

## THE EFFECTS OF MODIFIED COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIC READING (MCSR) INTERVENTION ON READING PERFORMANCE AMONG FRESHMEN IN IRAN

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**Abstract.** The aim of this study was to determine the effects of a Modified Collaborative Strategic Reading (MCSR) intervention on reading performance among first-year students in a public university in Iran. A quasi-experiment method using a pre-test-post-test design was utilized. The intervention was implemented to 42 Iranian university-level EFL freshmen. The students met once a week and received the MCSR intervention for 90 minutes over six weeks. A researcher-developed reading comprehension test was group administered at the pre- and post-tests. Upon completion of the study, students' perceptions regarding the MCSR intervention were also evaluated by means of an Opinionnaire®. Quantitative results indicated that participating students did not demonstrate significant gains in reading comprehension skills. However, qualitative evaluation revealed that students did have positive attitudes towards the MCSR intervention. We postulate that the participants may require intervention of considerably greater intensity in terms of instructional dosage than that provided in this research. Additionally, the data show that the students have a strong preference for communicative and cooperative activities and the popular thinking that they might resist group work (because of their long-standing conventional learning tradition) can no longer be true.

*Keywords:* Modified collaborative strategic reading; reading comprehension; cooperative learning; English as foreign language (EFL); Iran

**Abstrak.** Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk menentukan kesan Strategi Pembacaan Kolaboratif yang Diubah suai (MCSR) terhadap kemahiran membaca dalam kalangan pelajar tahun satu di sebuah universiti awam di Iran. Kaedah Kuasi-eksperimen menggunakan ujian-pra-ujian-pos telah dijadikan reka bentuk kajian. Dalam kajian ini, intervensi telah dijalankan terhadap 42 orang pelajar universiti tahun satu di negara Iran. Pelajar tersebut telah menerima intervensi MCSR selama 90 minit seminggu sepanjang enam minggu. Ujian Kefahaman Pembacaan yang dibina oleh pengkaji telah ditadbir sebelum dan selepas intervensi. Persepsi pelajar terhadap MCSR juga dinilai menggunakan soal selidik Opinionnaire®. Dapatan kuantitatif menunjukkan tidak terdapat perbezaan yang signifikan dari aspek kemahiran kefahaman. Walau bagaimanapun, data kualitatif menunjukkan bahawa para peserta kajian menunjukkan sikap yang positif terhadap

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MCSR. Data juga menunjukkan peserta kajian cenderung kepada kaedah pengajaran yang bersifat komunikatif dan kolaboratif. Justeru, hasil kajian ini menolak pandangan yang mengatakan pelajar tidak gemar terhadap pembelajaran secara kumpulan (kolaboratif).

*Kata kunci:* Strategi pembacaan kolaboratif yang diubah suai; pemahaman pembacaan; pembelajaran koperatif; bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa asing; Iran

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

As it has often been demonstrated in the reading literature, tailoring an effective reading instructional practice is no easy task. Undoubtedly, this is due to such complex and complicated factors as linguistic, cognitive and socio-cultural variables involved in reading comprehension in general and in English as a foreign language (EFL) reading in particular (Hudson, 2007; Nassaji, 2003). In the late 70s and early 80s, the pioneers of reading research such as Clarke and Silberstein (1979), Coady (1979), Eskey (1986), and Smith (1978, 1982) contended that there was very little point in teaching students to read. They underscored that reading instructor's responsibility was to provide real opportunities for students and make it possible for them to learn to read. In principle, they advocated developing *attack strategies* or comprehension strategies in any reading programme. Perhaps, their contention can best be understood if we take into account Smith's (1982) assertion: "There is far more to reading than meets the eyes" (p. 3).

Insights gained from the first language (L1) reading process have now highlighted the fact that second and foreign language (L2) reading practitioners should concentrate their efforts on developing strategic readers who can easily manage independent learning contexts (Baker, 2002; Grabe, 2004). That explains why reading comprehension instruction today pays particular attention to strategic reading development (Grabe, 2004). By definition, strategic reading refers to the application of reading strategies as heuristics and aids that can facilitate reading comprehension and overcome comprehension breakdowns at both the word and sentence levels (Aarnoutse & Schellings, 2003).

Generally, strategic reading is accompanied by cooperative learning in which students work in small groups (Grabe, 2002; Zhang, 1993). The reason is that the combination of strategic reading with learning in group creates an opportunity for students to (a) interact, (b) help one another increase their understanding, (c) and overcome their comprehension problems of the text. A growing number of

research studies have demonstrated that the development of reading competence can be encouraged by cooperation or interaction with peers (Almasi, 1996; Ghaith, 2003; Tok, 2008). Much in the same vein, various lines of research have demonstrated the effectiveness of group learning with university-level students who must pass reading courses in English (Ghaith & Abd El-Malak, 2004; Razavi, 2008; Tg Nor Rizan, 2007).

## **2.0 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

In various academic settings, where English is taught as a foreign language, the only skill which seems to be of paramount importance for tertiary education is the EFL reading skills (Birjandi & Noroozi, 2008; Farhady & Mirhassani, 2001). Due to the dominance of conventional language teaching methodology [i.e., Grammar-Translation Method (GTM)], a transmission style of teaching language still prevails across schools and universities in most EFL contexts. As a result, students' active participation in class activities is commonly frowned upon and the instructor is considered the sole provider of the (language) knowledge (Mahdizadeh, 2006; Mirhassani, 2007).

In addition, English language teaching (ELT) research studies conducted throughout the world have lent support to the idea that the majority of EFL students who are admitted into tertiary education are quite under-prepared in terms of their EFL reading abilities (Dreyer & Nel, 2003; Haghani, 2004). Available evidence suggests that the reason for EFL learners' ill-preparedness in reading comprehension performance is in large part attributable to traditional language teaching methods. Given the challenges of meeting the needs of tertiary level students, there is a need for empirically-based interventions that can (a) enhance learners' engagement in today's classrooms and (b) facilitate reading comprehension by developing strategic behaviour of students in EFL reading. Moreover, considering the importance of strategic reading and cooperative group work, it seems that reading strategy instruction within the framework of cooperative learning pedagogy has remained under-explored in university-level education where reading and understanding of English texts play an important part in students' further learning.

### **3.0 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

In order to address the problems, the current study was designed to determine the effect of the Modified Collaborative Strategic Reading (MCSR) technique in enhancing university-level first-years' EFL reading comprehension in Iran. The MCSR is a modified version of Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) which combines cooperative learning and reading strategy instruction (Klingner & Vaughn, 1996). Additionally, this study intended to evaluate the perceptions of the students regarding the efficacy of the MCSR.

### **4.0 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Based on the purpose of the study, the research questions that were formulated are as follows:

- (1) Will the students receiving the MCSR treatment demonstrate gains in reading comprehension performance, as measured by the researcher-developed reading comprehension test?
- (2) How do the EFL students respond to MCSR – an instructional practice which is a combination of reading strategy instruction and cooperative learning?

### **5.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

A specific theoretical perspective that this study capitalized on is commonly known as social constructivism. The selection of this particular perspective in this research should not imply that the authors believe that it is the most comprehensive view, but rather it should be seen as a theory that has potential utility in guiding present day reading intervention research. Social constructivism is generally grounded in the work of Vygotsky (1962) who asserted that knowledge is not a singular construct, but exists in diverse forms and interactive dimensions. In fact, social constructivism rests on the assumption that learners are involved in an active process of making sense of things through interactions with others (Fosnot & Perry, 2005; Felix, 2005). Based on this theory, cognitive development occurs when concepts first learned through social interaction become internalised and

made one's own. A salient feature of this theory is the interactiveness of the learning process. Such a pedagogical model in education has come to be known as cooperative learning in which students work together in small groups on a clearly defined task. As it is argued, language is "a psychological tool" that can be "characterized by being produced through social activity, rather than arising organically" (Hedegaard, 1996, p. 173). Therefore, it can be inferred that a learning environment where learners can interact and use language for social construction of meaning would probably enhance the language skills in general and the reading skill in particular.

In social constructivism, the reading process and the reader have undergone re-definition and reconceptualisation. The reader is seen as a member of a network of socio-cultural groups. Likewise, reading is defined as being involved in reading behaviour with the help of those who already did so (Eskey, 2002). In the nutshell, reading is viewed as a socio-cultural, collaborative experience (Alexander & Fox, 2004).

In reading strategy instruction, tasks in cooperative formats provide opportunities for learners to model and evaluate the usefulness of comprehension strategies as they read (Koda, 2005; Paris, Wasik, & Turner, 1991). When learners work cooperatively in small groups, they can read texts more efficiently and employ comprehension strategies to better comprehend the reading material (Vaughn & Edmonds, 2006). The group dynamics generated in cooperative group work ensures strategic reading and active engagement with the text (Koda, 2005). Cooperative small groups in turn trigger the motivation necessary for comprehension to take place (Mathewson, 1994). In fact, the opportunity created for interaction helps improve motivation to read. As the literature suggests, cooperative learning is capable of sustaining students as motivated and engaged readers by providing opportunities for social interaction and interactive learning (Paris et al., 1991).

With regards to the perspectives discussed, the following statement represents the underpinning logic for designing and conducting this study. If cooperative learning encourages active/interactive learning, and if reading strategies can lead to development of strategic behaviour in learners, then their selected combination in the form of an instructional practice (i.e., MCSR) would consequently enhance effective reading comprehension for university-level EFL learners.

## 5.1 Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR)

An instructional practice in which cooperative learning and reading comprehension strategies have been integrated has come to be known as Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR). It was originally developed by Klingner and Vaughn in 1996. CSR creates an instructional context in which students, with the help of their peers and also the instructor, become competent at applying a number of strategies while reading. Various lines of research on this approach indicate that CSR is an effective teaching tool that has the potential to enhance reading comprehension of (a) students with learning disabilities, (b) low- and average-achieving students, and (c) English language learners (Bryant, Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, Ugel, Hamff, & Hougen, 2000; Klingner & Vaughn, 1996; Klingner, Vaughn, & Schumm, 1998). However, for the purpose of the present investigation, the modified version of CSR (MCSR) was employed.

The rationale for using the modification of CSR is that CSR offers a limited number of reading strategies with regard to university-level students (Zoghi et al., 2006). In fact, CSR was originally developed for secondary students. As previous research studies on CSR demonstrate, CSR is mainly employed in settings other than university-level education (e.g., Klingner & Vaughn, 1996; Klingner, Vaughn, & Schumm, 1998). Many approaches to reading strategy instruction for secondary students, including CSR, tend to focus on a few reading strategies. Zoghi et al. (2006) contend that CSR is limited by a narrow range of reading strategies such as activating prior knowledge, summarising main ideas, and formulating questions.

Nevertheless, literature supports the idea that optimal combinations of text engagement strategies should be taught to university-level students so as to assist them to develop a repertoire of effective comprehension strategies (Fotovatian & Shokrpour, 2007). In order to give the CSR technique a certain degree of enrichment in terms of strategies, a number of effective, research-based reading strategies appropriate for university-level students (Zoghi, 2002) have been added to the original CSR. It is believed that such a modification could validate the application of MCSR in typical EFL reading classes with all types of university-level learners (Zoghi *et al.*, 2006).

## 5.2 Modified Collaborative Strategic Reading (MCSR)

MCSR incorporates four comprehension strategies of its original model. They are as follows: (a) *preview strategy* for activating prior knowledge, (b) *fix up strategy* for comprehension monitoring and vocabulary development, (c) *get the gist strategy* for identifying main ideas, and (d) *wrap up strategy* for generating questions. In MCSR, these strategies are complemented by a number of evidence-based strategies which facilitate identification of text structure (Nuttall, 1996; Zoghi, 2002). More specifically, five reading strategies of text organisation (comparison and causation) and discourse markers identification (example and adding information) are used (Nuttall, 1996). These strategies are added to MCSR in the form of *fix up strategies*. MCSR is implemented in three stages, which are traditionally labeled as presentation, practice, and production stages (Zoghi *et al.*, 2006):

(1) **Presentation Stage.** The instructor introduces a reading strategy of text organization (comparison and causation) or discourse markers identification (example and adding information) by modeling or think-aloud techniques. Students are then asked to activate their prior knowledge about the topic that they will read.

(2) **Practice Stage.** This is where students become involved in cooperative learning. Practice is provided to students in the following way. First, the instructor let students form small cooperative groups with five members in each. Students are then asked to read their selected reading material (one paragraph or two at a time) while acting their specified roles. The following roles are assigned in MCSR:

- **Leader:** Leads the group by saying what strategy to apply next.
- **Monitor:** Makes sure everyone participates and only one person talks at a time.
- **Fix-up Pro:** Uses *fix up* cards to remind the group of the steps to follow when trying to figure out a difficult word or concept. Fix-up pro monitors the group's reading comprehension in order to identify when they have breakdowns in understanding, and to use fix-up strategies in repairing meaning that is lost. The fix-up strategies are: (a) reread the sentence and look for key ideas to help you figure out the unknown word; (b) reread the

sentence before and after the difficult word looking for clues; (c) look for a prefix or suffix in the unknown word; (d) break the unknown word and look for smaller words that you know; (e) identify the text structure; and (f) identify the connective words.

- Encourager: Watches the group and gives feedback. Looks for behaviours to praise.
- Reader: Has the responsibility of reading the passage to his or her group.

In this stage, students get involved in the processes of (a) main idea summarisation of each individual paragraph that has been read, and (b) question generation about the same paragraph. The practice stage is implemented more than once, namely, after every one or two paragraphs.

**(3) Production Stage.** The instructor performs a variety of activities to ensure that students have identified the most important ideas of the entire material in this stage. This is implemented by having students do the following activities within their groups once the whole text is read:

- interviewing with each other on the reading material;
- retelling what s/he has read; and,
- performing pro-con debates about the topic.

Finally, in MCSR, post-production activities are performed to enhance student engagement and to also consolidate important concepts learned from the material. These activities are designed in the following manner:

- Number Heads Together (Kagan, 1994): The students in each group were given number from 1-4 or 1-5 (depending upon how many students are in each group). The instructor asks a review question. The students in each group then *put their heads together* to discuss the question and make sure that everyone in the group knows the answer. Then the instructor randomly selects a number from a group to answer.
- Send-A-Problem (Kagan, 1994): Each group selects the best question it has generated and passes that question to a different group to answer.



## **6.0 METHOD**

This study was designed to determine the effects of the MCSR intervention implemented to tertiary-level EFL students. A quasi-experiment method employing a pre-test-post-test design was utilised. The intervention in this study was a modified version of CSR. Furthermore, qualitative information was collected to complement the quantitative data. According to Creswell (2005), the quantitative data would provide an overall picture of the study and the descriptive, qualitative information would help to refine and explain the results of the obtained quantitative data.

### **6.1 Context**

The present research was conducted in one public university located in the East Azerbaijan province of Iran. The students had been accepted into their selected field of study based on the national university entrance exam. According to the selected university's stated policy, signed consent was not a common procedure, because it was perceived with suspicion. Therefore, only a verbal consent was secured to conduct the investigation. The study was conducted at the end of the first semester of the academic year 2007-2008 with only six sessions remaining.

### **6.2 Participants**

Due to the administrative constraints, we were able to secure consent to select only one class (existing group) with 42 students for this study. The participants had already been assigned to this class based on their KONKOOR (University Entrance Examination) scores. They had already been pre-grouped in classes of 42-54 students by the university academic administration of the study site. These entering freshmen were accepted into different fields of study at the Faculty of Engineering and had to complete the compulsory General English course in this university. In fact, the students in this class were selected because they were expected to improve their EFL reading skills during the course that they had taken. In this study, one language instructor was also employed to help deliver the intended instruction and collect the necessary quantitative and qualitative data.

### 6.3 Instrumentation

In this study, a 40-item reading comprehension test was developed by the researchers. The test was constructed by drawing on the reading comprehension taxonomy proposed by Barrett (1968) because it was assumed that it could assess a broad range of reading comprehension skills. Being in different formats, namely, multiple-choice questions (MCQs), true/false (T/F), fact/opinion, and open-ended questions, the test consisted of five categories of reading comprehension sub-skills: (a) literal comprehension, (b) reorganisation of ideas, (c) inferential comprehension, (d) evaluation, and (e) appreciation. The content validity of the test was validated by three reading experts from universities. The estimated reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of this reading test for the present L2 sample was  $\alpha = 0.78$ . The test booklets obtained from the pre-test and post-test were scored using the accompanying rubrics prepared for its scoring.

At the pre- and post-tests, the instructor collected the quantitative data to assess the participants' comprehension achievement. The pre-test was conducted one week prior to the beginning of the intervention, while post-testing took place during the week immediately following treatment completion. A six-week time interval between the pre-test and the post-test was considered adequate to control for the memory factor among the participants. The same reading passages and comprehension questions were administered in the pre- and post-tests. The main reason for using exactly the same test in the pre- and post-test was to ensure that they were exactly comparable. In fact, it was thought that utilisation of the same pre- and post-tests could remove the concern of equating different forms of pre- and post-tests.

Additionally, during the week immediately following treatment completion, the instructor also collected qualitative data. Such qualitative, group-administered measurement is usually believed to have the potential to elicit a great deal of response from the respondents (Jackson, 1995). The gathering of descriptive data was conducted by using Opinionnaire®. Opinionnaire® is a registered trademark of the Forum Foundation. Opinionnaire® is an objective survey instrument which was developed by the Forum Foundation ([www.forumfoundation.org](http://www.forumfoundation.org)). It uses questions to which participants respond objectively in a manner that allows for easy tabulation of participant opinions. In addition, Opinionnaire® also allows participants to respond anonymously with either an *object* or *abstain*. These responses are recorded and reported along with all other responses so that

participants never feel obliged to come up with an answer to a question when they simply are not prepared to make a decision based on the information they currently have. The MCSR Opinionnaire consisted of six questions in students' L1 that were intended to evaluate the students' perceptions regarding the MCSR intervention. Students' first language was used in order to ensure that they would have their voices without experiencing any unnecessary pressure that might be caused by using L2.

Originally, seven questions had been formulated; however, in view of the recommendations made by three experts in this field, they were reduced to six. At the conclusion of conducting the Opinionnaires, they were duplicated, back-translated into English and then analysed by both the instructor and the first author of the present article. To determine the consistency of the qualitative data, rater reliability of the data was calculated by Cohen's kappa. A reasonably acceptable level of inter-rater reliability was found ( $\text{kappa} = 0.84$ ).

## 7.0 PROCEDURES

General procedures consisted of (a) training workshop, (b) pre-testing of all participants, (c) MCSR implementation, (d) post-intervention Opinionnaires, and (e) post-testing. As an initial step, the researcher conducted an all-day workshop to train the participating instructor. The training, which took six hours in total (two three-hour sessions), consisted of (a) a brief introduction to MCSR, (b) its implementation procedures, and (c) the introduction of the research instruments and the scoring rubrics and the qualitative content analysis procedures.

Before the onset of the study, the students were pre-tested on reading comprehension, as measured by the researcher-developed test. The MCSR implementation was accomplished in two phases. First, the participants received one orientation session for MCSR. Then, the instructor introduced the MCSR's stages to the participants. After an overall description of the practice, he provided explicit instruction on how to use each strategy through modeling and think-aloud techniques. Once he ensured that the participants were proficient enough to use the strategies of MCSR, five instructional sessions were devoted for the study. Each session took one hour and a half. In fact, the students met once a week and received the MCSR intervention over the course of six weeks.

Post-intervention data collection took place upon completion of the six-week intervention. First, Opinionnaires were distributed among the students by the instructor. No time limit was set. Therefore, students were requested to take their time to respond to the questions. Then, the same reading comprehension test was re-administered to all participating students after the completion of the treatment.

## 8.0 RESULTS

### 8.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

Once data were collected from the pre-test and post-test, their analyses were performed through the application of a dependent-samples *t*-test. This was crucial in order to answer the first research question, namely:

- (1) Will students receiving the MCSR treatment demonstrate gains in reading comprehension performance, as measured by the researcher-developed reading comprehension test?

Initially, in order to use parametric inferential statistics which is a correlated *t*-test, a normality test should be performed. To that end, the assumption of normality was tested although it is argued that with sample sizes of 30+, violation of this assumption does not seem to be a cause for concern (Pallant, 2005). The Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistics ( $p = 0.2$ ) along with the skewness and kurtosis values ranging between  $-1.0$  and  $+1.0$  indicated that the normality assumption was upheld.

Next, a dependent-samples *t*-test was run to evaluate the impact of the MCSR intervention on students' scores on the reading comprehension test. As is evident in Table 1, there was no statistically significant increase in students' comprehension scores from the pre-test ( $M = 42.17$ ,  $SD = 5.86$ ) to the post-test [ $M = 42.80$ ,  $SD = 5.80$ ,  $t(41) = 1.75$ ,  $p > .05$ ].

Further, to assess the practical significance of the intervention, the percentage of change effected by the MCSR intervention was also calculated. For this purpose, the original pre-test and post-test mean scores were used. The result revealed a very low percentage of change (i.e., 1.49%). In other words, there is little effect of the MCSR intervention on the students' reading performance.

**Table 1** Result for dependent-samples t-test

<b>Measure</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>
Pre-test	42	42.17	5.86		
Post-test	42	42.80	5.80		
<b>t-test</b>				<b>1.75</b>	<b>0.087</b>

## 8.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

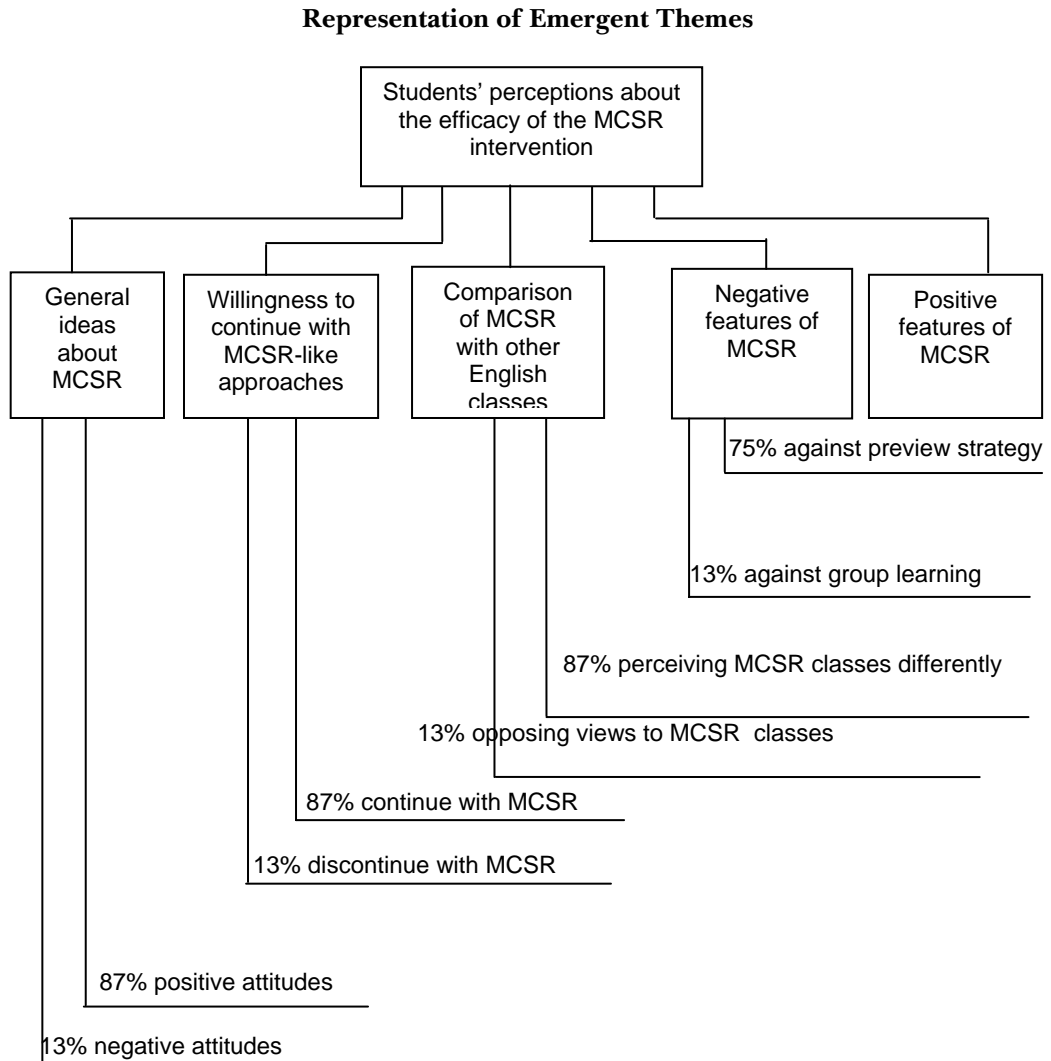
The qualitative data obtained were analysed to find the answer to the second research question, namely:

- (2) How do the EFL students respond to MCSR – an instructional practice which is combination of reading strategy instruction and cooperative learning?

First, the Opinionnaires were back-translated into English by the first author of the study and then were double-checked by the instructor to ensure the accuracy of the translation. Any discrepancies between the two were resolved in a meeting that they had before the qualitative content analysis was conducted. The data were coded by the instructor and the researcher. Coding procedures for the Opinionnaire data were based on open coding (theme identification) and axial coding proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.61) open coding involves “...the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data”. During open coding, entire interviews were read and reread so that patterns and major themes in the data could be identified. After this, the data were categorised around the themes. Axial coding, as Strauss and Corbin (1998) explicate, involves a set of procedures through which data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between a category and its sub-categories. During axial coding, the identified categories were refined and narrowed down into sub-categories. Further, the data were re-categorised around the refined/narrowed themes.

Finally, upon completion of the data coding, many similarities and a couple of differences emerged in the ways respondents reported their experiences about the

MCSR. In effect, analysis of students' Opinionnaire data generated five major themes, as shown in Figure 1: (a) general ideas about MCSR, (b) positive features of MCSR, (c) negative features of MCSR, (d) comparison of MCSR with other English classes, and (e) willingness to continue with MCSR-like approaches.



**Figure 1** Graphic representation of emergent themes in the qualitative data

In the subsequent sub-section where the issue of the data interpretation is undertaken, evidence to support the findings will be provided by using original, key quotations from among 38 respondents out of 42 students who agreed to

answer the MCSR Opinionnaires. To ensure that students stay anonymous, respondents received a hypothetical name.

**General ideas about MCSR.** The qualitative content analysis demonstrated that nearly 87% of the students reported positive perceptions about the MCSR programme. Their remarks also indicated that students receiving the intervention were in favour of the MCSR. A major reason spelled out for their interest in MCSR was the group work that they were engaged in. A couple of examples of their statements are as follows:

*“In that class, we helped each other. If I did not know anything, I would ask my classmates and the other way round. That was really wonderful.”* (Beth)

*“I really liked the instruction [MCSR]. The reason is because in the class we were helping each other and learning from each other.”* (John)

However, almost 13% of the students had negative attitudes toward the MCSR programme. For their negative responses, they could not really express any specific reasons except that they all attributed their disinterest to the “weirdness” of group work. This was illustrated in the following statements:

*“To be honest, the class was not like the regular classes that we were used to. We had to sit in circles and work in groups. That was not very interesting.”* (Mary)

*“I am not used to that kind of learning. I did not feel comfortable in the class. I love to see the teacher in front of the class all the time.”* (Jim)

**Positive Features of MCSR.** The most frequently identified strategy as “helpful” was the “get-the-gist” strategy. “Get-the-gist” strategy suggests that students should read texts paragraph by paragraph and stop to find a main idea for each paragraph, rather than read the whole text and then get the main idea. For example, a couple of the students remarked:

*“In my opinion, ‘get the gist’ was a very useful way of reading. Even now I apply this strategy in what I read.”* (Mark)

*“The most helpful thing was the ‘get the gist’ part. We did not have to read all the paragraphs and then find out what the text was about.” (George)*

One feature of the MCSR intervention most popular among the MCSR students was the group or cooperative learning component. The students stressed that group learning in MCSR allowed them to easily work on reading materials with the help of their group-mates, as noted in the following comments:

*“I guess one positive feature of the programme was the way that we learned the reading materials in groups. That is to say, we worked together in groups and we knew what we were doing with the text.” (Paul)*

*“Actually, that was the group work. We worked together and cooperated in a way. Even though it seemed a little bit strange on the first day, I think we realised later that it was much more effective to learn things in groups rather than individually.” (Beth)*

**Negative features of MCSR.** Approximately 90% of the respondents identified the “Preview” strategy component of the intervention as less useful. In addition, 13% of the students who did not have positive attitudes towards MCSR stated that learning based on group models did not work out for them:

*“And, the preview strategy really did not make any sense. It was kind of useless, that is to say, it was an ineffective activity to do. I was wondering why we did it.” (Gabriel)*

*“I couldn’t concentrate on the lesson. I always wished I could have been able to go through the lessons alone.” (Peter)*

**Comparison of MCSR with other English classes.** The majority of the students, i.e., nearly 87% of them, perceived the MCSR class differently from their other English classes. One major contrast that was identified from students' responses was related to the learning environment. Students noted that MCSR provided a different type of learning environment. In fact, they pointed out that MCSR could provide a learning environment which was more interactive than any other English classes that they had had before. They believed that they could



actively participate in the learning process. The following comments are excerpts from their Opinionsnaires:

*“The lessons were not boring. The instructor always tried to help us to be active by involving us in activities that he had designed. In other classes this is not the case.”* (Bob)

*“In some other classes you have to sit there and just listen to what the teacher is going to say. Also, in other English classes when teachers talk, I’m going to sleep. I mean I don’t care what they say. But, in the MCSR class, the learning environment was different. It could keep us motivated.”* (Tim)

Nevertheless, only five students, i.e., 13% of the students had opposing views about the MCSR programme. They all shared one common idea about the contrast that they reported. In fact they all referred to the learning principle that MCSR employed that is, cooperative learning. They continuously stressed that individualistic learning in their other classes is more effective for them than leaning which is based on group models. An example of their comments is as follows:

*“Admittedly, other English classes were more effective. I was well organised and could take notes of what the instructors said. In MCSR class, I was kind of confused. I did not know which part of the lessons was important for the final exam.”* (Roger)

**Willingness to continue with MCSR-like approaches.** The majority of the students, except the very five students who did not have positive attitudes towards MCSR, said that they would continue with the MCSR-like classes. Across these five students’ responses, the reason for discontinuity with MCSR-type instructional methods was found to be attributable to their preferred personal learning styles. Their reluctance with MCSR can be noted in their comments:

*“It does not really make sense. Everyone must take care of their own learning. Otherwise, they will lose track of their learning. As it [MCSR] impeded my effective learning, I do not want to go on with such programme.”* (Henry)

*“No, I would not like to. The reason is because I am more comfortable when I am working by myself”.* (Peter)

As stated earlier, 87% of the students showed strong desire for the MCSR. They all explained that the main reason that they would continue with the MCSR class was that they found group learning effective. Some of the examples of their comments are as follows:

*“Not only do I wish to continue with the MCSR class, but also I do hope I can experience once again an effective instructional method like that in other classes, too.”* (Gary)

*“I think this is a new method in our university. So, it will take time for it to become popular across the university. Since it was really effective and helpful, I want to experience it again.”* (Melissa)

## 9.0 DISCUSSION

In this study, we provided the MCSR intervention to university-level EFL students in order to investigate students' responses to the intervention with regard to the gains that they made on a researcher-developed reading comprehension test. We also attempted to evaluate their perceptions about the efficacy of the MCSR class.

The quantitative evaluation manifested that there was no statistically significant difference in the students' mean scores after the treatment programme. Moreover, the effect of the treatment, or rather the practical significance of the intervention, was very low. As logic suggests, on the basis of this study alone, it is difficult to ascertain about the factors accounting for a multi-dimensional process like reading comprehension. In experimental research, the conventional criterion of statistical significance testing is still well received despite the criticisms. To our way of thinking, the statistical non-significance should not detract from the potential benefits and ability of the treatment to enhance EFL reading comprehension revealed in the qualitative findings. This does not, however, mean that we can ignore the statistically no-difference finding. What is intended is that we should look at the situation more realistically.

Overall, the students' minimal responsiveness to intervention in this study may be related to both individual and instructional factors. A few possible explanations for the lack of statistically significant effects can be summarised as: (a) failing to address the language proficiency level of students before conducting the study; (b) failing to familiarise students sufficiently well with the intervention at the

pretreatment stage; and (c) students failing to realise the importance of reading strategy instruction.

In addition, it is pertinent to note that students in this study may have had a stronger response to the intervention if it had been delivered with greater intensity and conducted over a longer period of time. Pedagogically, this refers to the notion of instructional dosage (Faggella-Luby & Deshler, 2008), which is composed of four interconnected factors: (a) group size, (b) instructional period, (c) frequency, and (d) duration. Group size is related to the student-to-teacher ratio during instruction. The instructional period refers to the length of each session which can be at variance. Frequency is concerned with the number of times students are instructed during a week. Duration, the final factor in the instructional dosage, refers to both the optimal total number of sessions students should be instructed and the optimal length of time from start to finish. In short, what all this adds up to is that it is absolutely necessary to ensure that interventional studies are being implemented in the right dosage prior to conducting any research. Otherwise, research outcomes could be compromised if *dosage* is not carefully addressed.

The qualitative evaluation from the post-intervention Opinionsnaires, however, indicated that most of the participating students did have positive attitudes towards the intervention. The researchers postulate that university-level EFL students have a high preference for communicative and cooperative activities and the popular sentiment that students resist group work because of their long-standing conventional learning tradition might no longer holds.

A caveat may be of relevance here. Educational experts' reactions to innovations that emerge from different parts of the world differ. Sometimes, innovations may be blindly embraced by the enthusiastic practitioners due to their newness. Other times, they are likely to be rejected by the prejudiced, local practitioners simply because of their first impressions that did not agree with them. An all-important lesson that we learned from this study was that learning is context-dependent. The one-size-fits-all type of instruction does not seem to work. Apparently, students have various sorts of pedagogical needs. Enthusiastic researchers attempting to meet these needs in educational settings should be attentive to different aspects of the dynamics of the classrooms. Thus, taking an extremist view on instructional methods could do irreparable harm to effective education. We are all conscious of the issue that "There is not any one way to teach reading" (Coady, 1979, p.11). What is hoped for, then, is that academicians

come to believe that such instructional approaches as MCSR are just available approaches that they can add to their existing repertoire of effective teaching techniques.

In addition, students' strong desire for cooperative learning should not blind us to the fact that this interest may be due to the *novelty effects*, a notion that often goes unaddressed particularly in interventional studies. Novelty effects in research refer to the likelihood that the effects of an intervention can be, to some extent, dependent on their newness and novelty in the settings in which they are employed. Thus, participating students' strong preference can be attributed to the issue that MCSR was implemented under conditions in which it was particularly infrequent and novel. Interventions that are novel to the students may be more effective. Future replications of such studies with frequent application of MCSR can possibly be informative and enlightening.

The other findings of the qualitative evaluation manifested that a few of the students show minimal responsiveness to the MCSR intervention. Such a small degree of responsiveness may also be related to both individual and instructional factors. Possible explanations that can be offered for the lack of students' interest in such instructional programmes are that individual differences and their personal learning styles are not taken into account before conducting studies and most importantly the delivery of the instruction in terms of intensity is not properly addressed. The reluctant students may have had a different response to the intervention if MCSR had been delivered with a higher degree of intensity and duration.

The present study was, in no uncertain terms, limited in view of its research design. Due to the constraints imposed by the research site on this study, we were unable to include a control group. Thus, the use of only one group could have had a weakening effect on the quantitative outcome of the study. In fact, the lack of a control group in interventional research is a major weakness which should be taken into serious consideration. Admittedly, another limitation is related to the instructional dosage (i.e., its frequency and its remarkably brief duration). It is not unlikely that an intervention with proper instructional dosage would have resulted in greater gains. In addition, it is also possible that the researcher-developed reading comprehension test did not have strong psychometric properties for the subjects in this study.

Moreover, a small sample size and the limited number of the questions incorporated in the Opinionnaire may have been unable to provide a

comprehensive picture of students' perceptions on MCSR. It should also be noted that since students were requested to complete the Opinionsnaires before their final exam, they might have shown unreal positiveness in order to impress their instructor. These limitations should be taken into serious consideration in future MCSR studies. Thus, the results in the current study should be interpreted with caution. One lesson that we learned from this study is that enthusiastic researchers searching for quick fixes in educational settings would, in the end, feel dismayed by the outcome of their research and, accordingly, could do a disservice to students who are in need of effective (EFL reading) instruction. Therefore, we wish to initiate a call for further research on MCSR effectiveness with appropriate instructional dosage and also with a stronger research design. Inclusion of a control group is the first, vital step that needs to be taken in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of MCSR and its effectiveness.

## 10.0 CONCLUSION

Overall findings manifest that EFL learners can benefit from these two effective reading instructional elements. Undoubtedly, well organised small-group learning combined with research-based reading strategy instruction is a structure that holds great promise. We therefore suggest that reading instruction for university-level EFL students include a bridging strategy that can provide reading strategy instruction combined with much-needed, scaffolded learning. Moreover, if we intend to extend the notion of cooperation beyond the classroom confines, then teachers, instructors, and lecturers play influential roles in implementing MCSR or MCSR-like practices in classrooms. On a general note, a learning experience should be *educative*. In other words, as it helps build up knowledge generation, it must also increase the possibility that students could seek similar but expanded experiences in the future. With regard to the fact that current instructional approaches in some EFL contexts fall short of being *educative*, the findings of this study are important in helping EFL academicians modify or adjust their practices in meeting their students' educational needs. Students in this study voiced their preferences; however, what remains to be seen are the new avenues such student voices might open for EFL language pedagogy in general. Hence, to meet students' unique educational needs, constant attempts should be made to insert additional studies of this nature high on the research agenda. In sum, we envision

a great payoff in terms of EFL students' reading comprehension outcomes, provided that we can effect a change in current instructional practices and prompt our colleagues to consider adopting more appropriate evidence-based methods of teaching for the settings in which they teach EFL reading.

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