

Enhancing Fifth-Grade EFL Students' Reading Comprehension through Leveled Narrative Texts and Strategy Instruction

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ABSTRACT

This action research study investigated the effectiveness of combining leveled text in the form of narrative readings with explicit reading strategy instruction in improving fifth-grade **EFL** learners' ability to identify and extract explicit information from English narrative texts. The study was conducted in a highly vulnerable public school in Hualpén, Chile, where students had limited exposure to English and demonstrated low levels of decoding and reading comprehension, particularly at the literal level. The purpose of the study was to explore how structured, level-appropriate input paired with reading strategy instruction could support early reading comprehension development. Twelve fifth-grade students (aged 10–11, CEFR A1 level) participated in a six-session instructional intervention grounded in the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA), emphasizing bottom-up strategies such as decoding, keyword scanning, and sentence-level detail identification. Data were collected through pre- and post-intervention comprehension quizzes, a student perception survey administered in Spanish, a focus group, and a teacher reflective journal. Quantitative results showed a meaningful improvement in students' ability to locate explicit information accurately, while qualitative findings indicated increased motivation, reduced anxiety, and emerging metacognitive awareness of reading strategies. These findings suggest that leveled text combined with explicit reading strategy instruction can effectively strengthen foundational literal comprehension and support early learner autonomy in vulnerable low-input EFL contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, as it allows learners to access meaning, develop language knowledge, and engage with written texts. For young EFL learners, the ability to identify specific explicit information in texts represents a basic level of comprehension that precedes higher-order interpretive processes. However, in contexts where exposure to English is limited, learners often experience difficulties related to decoding, scanning, and literal comprehension, which negatively affects their reading performance.

In Chilean public schools characterized by high levels of social and economic vulnerability, English instruction is frequently constrained by reduced instructional time and limited opportunities to use the language beyond the classroom. As a result, many primary school learners do not reach upper elementary grades with emergent decoding skills and persistent difficulties in locating explicit information in written texts. Despite curricular expectations that promote reading comprehension development, instructional practices may not always provide sufficient scaffolding for foundational reading skills, particularly for learners with low English proficiency.

In action research, the identification and verification of a classroom-based problem are essential to ensure that the study addresses an authentic pedagogical need (Pardede, 2019). In this study, fifth-grade EFL students' reading comprehension difficulties were identified through classroom observations and diagnostic assessment results. Classroom observations revealed that students struggled to locate explicit information in narrative texts, frequently relied on word-by-word translation, and disengaged when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary. Diagnostic classroom tasks further indicated that many learners were unable to answer literal comprehension questions accurately, even when texts were short and supported with visuals.

Quantitative evidence from the pre-intervention comprehension test confirmed these difficulties. Students obtained low scores ranging from 0 to 6 out of 10, with a group mean of $M = 4.42$ ($SD = 1.78$), indicating substantial variability and generally weak performance in identifying specific information in texts. These results demonstrate that participants had limited literal reading comprehension skills prior to the intervention, confirming the existence of a pedagogically relevant problem directly related to the teacher-researcher's instructional context.

This situation reveals a gap between curricular demands and learners' actual reading abilities, highlighting the need for instructional approaches that respond to students' linguistic levels and learning needs. In this regard, the use of leveled texts and explicit reading strategy instruction has been suggested as a means to support early stages of EFL reading comprehension. Nevertheless, there is limited classroom-based research examining how these approaches function in vulnerable educational contexts with young EFL learners.

Therefore, this action research study aimed to examine how the use of leveled narrative texts combined with explicit reading strategy instruction influenced fifth-grade EFL learners' ability to identify specific information in English texts. The study was conducted in a highly vulnerable public school in Hualpén, Chile, and sought to contribute contextualized evidence to inform EFL reading instruction at the primary level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading Comprehension in EFL Contexts

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill in second language learning, particularly in English as a foreign Language (EFL) contexts where exposure to English is limited. Elleman

and Oslund (2019) describe reading comprehension as a complex cognitive process that requires the coordination of multiple linguistic and cognitive components, including vocabulary knowledge, inference generation, and comprehension monitoring. Their work emphasizes that comprehension development is gradual and requires systematic instructional support, especially for learners who experience early difficulties in accessing textual meaning.

From an interactive perspective, reading comprehension involves the construction of meaning through the integration of textual information, linguistic knowledge, and prior experience (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Grabe (2020) argues that successful EFL reading depends on the interaction between bottom-up processes, such as decoding and word recognition, and top-down processes, such as background knowledge activation. For young EFL learners with limited vocabulary and decoding skills, weaknesses at the bottom-up level can significantly hinder comprehension, highlighting the need for explicit instructional support and controlled textual input.

Reading also plays a central role in vocabulary development. Yang (2023) demonstrates that sustained engagement with written texts supports incidental vocabulary acquisition through repeated exposure to lexical items in varied contexts. These findings reinforce the importance of providing learners with accessible and level-appropriate reading materials that allow them to focus on meaning construction rather than linguistic overload.

Research indicates that vocabulary knowledge plays a central role in reading comprehension performance in EFL contexts, as learners with stronger lexical repertoires tend to comprehend texts more successfully. A case study involving undergraduate EFL learners showed a positive moderate correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, suggesting that vocabulary mastery significantly supports learners' ability to access text meaning (Manihuruk, 2020). These findings reinforce the view that reading comprehension, particularly at early stages of EFL learning, relies heavily on bottom-up processes that enable learners to decode and recognize lexical items accurately.

Bottom-up Processing in L2 Reading

Bottom-up models of reading emphasize that comprehension begins with the decoding of letters, sounds, and words before higher-level interpretation occurs. Nadea et al. (2021) argue that foundational skills such as phonemic awareness, word recognition, and syntactic parsing are essential for reading fluency and comprehension accuracy in EFL learners. Without these skills, learners often rely on guessing strategies, which may result in misinterpretation of explicit textual information.

Mannonova (2021) explains that bottom-up processing develops progressively, moving from grapheme–phoneme recognition to word- and sentence-level integration. Empirical studies support the instructional value of detail-oriented reading tasks. Yusuf et al. (2017) demonstrated that activities such as scanning for specific details strengthen decoding accuracy and improve learners' ability to extract explicit information. Similarly, Jeon and Yamashita's (2014) meta-analysis demonstrates that vocabulary knowledge and word-level decoding are among the strongest predictors of second language reading comprehension, particularly for learners with low proficiency.

Research by Arango Pérez et al. (2016) further supports the instructional use of bottom-up strategies, showing that structured decoding tasks enable learners to retrieve targeted information more effectively. While bottom-up processing alone may be insufficient, it constitutes a necessary foundation for comprehension development, particularly in

vulnerable EFL contexts. Accordingly, the present study integrates bottom-up processing with leveled texts and explicit instructional guidance to support learners' ability to comprehend specific information.

Reading for Specific Information

The ability to locate and extract specific information is a core component of reading comprehension in EFL contexts. Grabe and Stoller (2002) define scanning as a selective reading strategy that allows readers to efficiently identify relevant details. Teacher-mediated instruction plays a crucial role in developing this skill. Zaky (2025) demonstrates that mediated instruction supports learners' ability to focus on key textual information, monitor comprehension, and verify interpretations, resulting in improved comprehension outcomes and greater reading autonomy.

Empirical evidence also highlights the effectiveness of explicit reading strategy instruction. Wendaferew and Damtew (2023) report significant gains in learners' ability to identify facts and details following strategy-focused instruction. Similarly, Chica Ramírez et al. (2023) show that scaffolded comprehension tasks promote focused and purposeful reading, particularly when activities are structured around explicit goals and feedback.

In the Chilean context, Novoa Lagos (2019) found that increased text complexity negatively affected learners' performance on detail-based comprehension tasks, underscoring the importance of level-appropriate materials. Grabe (2020) emphasizes that graded texts allow learners to practice scanning skills without cognitive overload, facilitating efficient information retrieval. Studies by Ibrahim (2020), Chamot and O'Malley (1994), and Haiyan (2023) further confirm that scanning instruction, when combined with metacognitive strategy awareness, enhances learners' ability to extract targeted information.

Processes and Representations of Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension develops hierarchically, beginning with the ability to retrieve information explicitly stated in the text. Bruggink et al. (2022) explain that literal comprehension involves identifying and understanding information at the word, phrase, and sentence levels. This foundational process supports the construction of a coherent textbase and precedes higher-order processes such as inference and evaluation.

Oakhill et al. (2019) argue that many comprehension difficulties originate at the literal level, rather than from deficits in inferencing ability. When readers struggle to accurately process explicit information, their capacity to integrate ideas and engage in critical reading is constrained. Pinzás (2007) similarly emphasizes that literal comprehension represents the essential first stage of reading development. Despite its earlier publication date, this conceptualization remains relevant for operationalizing early-stage reading skills in EFL contexts.

Together, these perspectives justify the instructional focus of the present study on strengthening learners' ability to retrieve explicit information through leveled texts and structured reading tasks.

Cognitive and Motivational Dimensions of EFL Reading

Reading comprehension is influenced by both cognitive and motivational factors. Li et al. (2024) demonstrate that vocabulary knowledge and strategy use interact with motivation and self-efficacy to support comprehension. Álvarez et al. (2024) similarly found that

motivation alone does not predict reading success unless learners possess sufficient cognitive resources.

Guthrie and Wigfield's (2000) framework highlights intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and task value as central components influencing reading engagement. Tarchi (2017) further shows that while literal comprehension may be less sensitive to motivation, inferential comprehension and recall are strongly influenced by motivational and metacognitive factors. These findings support the use of level-appropriate texts and explicit strategy instruction to foster both cognitive development and learner confidence.

Language Exposure and Input

In low-input EFL environments, structured and comprehensible input is essential for reading development. Alowais and Ogdol (2021) show that leveled readers improve reading fluency, comprehension, and motivation. Safitri and Melati (2023) and Sun (2022) emphasize the role of controlled vocabulary, repeated structures, and visual support in facilitating comprehension among beginning EFL learners.

Digital and multimodal input, when paired with guided instruction, further enhances engagement and comprehension (Banditvilai, 2020; Ibrahim, 2020). These findings align with Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, which underscores the importance of providing input slightly beyond learners' current proficiency level. However, empirical evidence suggests that comprehensible input must be accompanied by explicit instructional mediation to develop effective reading strategies.

Leveled Reading Materials

Leveled texts provide gradual exposure to increasing linguistic complexity, supporting decoding, literal comprehension, and learner confidence. Alowais et al. (2021) and Safitri and Melati (2023) demonstrate that leveled texts facilitate both comprehension development and formative assessment. Visual support and repeated narrative structures allow learners to focus on identifying characters, events, and details, which aligns with the objectives of the present study.

In vulnerable educational contexts, leveled texts reduce frustration and promote sustained engagement, providing an accessible entry point into English reading. Their instructional use supports monitoring learners' progress in extracting specific information over time.

Digital and Tangible Tools for Reading Instruction

Both digital and tangible instructional tools contribute to effective EFL reading instruction. Chen and Macleod (2021) highlight the motivational benefits of digital tools, while Park and Lee (2021) emphasize that pedagogical alignment is essential regardless of modality. Sweeney (2017) found that tangible print texts are particularly effective for supporting literal comprehension when paired with teacher scaffolding.

These findings support the instructional design of the present study, which prioritizes structured interaction with leveled tangible texts to strengthen learners' ability to retrieve explicit information.

Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA)

CALLA integrates language development with explicit cognitive and metacognitive strategy instruction (Chamot et al., 1999). CALLA's five recursive phases: preparation, Journal of English Teaching, 12(2), June 2026. 135-148, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33541/jet.v12i2.7779>

presentation, practice, evaluation, and expansion, provide a structured framework for guiding learners in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their reading processes. This approach is particularly suitable for fifth-grade EFL learners in vulnerable contexts, as it offers explicit, age-appropriate scaffolding and supports the development of independent reading strategies.

Teacher Mediation and Reflective Practice

Teacher mediation and reflective practice play a critical role in supporting reading comprehension. Oo et al. (2021) emphasize that reflective teaching enables educators to adapt instruction based on learners' needs, enhancing the effectiveness of mediated reading strategies. Empirical studies confirm that reflective practice leads to more focused strategy instruction and improved comprehension outcomes (Suryani et al., 2024).

Research by Rozimela et al. (2025) and Liu et al. (2021) further illustrates how reflective mediation and teacher–student interaction support engagement and comprehension. These findings justify the use of a teacher reflective journal in the present study as a tool for instructional adaptation and improved reading mediation.

Leveled narrative texts and explicit reading strategy instruction have been identified as effective pedagogical approaches to address EFL learners' reading comprehension difficulties. Matching text difficulty to learners' proficiency levels facilitates comprehension by reducing linguistic and cognitive load and supporting gradual language development (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). In addition, explicit instruction in reading strategies, such as identifying main ideas, locating specific information, and using contextual cues, enhances learners' metacognitive awareness and supports active meaning construction (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). Therefore, integrating leveled narrative texts with explicit strategy instruction constitutes a theoretically grounded instructional intervention to address students' difficulties in extracting specific information from narrative texts. If leveled narrative texts and explicit reading strategy instruction are implemented, then fifth-grade EFL students' ability to locate specific information in narrative texts will improve.

METHOD

Research Design and Context

This study adopted an action research design aimed at improving fifth-grade EFL learners' ability to identify and extract specific explicit information from narrative texts through a classroom-based instructional intervention. Action research was selected because it allows teachers to systematically examine their own instructional practices while implementing pedagogical changes responsive to learners' needs. The study was conducted in a highly vulnerable public primary school in Chile, where students had limited exposure to English beyond the classroom and demonstrated low levels of decoding ability and literal reading comprehension. The intervention took place during regular English lessons and followed a cyclical process of planning, action, observation, and reflection to support instructional adaptation.

Participants

The participants were twelve fifth-grade students (aged 10–11) enrolled in a public school. All participants were beginner-level EFL learners, corresponding approximately to the A1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The group was characterized by emergent decoding skills, limited vocabulary knowledge, and low confidence

in reading English texts. Participation was based on convenience sampling, as the researcher was also the classroom teacher. All students regularly attended the intervention sessions and completed the assessment tasks included in the study.

Instruments

Multiple instruments were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data. To measure changes in reading comprehension performance, pre- and post-intervention comprehension quizzes were administered. These quizzes focused on learners' ability to locate and identify explicit information in leveled narrative texts, such as characters, actions, and specific details. The quizzes were aligned with the instructional focus of the intervention and reflected the types of tasks practiced during the lessons.

To explore students' perceptions of reading strategies and the intervention, a student survey was administered in Spanish to ensure comprehension and accurate responses. The survey included closed-ended items that examined learners' perceptions of strategy usefulness, confidence, and engagement during reading tasks. In addition, a focus group was conducted at the end of the intervention to gather more in-depth qualitative insights into students' experiences, motivation, and perceived challenges when reading English texts.

A teacher reflective journal was also used as a qualitative instrument. Throughout the intervention, the teacher-researcher documented observations related to student engagement, strategy use, difficulties encountered, and instructional adjustments made during each session. This journal supported ongoing reflection and informed pedagogical decision-making across the action research cycle.

Procedure

The intervention was implemented over six instructional sessions during regular English class time, with each session lasting approximately 45 minutes. The study followed a single action research cycle comprising planning, implementation, observation, and reflection phases. Instruction followed the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA), incorporating the phases of preparation, presentation, practice, evaluation, and expansion. The intervention focused on explicit bottom-up reading strategies, including phonological decoding, keyword scanning, and sentence-level detail identification.

Leveled narrative texts adapted to A1–A2 CEFR levels were used to match learners' linguistic proficiency and reduce cognitive load. Materials included simplified versions of *The Ugly Duckling*, *The Gingerbread Man*, and *Aladdin*. Activities included pre-reading vocabulary tasks, teacher think-aloud modeling, guided scanning exercises, sentence-level comprehension tasks, keyword highlighting, and structured worksheets targeting explicit information retrieval. Each session included vocabulary instruction, guided strategy modeling, controlled practice, and independent comprehension tasks. Scaffolding was provided through visual supports, modeling, and guided practice, with gradual release of responsibility to independent student practice. Instructional decisions were refined based on classroom observations and reflective journal entries.

Six sessions, of 90 minutes each, were selected to provide sufficient time for the gradual introduction, practice, consolidation, and integration of reading strategies within the action research cycle; planning, action, observation, and reflection; while remaining feasible within the school timetable. The selected texts (*The Ugly Duckling*, *The Gingerbread Man*, and *Aladdin*) were age-appropriate, linguistically controlled, and familiar, leveled narratives, which supported comprehension and reduced cognitive load for beginner EFL learners.

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Strategy instruction followed a scaffolded sequence, progressing from decoding and scanning to phrase construction, information identification, summarizing, comparison, and independent strategy use, in alignment with CALLA principles and the incremental development of students' ability to comprehend specific information in English texts.

Table 1
Summary of action research intervention sessions.

Session	Focus / Objectives	Preparation	Presentation	Practice	Evaluation	Expansion
1	Introduce decoding and scanning strategies using *The Ugly Duckling*.	Activated background knowledge through visuals and discussion.	Modeled decoding and scanning with think-alouds.	Used picture dictionaries to decode and scanned text for key vocabulary.	Self-assessment on strategy use.	Applied strategies to a science text and wrote two sentences using key vocabulary.
2	Develop phrase-building skills for factual information.	Reviewed decoding and introduced factual phrase construction.	Modeled phrase-building using *The Ugly Duckling* examples.	Created phrases with sentence strips and peer-reviewed clarity.	Feedback provided during peer review.	Retold part of the story using original phrases.
3	Practice scanning and identifying information using WH-questions.	Introduced Wh-words with visual prompts.	Modeled scanning and WH-answer identification	Highlighted information, answered WH-questions, and completed multiple-choice tasks.	Used a Likert scale and open-ended reflection.	Created WH-questions from a new text and quizzed peers.
4	Distinguish between details and main ideas; practice summarizing.	Reviewed strategies and discussed differences between details and main ideas.	Modeled inference using WH-answers.	Highlighted key ideas, completed summary worksheet, wrote one-sentence summaries.	Peer feedback and reflection.	Summarized a new paragraph independently.
5	Compare characters and events using textual evidence.	Reviewed characters and events from previous texts.	Modeled comparisons with a Venn diagram.	Worked in groups to compare characters and events.	Group presentations, teacher observations, and focus group discussions.	Wrote opinion paragraphs comparing two characters with supporting evidence.
6	Integrate all strategies for independent reading and self-regulation.	Recalled all previously learned strategies.	Modeled decoding, scanning, and detail identification with Aladdin.	Independently applied strategies to a new text.	Used a Likert scale and class discussion.	Set personal reading goals based on effective strategies.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the pre- and post-intervention comprehension quizzes were analyzed descriptively by comparing learners' performance before and after the intervention to identify changes in their ability to extract explicit information accurately. Survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify general trends in students' perceptions of

strategy use and reading confidence. Qualitative data from the focus group and teacher reflective journal were analyzed thematically, focusing on patterns related to motivation, engagement, strategy awareness, and perceived reading challenges. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the intervention's impact.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the school administration prior to data collection. Parental consent and student assent were secured, and participants' identities were protected through anonymization. All data were used exclusively for academic research purposes.

RESULTS

Quantitative Results

Quantitative data from the pre- and post-intervention comprehension quizzes indicate a clear improvement in students' ability to identify and extract explicit information from leveled narrative texts. Prior to the intervention, students demonstrated limited literal comprehension, with low accuracy in locating specific details such as characters' actions, events, and textual information. Pre-test results showed that most learners struggled to decode key vocabulary and frequently selected incorrect or incomplete answers, indicating weak bottom-up processing skills.

Following the intervention, students' performance improved substantially. Post-test scores revealed higher accuracy in identifying explicit details, improved keyword recognition, and more consistent responses to comprehension questions. Learners demonstrated a reduced reliance on guessing and an increased ability to scan the text to retrieve relevant information. Table 2 presents the pre- and post-intervention reading comprehension scores for each student. The table illustrates individual performance changes following the instructional intervention, highlighting improvements in students' ability to comprehend specific information in English texts.

Table 2
Pre- and post-intervention scores per student

Student	Pre-test Score	Post-test Score
Student 1	6	10
Student 2	6	5
Student 3	5	10
Student 4	3	9
Student 5	0	9
Student 6	3	8
Student 7	5	9
Student 8	4	9
Student 9	6	10
Student 10	5	9
Student 11	4	9
Student 12	6	6

Qualitative Results

Qualitative data were collected through a student perception survey, a focus group interview, and the teacher's reflective journal. The data were analyzed using thematic categorization to identify patterns related to strategy use, motivation, and engagement.

Student Survey Results

The post-intervention survey examined students' perceptions of the reading strategies and leveled narrative texts. Table 3 presents the distribution of students' responses. Most students perceived the intervention positively. A large majority reported that scanning for keywords helped them answer comprehension questions (91.7%) and that the reading strategies supported their understanding of the texts (83.3%). Most learners also indicated that leveled narrative texts were easier to read than regular texts (75.0%) and that they felt more confident when reading in English (66.7%). Overall, these results suggest that explicit strategy instruction and the use of leveled texts were perceived as effective supports for reading comprehension.

Table 3
Students' perceptions of the reading intervention (n = 12)

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Reading strategies helped me understand the text	83.3	16.7	0
Leveled texts were easier to read than regular texts	75.0	25.0	0
I feel more confident reading in English	66.7	25.0	8.3
Scanning for keywords helped me answer questions	91.7	8.3	0

Overall, most learners perceived the instructional strategies and leveled texts as beneficial for comprehension and confidence building.

Focus group findings

Focus group responses revealed increased motivation and reduced anxiety during reading tasks. Three main themes emerged:

1. Reduced Cognitive Load

Students reported that simplified vocabulary and repetitive structures helped them follow the stories more easily. One student stated:

"The story was easy because I knew many words and pictures helped me."

2. Strategy Awareness

Learners demonstrated emerging metacognitive awareness, particularly regarding scanning and keyword identification. For example:

"I look for the words in the question and find them in the text."

3. Increased Engagement

Students indicated that the narrative stories were motivating and enjoyable, which increased their participation in reading tasks.

Teacher reflective journal findings

The teacher's reflective journal documented observable changes in student behavior and performance across the intervention sessions. Three key patterns were identified:

1. Improved Task Persistence: Students completed reading tasks with less teacher support over time.
2. Increased Participation: More students volunteered answers and engaged in pair and group discussions.

3. Reduced Avoidance Behaviors: Fewer students avoided reading tasks or relied excessively on Spanish translation.

These observations suggest that the intervention fostered greater engagement and autonomy in reading activities.

Taken together, the qualitative data indicate that explicit strategy instruction and leveled narrative texts contributed to improved reading confidence, increased engagement, and emerging strategic awareness among EFL learners. These findings complement the quantitative improvements observed in the comprehension tests.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that leveled narrative texts combined with explicit reading strategy instruction supported fifth-grade EFL learners' ability to identify and extract specific explicit information from English texts. This improvement can be explained by the alignment between learners' low proficiency levels and the instructional focus on foundational reading processes. By reducing linguistic complexity and emphasizing bottom-up strategies such as decoding, keyword scanning, and sentence-level detail recognition, the intervention enabled learners to process texts more efficiently and with greater confidence.

From a reading theory perspective, these results are consistent with Grabe's (2020) view that bottom-up processing is essential for beginning EFL readers. The learners' improved performance suggests that strengthening decoding and word-level processing allowed them to access explicit textual information more accurately, supporting Grabe's argument that foundational skills must be established before higher-level comprehension can occur. The findings also align with Jeon and Yamashita's (2014) meta-analysis, which identified vocabulary knowledge and word-level decoding as strong predictors of second language reading comprehension. The gains observed in this study reinforce the importance of prioritizing surface-level linguistic processing for learners with limited English proficiency, particularly when the instructional goal is literal comprehension.

In relation to instructional materials, the positive impact of leveled texts supports the findings of Alowais and Ogdol (2021), who reported that level-appropriate materials facilitate comprehension and engagement in low-input EFL contexts. Similarly, Safitri and Melati (2023) emphasized that leveled texts support gradual reading development by allowing learners to focus on comprehension without cognitive overload. In the present study, leveled narrative texts enabled learners to successfully identify characters, actions, and events, which contributed to improved task performance.

The qualitative findings related to increased confidence and reduced anxiety are consistent with Guthrie and Wigfield's (2000) framework of reading motivation. Learners' positive perceptions suggest improvements in self-efficacy and task value, which supported sustained engagement with reading activities. These outcomes are further supported by Li et al. (2024), who demonstrated that motivation interacts with cognitive strategy use to enhance reading comprehension, rather than functioning independently.

The instructional approach adopted in this study reflects the principles of the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA). Chamot et al. (1999) argue that explicit strategy instruction and guided practice promote learner autonomy and strategic awareness. The emergence of early metacognitive awareness observed in this study is consistent with findings reported by Palasan (2021) and Nejad et al. (2015), who documented improved reading comprehension and strategy use following CALLA-based instruction.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that EFL instruction for young learners in vulnerable contexts should prioritize level-appropriate texts and explicit instruction in foundational reading strategies. As suggested by Oakhill et al. (2019), supporting literal comprehension is a necessary step before progressing to inferential or critical reading. At the curriculum level, sequencing reading objectives from literal comprehension toward more complex skills may better support sustainable reading development. In teacher education, the findings highlight the value of reflective and strategy-based instructional frameworks for addressing learners' diverse needs.

Overall, this study provides classroom-based evidence that combining leveled narrative texts with explicit strategy instruction can strengthen literal reading comprehension and foster positive reading experiences among beginner EFL learners in vulnerable educational contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how the use of leveled narrative texts combined with explicit reading strategy instruction influenced fifth-grade EFL learners' ability to identify and extract specific explicit information from English texts in a vulnerable educational context. The findings indicate that the intervention contributed to measurable improvements in learners' literal reading comprehension, as well as to increased confidence, reduced anxiety, and greater engagement during reading activities. By focusing on bottom-up processing and providing level-appropriate input supported by CALLA-based instruction, the study offers classroom-based evidence that foundational reading skills can be strengthened through structured and scaffolded pedagogical practices.

Empirical evidence also supports the effectiveness of structured reading strategy instruction in improving comprehension performance. In an experimental study conducted with university EFL students in Indonesia, Ayu (2021) examined the impact of the Text Feature Walks strategy on students' comprehension of expository texts. The findings revealed statistically significant improvements in reading achievement among students who received explicit instruction in identifying and analyzing text features compared to those who did not. The study highlights the value of guiding learners to preview textual elements, activate prior knowledge, and set a purpose for reading. Although conducted at the tertiary level, the results reinforce the importance of explicit and scaffolded reading strategy instruction for enhancing comprehension outcomes, particularly in contexts where learners struggle with vocabulary and text organization.

From a practical perspective, the results highlight the value of integrating leveled reading materials and explicit strategy instruction into EFL classrooms serving young learners with limited exposure to English. Teachers may benefit from prioritizing instructional approaches that emphasize decoding, scanning, and the identification of explicit information before introducing higher-order comprehension tasks. At the curricular level, the study supports sequencing reading objectives from literal comprehension toward more complex reading skills. In terms of teacher development, the findings underscore the importance of training educators to implement strategy-based frameworks such as CALLA and to engage in reflective practice to adapt instruction to learners' needs.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. The small sample size and the short duration of the intervention limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the use of classroom-based assessment tools and the focus on a single educational context restrict the extent to which results can be extended to other EFL settings. The study also

focused exclusively on literal comprehension, without examining the impact of the intervention on inferential or critical reading skills.

Future research could explore the effects of similar interventions over longer periods and with larger and more diverse samples. Further studies may also examine how leveled texts and explicit strategy instruction support the development of higher-order reading comprehension skills or how these approaches can be adapted to different grade levels and instructional contexts. Expanding research in these areas would contribute to a deeper understanding of how foundational reading instruction can support sustained EFL literacy development.

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