE) Scrooge woke up to find his room so dark that he could hardly tell the difference between the window and the walls (BU_REPHRASE).

This pattern persisted when initial strategies proved ineffective. Faced with comprehension challenges, the poor readers were less inclined to adjust their strategies during reading, even when aware of their difficulties. As seen in Excerpt 10, Amy attempted to translate a complex sentence into Chinese to aid her understanding. When this approach failed, she acknowledged her confusion but moved on to the next section without rereading or seeking clarification.

Excerpt 10 (Amy):

Original text: This was a great relief, because "three days after sight of this First of Exchange pay to Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge or his order," and so forth, would have become a mere United States' security if there were no days to count by.

Amy's TAP: 这似乎是一种很大的宽慰, ... 因为当这个人或者他的命令...第一次交换支付之后的三天等等, 我都不想 become 命运。如果不按天计算的话, 这将成为仅仅是美国的安全 *This seemed to be a great relief...because this person or his order...three days after the exchange. If it is not counted by days, it will become the*

security of US. (BU_TRAN). The latter part of the sentence, from “three days” to “count by” ... I cannot understand (MC_PROBLEM).

In the above excerpt, Amy did not try to pinpoint the source of her difficulties. Instead, she proceeded to the next section. In the interview, she expressed frustration when encountering difficult text, and also admitted difficulty in actively monitoring comprehension while reading.

The poor readers’ approach to monitoring their comprehension reflected limited engagement with the text. Instead of strategically regulating their understanding, they tended to focus on surface-level challenges, such as unfamiliar words or complex sentence structures. Field notes consistently indicated that they seldom revisited confusing sections or evaluated their overall comprehension, pointing to limited metacognitive control. This short-term, problem-oriented approach often hindered their ability to integrate ideas across the text or recognize breakdowns in deeper understanding.

In summary, three key characteristics emerged in the poor readers’ strategy use during narrative reading. First, they depended predominantly on literal translation and surface-level interpretation, limited by grammatical constraints and lacking strategic flexibility. Second, while occasionally employing contextual or background knowledge, these attempts remained superficial and seldom supported coherent comprehension. Most critically, they exhibited deficient metacognitive control, failing to plan, monitor, or repair comprehension breakdowns. Consequently, their reading was fragmented and reactive, focusing on discrete vocabulary issues rather than constructing a coherent understanding of the story events and character motivations.

5. Discussion

From the above characteristics, the good and poor readers displayed three distinct differences in their use of strategies when engaging with the narrative text (see Figure 2). These differences contribute new insights into the broader understanding of L2 reading strategies, particularly in the under-explored area of narrative text comprehension across proficiency levels.

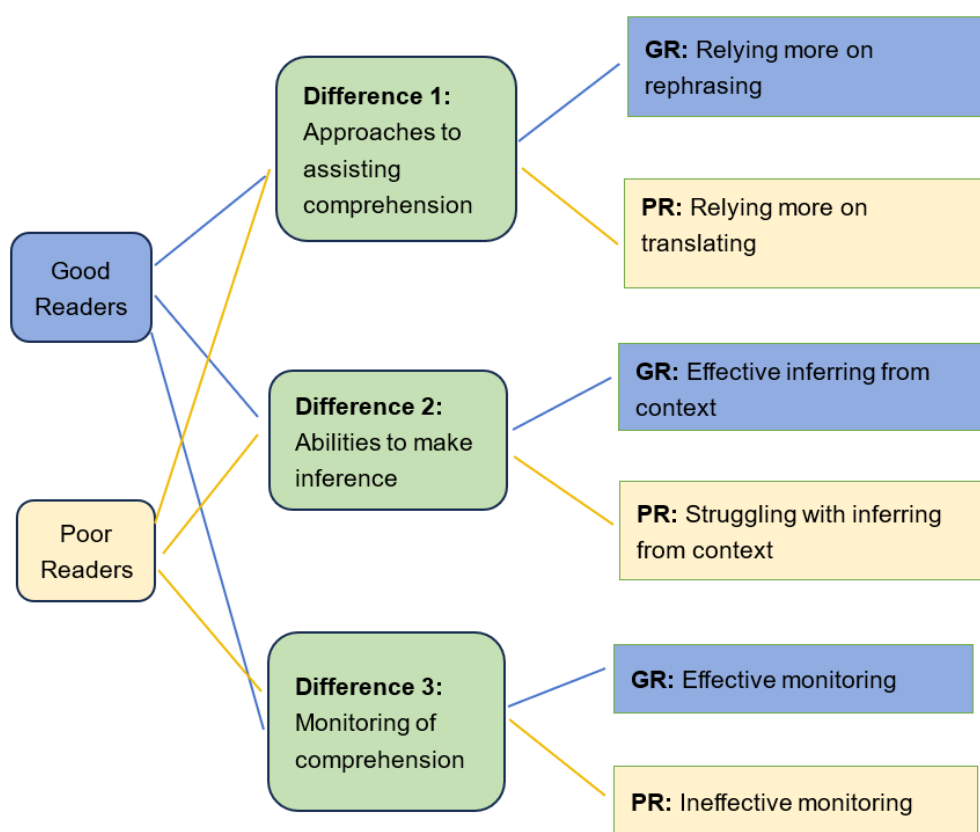


Figure 2. Differences between good and poor readers' strategy use

As illustrated in Figure 2, the first distinction between the good and poor readers lies in how they assisted comprehension during narrative reading. The good readers in this study tended to use rephrasing to verify and clarify meaning, which often aided inferencing. This supports earlier findings (Escudero et al., 2019; Lin & Yu, 2015) linking rephrasing to higher proficiency, but also extends prior research by showing that rephrasing was not merely a surface-level strategy, but a flexible meaning-making tool that helped sustain coherence across a storyline. The poor readers, by contrast, relied heavily on word-for-word translation, particularly when faced with unfamiliar vocabulary. This finding contrasts with Kraal et al.'s (2018) observation that low-comprehending readers often use paraphrasing to extract literal meaning, but also supports Pattapong's (2022) observation that struggling readers tend to depend on direct translation. Despite differing L1 backgrounds, both studies show a consistent pattern: less proficient readers favor lexical-level translation while under-using context-based strategies critical for narrative comprehension. This tendency likely stems from their limited vocabulary knowledge and lack of reading fluency, which hinder direct processing in English and increase their dependence on L1 to construct meaning. This excessive reliance on translation may further hinder inferential comprehension, especially in narratives that rely on implicit meaning, figurative language, and evolving plot lines.

The second key difference concerns inferencing, a cognitive skill essential for narrative comprehension. In this study, the good readers effectively used contextual cues to infer character motivations and plot developments, enhancing their overall understanding. These

findings support existing literature suggesting that proficient readers are better at generating inferences related to the topic (e.g., Barth et al., 2015; Elleman, 2017; Pattapong, 2022; Srisang & Everatt, 2021) and at integrating individual words into the broader context (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014). The poor readers, on the other hand, often focused mainly on surface-level details and were less confident in making inferences. This mirrors earlier findings that poor readers either remain bound to explicit textual meanings or struggle to produce inferences at the level of proficient readers (McMaster et al., 2012; Kraal et al., 2018). Their inferential difficulties can be attributed to two interrelated factors. First, as noted by Dhanapala and Yamada (2015), limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge restrict these readers to surface-level textual processing. Second, they often overlook contextual clues that could facilitate word-meaning inference (Hu & Nassaji, 2014). In narratives, where implicit elements and figurative language abound, this combination of surface-level processing and inferential weakness proved particularly detrimental, ultimately impairing coherent understanding rather than facilitating comprehension. The findings thus indicate that inferencing in narrative contexts is not optional but integral to constructing a coherent mental model of characters and events, which help explain why narratives are especially challenging for less proficient readers reported in previous studies (e.g., Alkhaleefah, 2017).

The third difference is comprehension monitoring, a key component of metacognitive strategy use. The good readers in this study demonstrated active engagement in metacognitive processes, consistently monitoring and assessing their comprehension. Similar practice has been observed in the previous studies (Amini et al., 2020; Öztürk & Şenaydın, 2019), which reported that more proficient readers engage in more deliberate and adaptive comprehension monitoring behaviors. In contrast, the poor readers showed ineffective monitoring behaviors. They seldom recognized higher-level comprehension challenges, such as ambiguous concepts or contradictions, and rarely took steps to address these issues. The disparity between good and poor readers underscores the importance of metacognitive engagement in narrative reading, where comprehension depends not only on decoding but also on interpreting unfolding events and managing uncertainty. In this study, the poor readers' limited monitoring often led to fragmented understanding. These results echo the findings of Mirandola, Ciriello, Gigli and Cornoldi (2018) and Taouki et al. (2022), who similarly observed that insufficient comprehension monitoring undermines readers' ability to manage the complexities inherent in narrative texts.

Across these areas, the findings illuminate not only the differences in strategy use between proficiency groups but also the ways learners interact with narrative texts in real time. Good readers demonstrated flexible and adaptive strategy application, integrating rephrasing, inferencing, and monitoring to construct coherent mental representations. Poor readers, by contrast, showed rigid, bottom-up processing and limited metacognitive engagement. By capturing these patterns through think-aloud protocols in the Chinese EFL context, the study provides qualitative insights into how and when strategies are applied, addressing the gap in previous research that focused predominantly on strategy frequency via questionnaires. Furthermore, by focusing on the narrative text, it illuminates the genre-specific challenges and cognitive demands that have been largely overlooked in prior TAP studies. Collectively, the

findings underscore the importance of instruction that fosters adaptive strategy use, contextual inferencing, and active monitoring, thereby supporting less proficient readers in navigating the implicit, evolving, and often complex elements of narrative texts.

6. Conclusions

This study examined the strategy use of good and poor EFL readers when engaging with the narrative text. The findings revealed distinct differences between the two reader groups in how they assisted comprehension, made inferences, and monitored comprehension. These distinctions shed light on the cognitive and metacognitive processes underlying effective reading strategies in narrative reading. Overall, the study highlights the importance of both linguistic competence and strategic awareness in navigating the complexities of narrative texts, offering valuable insights for improving EFL reading instruction and support.

Theoretically, this study extends Bernhardt's (2005) compensatory model of L2 reading by showing that while strategic processing can offset linguistic limitations, its effectiveness depends on the alignment between strategy use and genre-specific cognitive demands. Practically, these insights call for EFL instruction that cultivates metacognitive awareness, and explicitly trains learners in strategies like rephrasing and inference-making, particularly when engaging with narrative texts. Future studies can explore how such instructional interventions influence both higher- and lower-level reading skills over time, and how these strategies function in non-narrative genres such as expository or argumentative texts, where differing cognitive demands may reveal new compensatory patterns.

The study has several limitations. Firstly, a more diverse sample across educational settings, or cultural backgrounds may help to understand how the strategies vary across different demographic groups. Secondly, the findings are based on a single narrative text. Future research could examine strategy use across a wider range of narrative texts to ensure broader applicability. Finally, due to space constraints, the study only presents the most prominent characteristics of good and poor readers' strategy use, leaving room for a more comprehensive analysis of readers' approaches.

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Appendix 1: Reading Strategy Scheme

Reading strategy	Code
I. Cognitive Bottom-up	COG_BU
A. Identifying the text mechanically	
1. Re-reading	BU_READ
2. Skipping	BU_SKIP
3. Vocalizing	BU_VOCAL
B. Recognizing linguistic element of the text	
4. Using dictionary	BU_DIC
5. Guessing a word from its lexical structures	BU_LEXICAL
6. Analyzing grammatical structure	BU_GRAMMAR
7. Noticing cohesive devices	BU_COHESIVE
C. Decoding fundamental representation of the text	
8. Translating into L1	BU_TRANS
9. Rephrasing	BU_REPHRASE
D. Recording key information of the text	
10. Marking the text	BU_MARK
11. Taking notes	BU_NOTES
II. Cognitive top-down	COG_TD
E. Making guess of meaning from text	

12. Previewing what the text is about	TD_PREVIEW
13. Predicting succeeding contents	TD_PREDICT
14. Inferring the meaning of word from context	TD_INFER_WD
15. Inferring ideas from context	TD_INFER_IDEA
16. Revisiting earlier sections	TD_REVISIT
F. Recognizing text organization	
17. Analyzing text type	TD_TEXT_TYPE
G. Engaging in obtaining ideas	
18. Summarizing parts of or whole text	TD_SUMMRAIZE
19. Drawing on world knowledge / prior experience	TD_KNOW
20. Visualizing text information	TD_VISUAL
21. Providing an opinion on what is told in the text	TD_OPINION
22. Raising questions	TD_QUESTION

III. Metacognitive	MC
H. Planning	
23. Planning the action/strategy to take	MC_PLAN
24. Attending selectively	MC_ATTEND
I. Monitoring and Self-Regulation	
25. Recognizing problems	MC_PROBLEM
26. Confirming comprehension	MC_CONFIRM
27. Self-correcting	MC_CORRECT
J. Evaluating	
28. Evaluating strategy used	MC_EV_STRATEGY
29. Evaluating performance	MC_EV_PERFORM

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