



Assessing Reading Strategies and Abilities of Humanities and Social Sciences Undergraduates in English Fiction and Non-Fiction Texts

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Abstract

Reading, a dynamic and multicomponent skill, plays a critical role in meaning-making, encompassing decoding, syntactic processing, vocabulary, and metacognition. This research investigates the reading comprehension abilities (RCA) and use of reading strategies by the undergraduate students of humanities and social sciences at Mid-West University (MU), Surkhet, Nepal focusing on English fiction and non-fiction texts. Employing a quantitative research method, data were gathered from 50 fourth-semester students using a reading comprehension test based on CEFR B2-level texts and a five point Likert scale measured from 1 for strongly disagree to 5 for strongly agree for positive items and reverse scoring for negative statements for assessing cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective reading strategies. The Findings reveal that students predominantly utilize cognitive and metacognitive strategies, with engagement in socio-affective reading practices. The majority demonstrate basic to intermediate proficiency, with notable gaps at advanced levels (C1/C2). These findings underline the need for targeted curriculum intervention emphasizing higher-order reading strategies, diverse authentic texts, and advanced-level reading resources to enhance comprehension ability in Nepali EFL contexts.

Keywords

Reading comprehension ability, Reading strategies, English fiction texts, English non-fiction texts

Introduction

Reading is taken as the active language skill in which the readers actively engaged in building the meaning from the text. Reading, therefore, is a multi-component meaning-making or meaning-extracting activity, composed of such processes and skills as decoding, syntactic processing, vocabulary knowledge, metacognition, etc. (Bernhardt, 2011; Grabe, 2009; Koda, 1996, 2005, as cited in Li et al., 2024). It is an indispensable skill to develop in both their L1 and L2 contexts (Suk, 2024). In this regard, Hedge (2010),

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Johnson (2008), and Doff (1988) have attempted to define reading as an active and fluent process, which involves the reader and the reading materials in building meaning on a guided purpose. In fact, the readers read the text for meaning. If the text were unable to construct a meaning, there would be no reading. The scholarly evidence tend to confirm that reading is not just picking up words, phrases and sentences written in the text rather, it is a process of making sense of written subject matter or text. In this regard, Hunt (2004) claimed, "Reading as a process shaped partly by the reader's background, and partly by the situation the reading occurs" (p. 137). So, reading is a comprehending process to create meaning of written or printed symbols (Grabe, 2009; Johnson, 2008; Clapham, 1996) or contents.

Evaluating one's ability to comprehend written text involves a combination of bottom-up and top-down processing and using content and formal schemata to make inferences (Council of Europe, 2020). Assessments of reading comprehension take various forms and have different requirements. Some assessments focus on understanding individual sentences or short passages, while others involve comprehending longer narratives, factual texts, or even poetry (Oakhill et al., 2014). Successful reading comprehension is often indicated by a reader's ability to form representations of a text (Fesel et al., 2015; Kim & Clariana, 2015). Various frameworks assess text understanding at different levels. The surface structure of a text can be analyzed through bottom-up processing, such as text structure questioning, linguistic analysis, and recalling words (Almalki & Alzahrani, 2024; Kintsch, 2005; Kneepkens & Zwaan, 1995). In contrast, top-down processing involves autobiographical links, speculations, and emotional responses to the text (Kintsch, 2005; Allbritton & Gerrig, 1991; Vipond & Hunt, 1984; Zwaan, 1994, as cited in Almalki & Alzahrani, 2024).

Measuring reading comprehension ability is a challenging task that can be accomplished using either closed-ended or open-ended items. Closed-ended items include multiple-choice questions, true/false and agree/disagree statements, cloze tests, ordering items (chronological and logical), matching, correcting, and filling in the gaps. On the other hand, open-ended items consist of short-answer questions, long-answer questions, and summary or paraphrase writing tasks (Alderson, 2000; Long & Doughty, 2009; Mackay, 2015; Ur, 2013 Yang, 2021). In addition, Benešová (2006, as cited in Tiwari, 2021) identifies multiple-choice, true/false, matching tests, picture cues, ordering tests, cloze tests, c-tests, cloze elide tests, information transfer tasks, short-answer tests, long-answer tests, summarizing and responding tasks, and mixed-format tests as common assessment formats used to measure reading comprehension.

Reading comprehension strategies are generally defined as readers employ while reading affect the reading comprehension. As Scovel (1998) stated, "Comprehension is not an absolute state where language users either fully comprehend or are left completely in the dark" (p.59). Reading comprehension, thus, refers to an active, dynamic and a constructive process in which readers dynamically try to use different cognitive and metacognitive strategies for comprehending a text (Allen, 2003; Dole et al., 1991; Ghonsooly & Loghmani, 2012; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Yang, 2002) under varying local contexts and environments. Authentic reading materials including newspapers, magazines, novels, and academic texts offer valuable resources for L2 learners. They expose learners to different types of discourse and genres, allowing them to engage with both fiction and non-fiction texts.

English is a compulsory and major course within the Bachelor of Arts, hereafter B. A. program under the GSHS. The compulsory courses, Com. Eng. 311: Compulsory English I in the first semester and Com 421: English Proficiency II in the second semester aim to introduce students to reading skills by exploring Nepali society and culture via novels (Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, 2019). While these courses strive to develop the four language skills and related sub-skills, their primary focus is on enhancing reading proficiency and study skills by concentrating on language mechanics. The curriculum includes fundamental reading concepts such as an introduction to reading skills, mechanics of reading, types of reading, reading speed, and novel reading. In addition to the compulsory courses, English is also offered as a specialization within the humanities and social sciences. Given the nature of this discipline, the major English courses are rich in literary genres and theories, aiming to cultivate extensive reading and critical thinking skills. Students are expected to become well-versed in various genres, literary movements, styles, and forms of writing, providing them with a broad and nuanced understanding of literature.

While the B. A. program's English curriculum at MU is comprehensive in its approach to developing foundational and advanced reading skills, a critical analysis reveals potential areas for enhancement. The integration of novels to explore Nepali society and culture is beneficial for contextual learning, but it is essential to ensure that the selected texts are diverse and inclusive, representing a wide range of perspectives within Nepali society. This can help students develop a more holistic understanding of their cultural context. Furthermore, the curriculum's focus on the mechanics of reading and basic reading concepts, though necessary, should be balanced with more advanced reading strategies and critical analysis skills. Merely introducing basic concepts without advancing to higher-order reading and interpretive skills may limit students' ability to engage deeply with complex texts.

The specialization courses' emphasis on literary genres and theories is valuable for fostering extensive reading and critical thinking. However, it is crucial to critically evaluate whether these courses adequately prepare students for the practical demands of their future careers. While the Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) program in humanities and social sciences at MU offers a comprehensive English curriculum emphasizing foundational and advanced reading skills, critical gaps persist in the assessment of reading comprehension abilities and strategies, particularly concerning fiction and non-fiction texts (Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, 2019). The compulsory courses focus on enhancing language mechanics and foundational reading concepts, such as reading speed and mechanics, through contextual materials like novels exploring Nepali society and culture. Similarly, specialization courses prioritize literary genres and theories to foster extensive reading and critical thinking.

Despite these efforts, the curriculum appears to lack adequate emphasis on higher-order cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies that are essential for engaging deeply with complex texts. Furthermore, there is limited research examining whether students in these programs effectively employ such strategies to navigate the nuanced demands of fiction and non-fiction reading. Previous studies (Hedge, 2010; Anderson, 1999; Dole et al., 1991) underscore the significance of dynamic reading strategies in promoting comprehension. However, little empirical evidence is available on how Nepali undergraduate students utilize these strategies, particularly in diverse academic and cultural contexts. This study addresses these gaps by assessing the reading comprehension abilities and strategies of undergraduate students in the humanities and social sciences. By focusing on fiction and non-fiction texts, this research aims to provide insights into how students engage with and interpret various text types. The findings contribute to curriculum enhancement, inform pedagogical practices, and bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application in English education.

Literature Review

Reading comprehension is guided by theoretical orientations and reading models. In this regard, different researchers have contributed with a number of theories and models of reading and reading comprehension. For instance, the works of Bernhardt (2011), Birch (2007), Alderson (2000), Urquhart and Weir (1998), Nuttall (1996), Manzo and Manzo (1990), Perfetti (1985a), and Harris and Sipay (1984) are a few leads to represent reading comprehension as a pragmatic journey onto knowledge acquisition and display. According to Harris and Sipay (1984), there are mainly three reading models --bottom-up, top-down and interactive (p. 6). The proponents of bottom-up model, as discussed in the works of Gough (1992), and LaBerge and Samuels (1974), include a process of decoding every letter, vocabulary word, and eventually sentence in order to construct meaning by the reader from a written passage of text. Unlike bottom up model of reading, the proponents of top-down model, such as Goodman (1996); Smith (1985) have claimed that reading becomes 'meaning-driven' in which the reader starts with their background knowledge about the text, 'and actively compare what is read to what is already understood' (Manzo & Manzo, 1990; Urquhart & Weir, 1998).

As an attempt to develop balanced model of reading, interactive model of reading attempts to combine valid insights of both bottom-up and top-down. The proponents of interactive model of reading, such as Urquhart and Weir (1998), Block (1992), Bernhardt (2011), Rumelhart (1980), and Stanovich (1980) have claimed that there is a continuous interaction between bottom-up and top-down processing in the construction of the meaning of a text (Cohen, 2014; Goodman, 1988; Grabe, 1988). From bottom-up and top-down theories to the more recent interactive models, scholars have argued about which reading model best explains

the process of readers' comprehension. The strategic awareness and monitoring of the comprehension process, on the part of the language learner, is a powerful instrument for successful reading comprehension (Sheory & Mokhtari, 2001; Alexander & Jetton, 2000; Pressley, 2000; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995) in different contexts and environments. Research suggests that successful reading comprehension is linked to the effective use of reading strategies, with readers applying different strategies based on their reading proficiency (Afflerbach et al., 2017; Anderson, 1991; Block & Pressley, 2007; Grabe, 2009; Oxford & Crookall, 1989; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Taylor et al., 2006; Yapp et al., 2023, as cited in Suk, 2024).

Reading is of crucial importance particularly in the ESL/EFL academic context where students have a limited access to an adequate amount of authentic spoken text (Adhikari & Poudel, 2020, p.364) in Nepal. Fluent readers are more active and effective in their use of strategies compared to less fluent readers. Meta-analyses reveal that explicit instruction in reading strategies significantly improves reading comprehension, with moderate to large effect sizes (Suk, 2024; Taylor et al., 2006; Yapp et al., 2021). The empirical researches have shown that language learners' use of reading strategies and their reading comprehension are related (Al-Sheikh, 2002; Brantmeier, 2000, 2002; Dheib-Henia, 2003; Dreyer & Nel, 2003; Lee, 2007; Mokhtari & Reichard, 2004; Nuttal, 2000; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001; Wu, 2005; Zhang, 2001, as cited in Jafari & Shokrpour, 2012).

Despite of researches on reading comprehension models and strategies, a notable gap remains in understanding how these models and strategies are applied in specific educational contexts, particularly in Nepal's EFL settings. While researchers have extensively discussed theoretical models such as bottom-up, top-down, and interactive approaches (Harris & Sipay, 1984; Gough, 1992; Goodman, 1994), and have emphasized the role of strategic awareness in enhancing comprehension (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Sheory & Mokhtari, 2001), there is limited empirical research exploring how these models function in the Nepali context, where English is often taught in schools with limited authentic exposure to the language (Adhikari & Poudel, 2020).

Furthermore, while studies have consistently shown that strategy use is crucial for successful reading comprehension (Grabe, 2009; Suk, 2024), research has yet to fully address how different strategies are employed by Nepali learners with varying proficiency levels and how these strategies are influenced by their socio-cultural context (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Moreover, although research on reading strategies in both L1 and L2 contexts is abundant, little is known about the specific challenges Nepali learners face in utilizing these strategies, particularly in the context of limited access to authentic English materials and exposure. Existing studies focus on general strategy use (Afflerbach et al., 2008; Anderson, 1991), but they do not adequately explore how the socio-cultural and educational environment of Nepal affects the learners' strategy choices and reading comprehension ability.

English has been used as the medium for education, evaluation, and subject delivery for over 150 years, spanning all levels from nursery to tertiary education (Khadka, 2022). In this context, focused on examination, Khadka (2024) highlights that Nepal's SLC/SEE English assessments primarily emphasize on reading and writing skills (p. 48). This fact presents an opportunity to investigate the interplay between reading strategies and comprehension outcomes, particularly in English fiction and non-fiction texts within the Nepali ESL/EFL context. The study addresses a gap in understanding reading comprehension dynamics in Nepal, where evolving educational policies aim to enhance English proficiency. It examines the RCA and use of reading strategies by undergraduate students of humanities and social sciences at MU focusing on English fiction and non-fiction texts.

Despite extensive research on reading comprehension models and strategies, several gaps remain unexplored in the Nepali EFL context. Firstly, while theoretical models like bottom-up, top-down, and interactive approaches have been widely discussed (Harris & Sipay, 1984; Gough, 1992; Goodman, 1994), there is limited empirical evidence on how these models interact with the reading processes of Nepali undergraduate students. Secondly, although research emphasizes the importance of reading strategies in enhancing comprehension (Grabe, 2009; Suk, 2024), little is known about how cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies are utilized by Nepali learners with varying proficiency levels, particularly within the socio-cultural and educational environment of Mid-West University. Additionally, few studies have

examined how Nepali undergraduates' reading strategies differ when engaging with fiction and non-fiction texts in English, despite the varying cognitive demands posed by these text types.

By identifying how Nepali undergraduates approach fiction and non-fiction texts, the study offers insights for developing curriculum interventions that promote higher-order reading skills and critical thinking. Furthermore, as Nepal's educational policies increasingly prioritize English proficiency, the study also informs policymakers about strategic gaps and the necessary support systems to enhance reading comprehension. In this regard, this study aims to assess the reading comprehension abilities (RCA) of humanities and social sciences undergraduate students at Mid-West University, focusing on their engagement with both English fiction and non-fiction texts. Additionally, the study strives to identify the range of cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective reading strategies employed by these students. Furthermore, the study seeks to examine the relationship between students' use of reading strategies and their reading comprehension abilities across fiction and non-fiction texts. By exploring these correlations, the research aims to uncover whether specific strategies, whether cognitive, metacognitive, or socio-affective, positively influence RCA outcomes.

Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative research methodology, aligning with the research objectives and the need for statistical analysis of reading comprehension abilities and strategy use among undergraduate students. This methodological approach was best suited to the research questions as it allowed for objective measurement and comparison of reading comprehension abilities (RCA) and the frequency of reading strategies employed by students. The research design involved a cross-sectional survey, collecting data at a single point in time to capture a snapshot of students' RCA and their use of cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies. This design was justified as it enabled the researcher to gather quantifiable data from a representative sample, facilitating statistical analysis and interpretation.

For data collection, two instruments were used: a reading comprehension test and a survey questionnaire. The test assessed RCA using two sets of texts — fiction and non-fiction — each accompanied by ten multiple-choice questions (MCQs), totaling 20 marks. The test items were adapted from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) B2 level reading texts, ensuring their validity and reliability in assessing the target population's reading proficiency. To identify reading strategies, a Likert scale questionnaire was employed, consisting of 30 items adapted from Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001), Oxford (1990), and O'Malley and Chamot (1990). The questionnaire measured the frequency of cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always).

The data collection process involved random sampling of 50 fourth-semester undergraduate students from the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Mid-West University (MU), as these students had completed the compulsory English course by this stage. Validity was ensured through piloting the test and questionnaire, adapting them to the Nepali context, and conducting item analysis for reliability. The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, applying descriptive statistics to summarize the data and inferential statistics to explore relationships between RCA and strategy use. Ethical considerations were maintained by obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, and using data solely for research purposes. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, and their voluntary participation was emphasized, aligning with ethical research standards.

Result Analysis and Interpretation

In this section, the quantitative data regarding the use of reading strategies and assessment of reading comprehension ability of undergraduate students of humanities and social sciences students in English fiction and non-fiction texts were presented and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical measurements. Based on the analysis and interpretation, the findings were discussed in the subsequent sections as follows:

Assessment of Reading Strategies

This research adopts the classification framework of O'Malley and Chamot (1990), categorizing reading strategies as metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective reading strategies. The use of reading strategies by the undergraduate students of humanities and social sciences students are presented as follows:

Use of Cognitive Reading Strategies. Cognitive reading strategies refer to the mental processes that readers use to decode, understand, and retain information from a text. These strategies include techniques such as predicting, summarizing, inferring, and identifying key information, which help readers to actively engage with the text and construct meaning. For undergraduate students in humanities and social sciences, the use of cognitive reading strategies is particularly important, as it enables them to navigate complex academic texts, analyze arguments, and integrate new knowledge with their prior understanding. This section examines how these students employ cognitive strategies to enhance their reading comprehension and academic performance in the context of their studies.

Figure 1

Use of Cognitive Reading Strategies by Students of Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (BA)

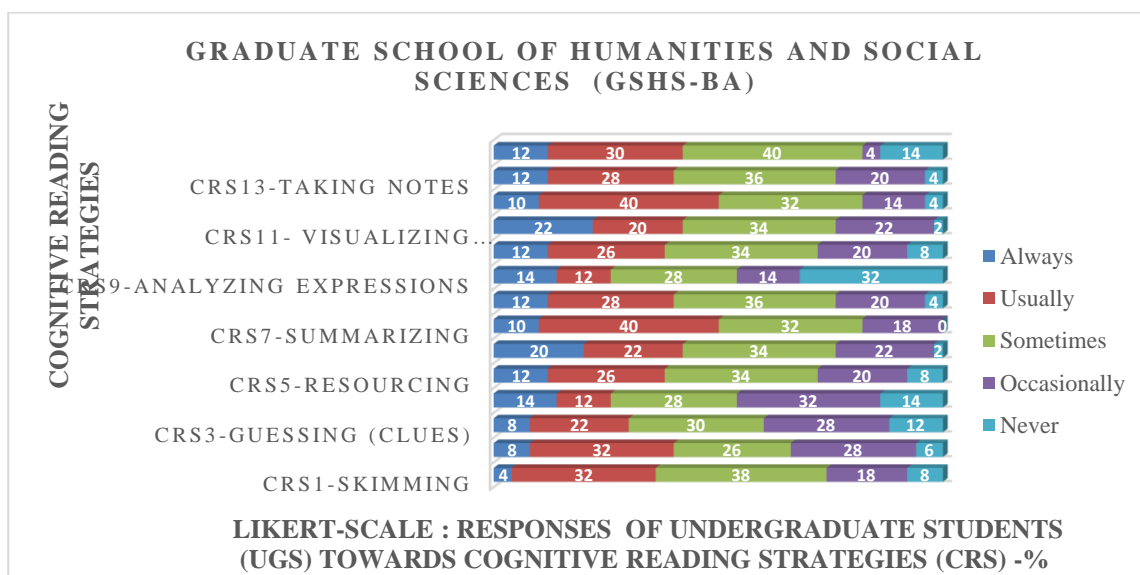


Figure 1 presents the descriptive analysis of cognitive reading strategies (CRS) used by undergraduate students from GSHS (Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences). The most commonly used cognitive reading strategy was CRS11 - visualizing information, with 22% of students reporting 'always' using it, 20% 'usually' using it, 34.0% 'sometimes' using it, 22.0% 'occasionally' using it, and only 2% 'never' using it. On the other hand, CRS9 - analyzing expressions, emerged as the least used cognitive reading strategy, with 32.0% of students reporting 'always' using it, 14.0% 'usually' using it, 28.0% 'sometimes' using it, 12.0% 'occasionally' using it, and 14.0% 'never' using it. The findings suggest that the majority of undergraduate students at GSHS-BA reported visualizing information as their most frequently employed cognitive reading strategy, while analyzing linguistic expressions was the least utilized strategy.

Use of Meta-cognitive Reading Strategies. Metacognitive reading strategies involve the awareness and regulation of one's own reading process, including planning, monitoring, and evaluating comprehension. These strategies help readers control and adjust their approach to reading, ensuring a deeper understanding of the text. For undergraduate students in humanities and social sciences, metacognitive strategies are essential for engaging critically with academic texts, assessing their own comprehension, and making necessary adjustments for improved understanding. This section explores how these students utilize

metacognitive strategies to enhance their reading performance, foster self-regulation in their learning, and address challenges they encounter during reading.

Figure 2

Use of Meta-cognitive Reading Strategies by Students of Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (BA)

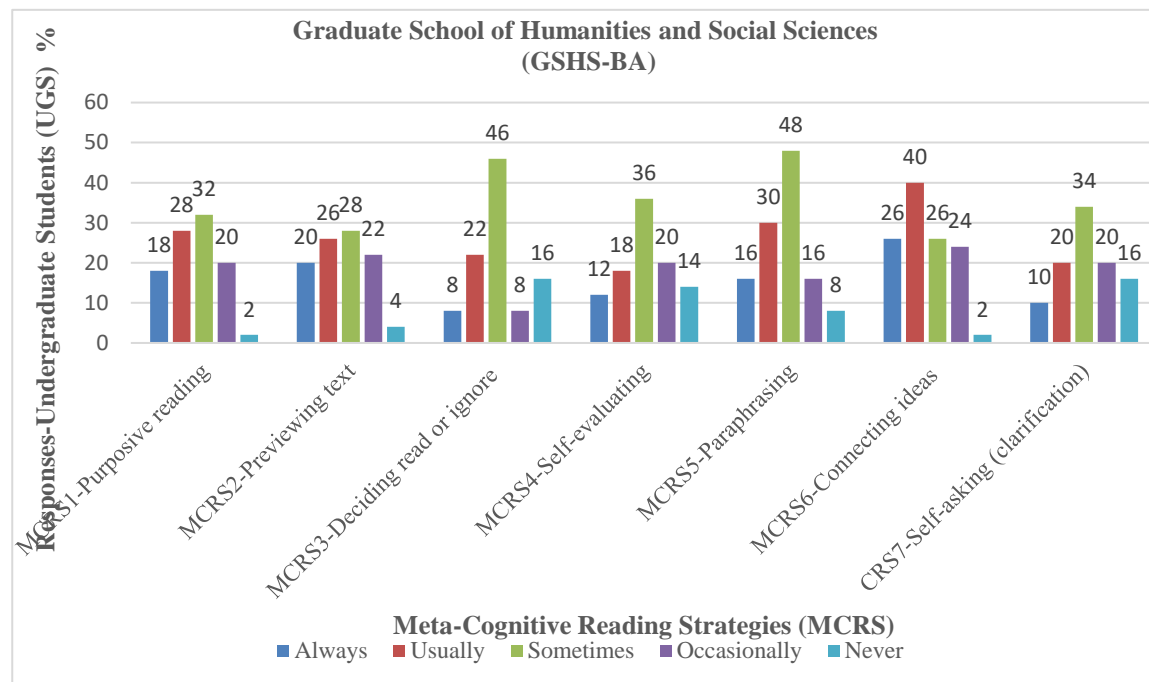


Figure 2 presents the descriptive analysis of meta-cognitive reading strategies (MCRS) used by the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (GSHS-BA) students from MCRS1-7. Based on the data, the most commonly used meta-cognitive reading strategy among GSHS-BA students was MCRS6-Connecting ideas: always: 12 (26.0%), usually: 20 (40.0%), sometimes: 13 (26.0%), occasionally: 12 (24.0%), and never: 1 (2.0%) out of 50 respondents. This indicates that many undergraduate students in the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences frequently connect ideas and consider their prior knowledge about the topic while reading. On the other hand, the least used meta-cognitive reading strategy is MCRS3-Deciding reading or ignoring: always: 4 (8.0%), usually: 11 (22.0%), sometimes: 23 (46.0%), occasionally: 4 (8.0%), and never: 8 (16.0%) out of 50 respondents. This suggests that a smaller proportion of GSHS-BA undergraduate students pay attention to whether they should read or ignore certain texts while reading, indicating a lower tendency to make deliberate decisions regarding their reading materials.

The findings reveal that the majority of undergraduate students in the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (GSHS-BA) prioritize connecting ideas and considering their existing knowledge when engaging in reading activities. However, a smaller number of students focus on deciding whether to read or ignore certain texts, indicating a lesser emphasis on deliberate decision-making during the reading process.

Use of Socio-affective Reading Strategies. Socio-affective reading strategies involve the use of social interactions and emotional responses to support and enhance the reading process. These strategies include seeking help from peers or instructors, discussing the text with others, and using positive self-talk to maintain motivation and overcome difficulties. For undergraduate students in humanities and social sciences, socio-affective strategies are particularly valuable as they foster collaborative learning and emotional engagement with texts, which can enhance comprehension and retention. This section examines how these students

employ socio-affective strategies to navigate their reading challenges and improve their academic performance.

Figure 3

Use of Socio-affective Reading Strategies by Students of Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (BA)

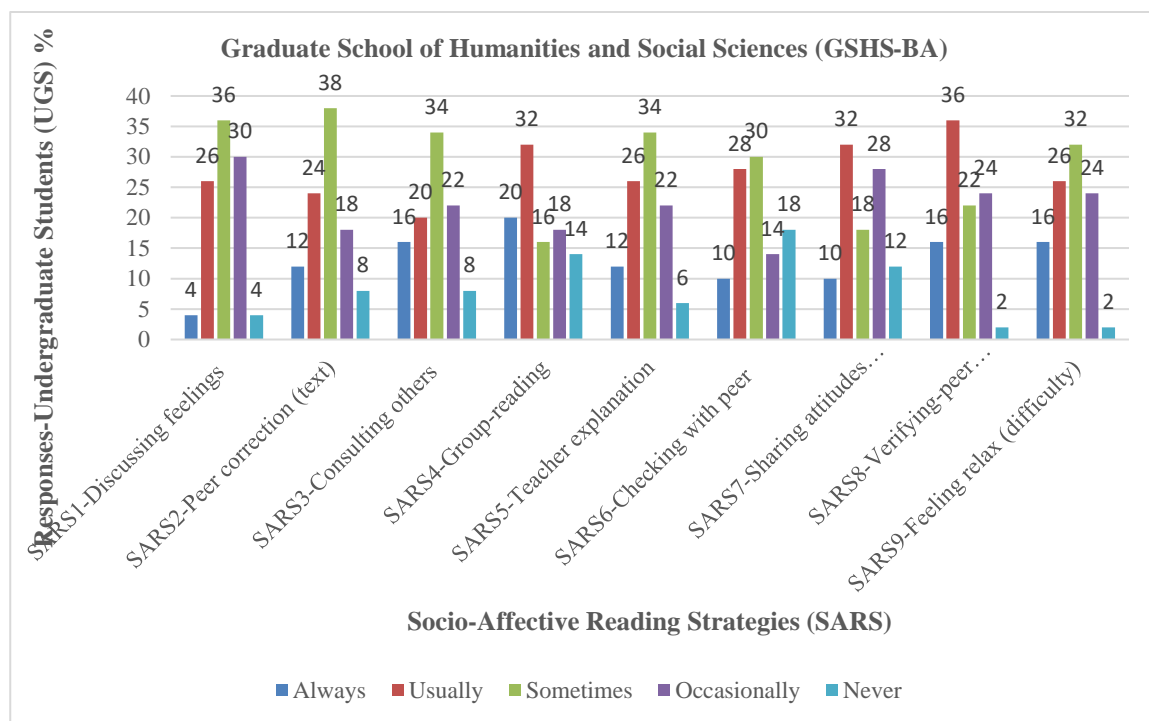


Figure 3 reflects the descriptive analysis of socio-affective reading strategies (SARS) used by the students of the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (GSHS-BA) from SARS1-9. According to the data, the most frequently used socio-affective reading strategy among GSHS-BA students was SARS4-*Group-reading*: always: 10 (20.0%), usually: 16 (32.0%), sometimes: 8 (16.0%), occasionally: 9 (18.0%), and never: 7 (14.0%). This indicates that a significant proportion of undergraduate students in the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences prefer to read in groups, highlighting their value on collaborative reading and discussion with their peers. On the other hand, the least used socio-affective reading strategy is SARS6- *Checking with peers for clarification*: always: 5 (10.0%), usually: 14 (28.0%), sometimes: 15 (30.0%), occasionally: 7 (14.0%), and never: 9 (18.0%).

The findings suggest that a smaller number of GSHS-BA undergraduate students actively seek clarification from their peers when encountering difficulties in reading, indicating a lesser reliance on peer support for clarification during the reading process.

Assessment of Reading Ability

The level of reading comprehension ability was assessed in terms of the CEFR reading level, i.e.,: A1 and A2 (basic level); B1 and B2 (independent level) and C1 and C2 (proficient level). based on the score they obtained in the reading comprehension texts. In terms of program-wise assessment of reading comprehension ability (RCA) with text types (i.e., non-fiction and fiction reading texts), the levels of the undergraduate students were found to be identified as the following categories of readers as per the category of CEFR level:

Reading comprehension ability of undergraduate students of GSHS-BA in English non-fiction reading texts. Reading comprehension ability refers to the capacity of readers to understand, interpret, and retain information from a text. For undergraduate students of the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (GSHS-BA), RCA in English non-fiction reading texts is a critical skill, as these texts often contain complex ideas, arguments, and academic discourse. Effective reading comprehension in this context requires the ability to decode the language and analyze and synthesize information, evaluate arguments, and apply knowledge in various academic and real-world settings. This section explores the RCA of GSHS-BA students when engaging with English non-fiction texts, highlighting the factors that influence their comprehension and the strategies they employ to navigate these texts successfully.

Figure 4

Crosstab analysis of reading comprehension ability (RCA) of undergraduate students of Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (GSHS-BA) in English non-fiction reading texts

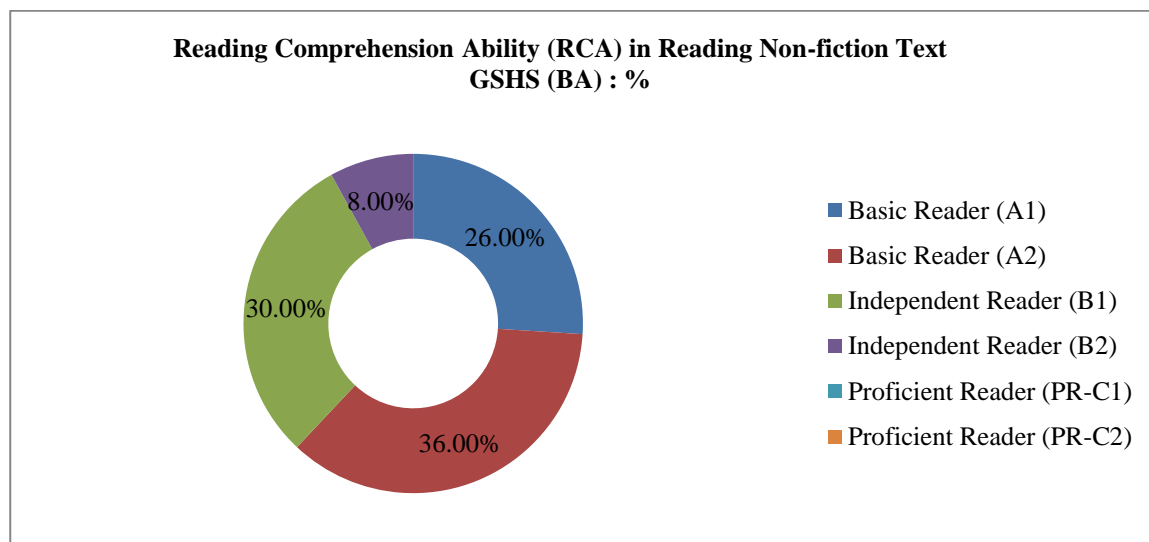


Figure 4 presents a crosstab analysis of reading comprehension ability (RCA) among undergraduate students of the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (GSHS-BA) in English non-fiction texts. The majority of students (36%) demonstrate RCA at the A2 level, indicating they can understand sentences and common expressions in familiar contexts. Additionally, 30% of students perform at the B1 level, suggesting they can grasp the main points of standard input on familiar topics. A smaller group (8%) has achieved the B2 level, demonstrating the ability to comprehend complex texts, including technical discussions in their field. None of the students have attained the advanced proficiency levels of PR-C1 or PR-C2. These findings highlight that most students remain within basic to intermediate levels of reading comprehension. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the majority of undergraduate students at GSHS-BA have a basic level of English reading comprehension ability, with only a small percentage demonstrating an intermediate level of ability. This suggests that further support and efforts may be needed to enhance the reading comprehension skills of these students in English non-fiction texts.

Reading comprehension ability of undergraduate students of GSHS-BA in English fiction reading texts. Reading comprehension ability (RCA) in English fiction texts involves the skill to understand narrative structures, character development, themes, and underlying messages within a story. For undergraduate students of the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (GSHS-BA), mastering RCA in English fiction is essential for analyzing literary works, interpreting symbols, and critically engaging with the texts. Fiction texts often require readers to explore emotions, cultural contexts, and complex ideas presented through storytelling. This section examines the RCA of GSHS-BA students when reading English fiction,

focusing on their ability to interpret and engage with literary content and the strategies they use to enhance their comprehension of these texts.

Figure 5

Crosstab analysis of reading comprehension ability (RCA) of undergraduate students of Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (GSHS-BA) in English fiction reading texts

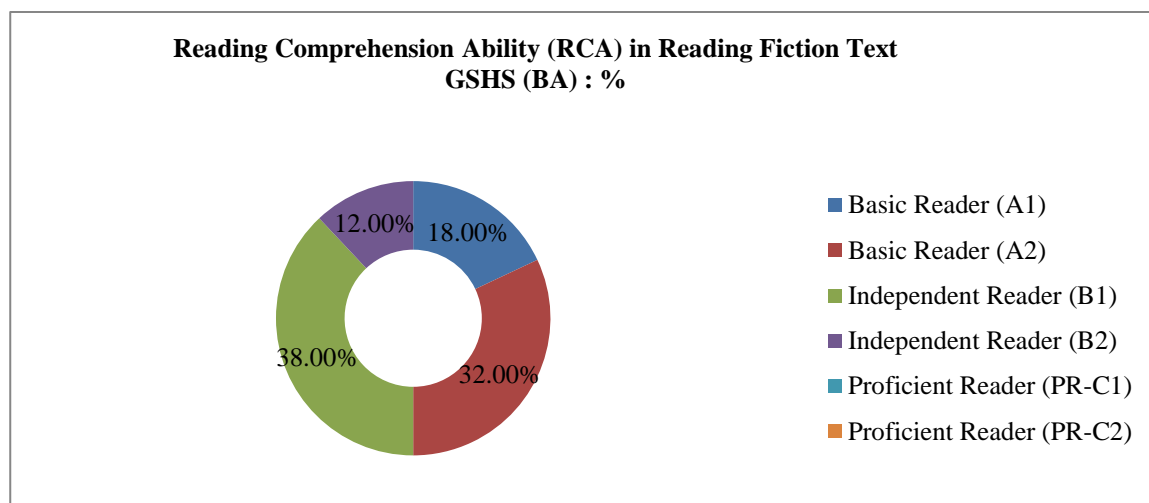


Figure 5 presents the crosstab analysis of reading comprehension ability (RCA) of undergraduate students of Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (GSHS-BA) in English fiction reading text. According to the above pie-chart, the majority of students (38.00%) are at the B1 level, which indicates that they have independent reading ability and can understand a variety of texts on familiar topics followed by A2 (32.00%) level, which indicates that they have a basic understanding of English and can read simple texts and the B2 (12.00%) level, which indicates that they have a higher level of comprehension and can understand more complex texts. There are no students at the PR-C1 or PR-C2 levels, which indicate advanced proficiency in reading comprehension.

Table 1

Gender-wise RCA of Undergraduate Students in English Texts in Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (GSHS-BA)

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	T	df	p-value
Equal variances assumed	0.023	.879	1.485	48	.144

Table 1 presents the results of statistical tests conducted to analyze the relationship between gender-wise reading comprehension ability (RCA) of undergraduate students in English texts within the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (GSHS-BA) program. Following this, the t-test assesses whether there is a significant difference in the mean RCA scores of male and female students, assuming equal variances. The test yields a t-value of 1.485 with 48 degrees of freedom and a p-value of 0.144. Again, the p-value exceeds the conventional alpha level of 0.05, suggesting no statistically significant difference in RCA between male and female students in the GSHS-BA program. Overall, the findings indicate gender does not significantly influence RCA in this context. The findings suggest no statistically significant difference in reading comprehension ability between male and female undergraduate students in English texts within the

Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (GSHS-BA) program. This implies that, within the context of the GSHS-BA program, gender does not appear to determine the differences in reading comprehension ability among the undergraduate students.

Discussion

The discussion of this study's findings reveals significant patterns in the use of cognitive, meta-cognitive, and socio-affective reading strategies among undergraduate students of the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (GSHS-BA). These patterns reflect both universal trends and context-specific nuances in reading strategy application, aligning with existing literature. Research shows that readers employ various strategies to comprehend texts in both L1 and L2 contexts, with strategy instruction playing a crucial role in enhancing comprehension and text awareness (Afflerbach et al., 2017; Anderson, 1991; Hudson, 2007; Pressley, 2002b; Taylor et al., 2006, as cited in Suk, 2024).

The frequent use of visualizing information (CRS11) as the most common cognitive strategy highlights the importance of creating mental images to enhance comprehension and retention. This finding resonates with Mustajab Ahmed (2020), who observed a similar trend among Omani EFL students, reinforcing the effectiveness of cognitive strategies across contexts. In contrast, the least utilized strategy, analyzing expressions (CRS9), points to a gap in students' analytical engagement with texts. This gap may be attributed to inadequate training or a lack of emphasis on dissecting linguistic details during reading. Addressing this issue through explicit strategy instruction could strengthen students' analytical reading skills. Research suggests that readers' ability to form mental representations of a text is a key indicator of successful comprehension (Almalki et al., 2024; Fesel et al., 2015; Kim & Clariana, 2015).

Regarding meta-cognitive strategies, the dominance of connecting ideas (MCRS6) suggests that students frequently integrate prior knowledge and establish connections during reading. This finding supports studies by Rianto (2021), Darjito (2019), Daguay-James and Bulusan (2020), and Chan and Aryadoust (2023), which underscore the critical role of meta-cognitive strategies in fostering comprehension. Conversely, the low usage of deciding whether to read or ignore certain texts indicates a more passive approach to selecting reading materials. This aligns with Moghadam (2004), who found that previewing and directing attention are often underutilized strategies, despite their importance for effective reading. Equipping students with the skills to evaluate and prioritize texts could enhance their overall reading efficiency. The preference for group reading (SARS4) as the most frequently used socio-affective strategy highlights the value placed on collaborative learning. This finding is consistent with Pesout and Nietfeld (2020), who observed that cooperative environments enhance reading comprehension through positive social interdependence.

Collaborative reading allows students to discuss and clarify ideas, fostering deeper understanding. As Khadka (2024) argues, reading is both a social and linguistic process, influenced by socio-cultural and socio-historical factors. However, the limited use of checking with peers for clarification (SARS6) suggests a reluctance to seek help—possibly due to cultural factors or a lack of confidence. Aronson and Laughter (2016), Banks (2004), and Gay (2002) stress the importance of recognizing cultural differences in classrooms, advocating for inclusive and supportive learning environments to encourage active peer interaction. Further supporting these findings, research highlights the interplay between cognitive, meta-cognitive, and socio-affective strategies in effective reading practices. For instance, connecting ideas aligns with Moghadam (2004) and Yapp et al. (2021), who emphasize the role of background knowledge in comprehension. Strategies like making predictions, summarizing, and inferring (Moghadam, 2004) also contribute to reading success. The data show that GSHS-BA students predominantly rely on cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies to facilitate comprehension and integrate knowledge, while socio-affective strategies like collaborative reading are valued but less frequently used for clarification. To further enhance students' reading comprehension abilities, it is essential to address gaps in analytical and selective reading practices and foster a supportive peer environment.

The crosstab analysis of RCA in English non-fiction texts reveals that a significant portion of GSHS students who possess only the basic reading proficiency level. Over one-third (36%) are at the A2 level, capable of understanding sentences and commonly used expressions, while 30% are at the B1 level, able to comprehend clear, standard input on familiar topics. A smaller percentage (8%) achieved the B2 level,

indicating the ability to process more complex texts. Notably, none of the students reached PR-C1 or PR-C2 levels, underscoring the absence of advanced proficiency in this group. When examining RCA in English fiction texts, a slightly different pattern emerges. The largest group (38%) is at the B1 level, demonstrating an independent ability to understand texts on familiar topics, followed by 32% at the A2 level and 12% at the B2 level. Similar to non-fiction texts, no students attained PR-C1 or PR-C2 proficiency levels. These results suggest that while students exhibit moderate comprehension skills, significant room for improvement remains, particularly in advancing beyond intermediate levels. These findings align with global trends in EFL contexts. For example, Waluyo (2019) reported that 57.8% of Thai first-year university students were at the A2 level, reflecting similar struggles in achieving higher proficiency.

In contrast, studies in Taiwan (Yu et al., 2022) showed considerably higher proficiency levels, with a substantial proportion of students at the B2 and C1 levels, highlighting the impact of educational practices, English exposure, and resource availability on RCA. The statistical analysis reveals no significant differences in RCA between male and female students, corroborating findings from other studies. Duncan et al. (2016) observed that gender differences in reading comprehension tend to be genre-specific, with females often excelling in fiction and males in non-fiction. However, in the GSHS-BA context, no significant gender-based variations emerged, possibly due to shared educational experiences, cultural factors, or the homogeneity of the student population.

Research in Nepal supports this conclusion. Shrestha (2018) found that graduate students from the Faculty of Arts scored lower in RCA compared to those from the Faculty of Education, emphasizing the influence of academic programs on reading proficiency. Similarly, Sharma (2019) noted a preference for print texts over electronic ones among Nepali students, which could affect their reading strategies and outcomes. Subedi (2022) further highlighted the effectiveness of authentic texts—such as newspapers and short stories—over non-authentic ones in enhancing reading skills among bilingual learners. These findings underscore the need to integrate diverse, authentic reading materials to bridge the proficiency gap. Khadka (2024) emphasizes that understanding reading as a dynamic process, rather than a static outcome, is crucial for effective EFL teaching and learning. Addressing these issues requires targeted interventions, such as promoting authentic materials, encouraging higher-order cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies, and incorporating advanced-level texts into curricula. These strategies could support GSHS-BA students in progressing beyond intermediate levels and achieving greater reading comprehension proficiency.

Conclusion

The research findings provide valuable perspectives in the reading comprehension abilities and reading strategies used by undergraduate students at the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (GSHS-BA). The analysis highlights the predominant use of cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies, with visualizing information and connecting ideas emerging as key practices. These strategies, aligned with global EFL research, underscore their critical role in facilitating comprehension and retention. However, the limited use of analytical strategies, such as dissecting linguistic expressions, and selective reading practices points to potential gaps in strategy instruction that warrant targeted interventions. The socio-affective domain reveals the prominence of group reading as a preferred strategy, emphasizing the value of collaborative learning. Nevertheless, the relatively low use of peer clarification highlights cultural and contextual factors that may impede interactive learning.

The findings on reading comprehension ability (RCA) demonstrate that a majority of students are positioned at intermediate proficiency levels (A2 and B1) for both fiction and non-fiction texts, with no representation at advanced levels (PR-C1 and PR-C2). These results align with trends observed in other EFL contexts, where students often face similar challenges in achieving advanced reading proficiency. Factors such as limited exposure to authentic texts, exam-oriented education systems, and a lack of higher-order reading skills contribute to these trends, underscoring systemic challenges in Nepal's EFL education landscape. Importantly, the absence of significant gender differences in RCA aligns with prior research, suggesting that shared academic environments and cultural homogeneity may mitigate gender-based disparities. However, the influence of academic programs on reading outcomes, as evidenced by differences across faculties, highlights the need for program-specific interventions to address proficiency gaps.

To address the challenges identified, several recommendations are proposed. Incorporating diverse, authentic reading materials into curricula can provide students with exposure to advanced language use and real-world contexts. Explicit instruction in analytical and selective reading strategies can equip students with tools for deeper textual engagement. Encouraging the use of higher-order cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies, such as summarizing and inferring, can further enhance comprehension. Additionally, fostering collaborative learning environments that promote peer interaction and cultural inclusivity can support socio-affective strategy development.

In conclusion, this study underscores the interplay between cognitive, meta-cognitive, and socio-affective strategies in shaping reading comprehension outcomes. While students demonstrate moderate proficiency and strategic engagement, targeted interventions in curriculum design, strategy instruction, and resource accessibility are essential for advancing their reading abilities.

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