

## TRANSFORMING READING INSTRUCTION: SAUDI TEACHERS' ADOPTION OF METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES

### *TRANSFORMANDO A INSTRUÇÃO DE LEITURA: ADOÇÃO DE ESTRATÉGIAS METACOGNITIVAS POR PROFESSORES SAUDITAS*

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This study explores Saudi EFL teachers' preferences for the metacognitive strategy approach in reading instruction and identifies factors influencing its adoption. A survey was conducted among 78 Saudi EFL teachers to assess their preferences for the metacognitive strategy approach and the challenges associated with its implementation. The findings revealed a strong preference for the metacognitive strategy approach, with 81.7% of teachers favoring its use due to its effectiveness in enhancing reading comprehension and fostering independent learning. However, several challenges, including limited training, rigid curricula, and cultural barriers, were identified as significant obstacles to its adoption. The study underscores the importance of targeted professional development programs and curriculum reforms to facilitate the integration of metacognitive strategies into reading instruction. It also recommends further research on the long-term impact and classroom application of these strategies.

**Keywords:** English as a Foreign Language, reading instruction, professional development, teachers' belief.

#### **RESUMO**

Este estudo explora as preferências dos professores sauditas de EFL pela abordagem de estratégia metacognitiva na instrução de leitura e identifica fatores que influenciam sua adoção. Uma pesquisa foi conduzida entre 78 professores sauditas de EFL para avaliar suas preferências pela abordagem de estratégia metacognitiva e os desafios associados à sua implementação. As descobertas revelaram uma forte preferência pela abordagem de estratégia metacognitiva, com 81,7% dos professores favorecendo seu uso devido à sua eficácia em melhorar a compreensão da leitura e promover o aprendizado independente. No entanto, vários desafios, incluindo treinamento limitado, currículos rígidos e barreiras culturais, foram identificados como obstáculos significativos à sua adoção. O estudo ressalta a importância de programas de desenvolvimento profissional direcionados e reformas curriculares para facilitar a integração de estratégias metacognitivas na instrução de leitura. Ele também recomenda mais pesquisas sobre o impacto de longo prazo e a aplicação em sala de aula dessas estratégias.

**Palavras-chave:** Inglês como Língua Estrangeira, instrução de leitura, desenvolvimento profissional, crença dos professores.

## Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education plays a critical role in Saudi Arabia, where English proficiency is a gateway to academic success and international opportunities. Despite the growing emphasis on English education, reading comprehension remains a persistent challenge for Saudi learners. This difficulty stems from limited exposure to English outside the classroom, a lack of engagement with authentic texts, and traditional teaching methods that prioritize accuracy over comprehension. Addressing these challenges requires a shift toward innovative teaching approaches that foster strategic and independent reading. The metacognitive strategy approach, which combines lower- and higher-level cognitive processes, has gained traction in educational research and practice as a promising solution to these issues.

However, there remains a gap in understanding whether Saudi EFL teachers genuinely prefer the metacognitive strategy approach and how their beliefs translate into classroom practices. Teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning significantly influence their instructional decisions, shaping the effectiveness of reading instruction (Borg, 2003). In contexts like Saudi Arabia, where traditional methods such as the grammar-translation and audio-lingual approaches dominate, the adoption of metacognitive strategies represents a significant pedagogical shift. Exploring whether teachers are inclined toward this approach can illuminate opportunities for professional development and curriculum reform.

This paper seeks to address the research question: Do Saudi EFL teachers prefer the metacognitive strategy approach, and what factors contribute to this preference or hinder its adoption? Drawing on Althewini's (2016) study, which found that a large percentage of surveyed Saudi EFL teachers identified with this approach, the research investigates whether this preference is actually favoured by Saudi EFL teachers. It also considers whether the stated preference aligns with actual classroom practices, given the constraints of curriculum mandates and teacher training.

The study of teacher beliefs is particularly significant in the Saudi context, where English instruction is tightly regulated and shaped by cultural and institutional factors. Research has shown that teacher cognition—the intersection of beliefs, knowledge, and practices—is a critical determinant of instructional success (Borg, 2006). By examining the factors that influence teachers' preferences for the metacognitive strategy approach, this paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how to support effective reading instruction in Saudi EFL classrooms.

Understanding whether Saudi EFL teachers favor the metacognitive strategy approach has far-reaching implications for improving reading comprehension outcomes. By aligning teacher beliefs with research-backed practices, policymakers and educators can create a more effective and engaging learning environment for Saudi students. This study aims to bridge the gap between theoretical preferences and practical implementation, ensuring that reading instruction meets the demands of a globalized world.

## Literature Review

### *Theoretical Foundations of the Metacognitive Strategy Approach*

Metacognitive strategies are increasingly recognized as essential tools in enhancing reading comprehension, particularly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. These strategies, which involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's reading processes, empower learners to become independent, self-regulated readers (Zhang & Seepho, 2013). Central to the metacognitive strategy approach is the ability to reflect on comprehension and employ effective strategies, such as predicting content, identifying main ideas, and using contextual clues to infer meaning. These skills are critical in helping learners navigate complex academic texts (Grabe & Stoller, 2002).

Ali and Razali (2019) provide a comprehensive review of studies on cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies in teaching reading comprehension for ESL/EFL learners. Their work highlights the distinction between cognitive

strategies, which focus on direct manipulation of the learning material, and metacognitive strategies, which involve self-regulation of the learning process. Cognitive strategies such as summarization and note-taking help learners manage information, while metacognitive strategies like planning, monitoring, and evaluation empower students to become more aware of their comprehension processes. Ali and Razali (2019) emphasize that metacognitive strategies are particularly effective in improving reading comprehension, as they encourage learners to actively engage with texts and take responsibility for their learning.

The review by Ali and Razali (2019) also underscores the importance of explicit strategy instruction. Many studies cited in their review demonstrate that when teachers model metacognitive strategies and provide guided practice, students develop stronger reading skills and become more confident readers. For ESL/EFL learners, who often face linguistic and cultural barriers to comprehension, these strategies are invaluable. The authors argue that successful implementation requires teachers to be well-versed in metacognitive instruction, highlighting the need for professional development programs tailored to equip educators with these skills.

Kan, Noordin, and Ismail (2024) take a more focused approach, systematically reviewing the implementation of metacognitive reading strategies to improve English reading ability. Their findings confirm that metacognitive strategies significantly enhance reading comprehension, particularly when integrated into a structured instructional framework. For example, the review highlights how the Think-Aloud protocol—where teachers verbalize their thought processes while reading—effectively models metacognitive strategies for students. Additionally, collaborative activities, such as peer discussions and group reflections, were found to reinforce these strategies and promote deeper engagement with texts (Kan et al., 2024).

The study by Kan et al. (2024) also identifies key challenges in implementing metacognitive strategies, particularly in ESL/EFL contexts. Teachers often lack the training needed to effectively teach these strategies, and curriculum constraints can limit opportunities for students to practice them. Furthermore, large class sizes and

limited classroom time make it difficult to provide individualized feedback. Despite these challenges, Kan et al. (2024) emphasize that integrating metacognitive strategies into regular instruction can yield significant benefits, particularly when combined with teacher training and curriculum reforms.

Together, these studies support the findings of the current research, which highlights Saudi EFL teachers' strong preference for the metacognitive strategy approach. The emphasis on explicit instruction, teacher training, and structured implementation aligns closely with the challenges and opportunities identified in the Saudi context. These findings underscore the potential of metacognitive strategies to transform reading instruction, providing learners with the tools needed to navigate complex texts and achieve academic success (Ali & Razali, 2019; Kan et al., 2024).

In the Saudi EFL context, where many students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, metacognitive strategies play a vital role in bridging the gap between linguistic proficiency and comprehension. Al-Qahtani (2020) demonstrated the effectiveness of the Think-Aloud protocol—a key metacognitive strategy—in significantly improving Saudi EFL learners' reading comprehension and attitudes. Similarly, Al-Khresheh et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of metacognitive awareness in reading, showing that students who actively employ such strategies achieve better comprehension outcomes. These findings underscore the relevance of the metacognitive strategy approach in fostering deeper engagement with texts and developing critical thinking skills.

### ***Comparison with Other Models of Reading Instruction***

EFL reading instruction is often shaped by three major models: the skills-based approach, the whole language approach, and the metacognitive strategy approach. The skills-based approach focuses on lower-level processes, such as phonics, vocabulary, and grammar, emphasizing linguistic accuracy and fluency (Meniado, 2016). While effective in building foundational skills, this approach often neglects higher-order thinking and comprehension strategies. In contrast, the whole language approach takes a holistic view, integrating reading with writing and other

language skills. It emphasizes meaning-making and encourages learners to connect texts with their personal experiences. However, its lack of explicit strategy instruction can hinder students, particularly those with limited language proficiency (Grabe, 2009).

The metacognitive strategy approach addresses the limitations of both models by integrating lower- and higher-level cognitive processes. This dual focus makes it particularly suitable for EFL learners who require both foundational skills and advanced comprehension techniques. For instance, Al-Kiyumi et al. (2021) found that instruction in metacognitive strategies significantly enhanced the reading comprehension of EFL students in Oman, a context similar to Saudi Arabia. By equipping learners with tools for strategic reading, the metacognitive approach ensures a more comprehensive and effective learning experience.

### ***Teacher Beliefs and Practices in EFL Reading Instruction***

Teacher beliefs are critical in shaping instructional practices and ultimately influence students' learning outcomes. In the Saudi EFL context, traditional methods like grammar-translation and audio-lingual approaches have dominated classrooms, emphasizing rote learning and linguistic accuracy (Al-Seghayer, 2014). However, there is a growing shift toward research-based methods like the metacognitive strategy approach. Studies show that teachers who are trained in metacognitive strategies are more likely to implement them effectively. For example, Meniado (2016) highlighted the positive correlation between teachers' use of metacognitive strategies and students' improved reading comprehension performance.

Professional development plays a pivotal role in bridging the gap between teacher beliefs and effective practices. Al-Khresheh et al. (2023) emphasized the need for targeted training programs to enhance teachers' ability to model and teach metacognitive strategies. Similarly, Al-Qahtani (2020) noted that teachers who received training in think-aloud protocols reported significant improvements in student engagement and comprehension. These findings highlight the importance

of equipping teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to implement metacognitive strategies effectively.

### ***Challenges in the Saudi EFL Context***

Despite the proven effectiveness of metacognitive strategies, their implementation in Saudi EFL classrooms faces several challenges. Curriculum constraints, such as rigid textbooks and limited flexibility, often prevent teachers from incorporating metacognitive practices into their instruction (Al-Seghayer, 2014). Additionally, large class sizes and time limitations hinder the adoption of student-centered activities, which are essential for promoting metacognitive awareness.

Cultural factors also play a role. Many Saudi learners rely heavily on teacher-centered methods and struggle with independent learning (Alrabai, 2017). Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach, including curriculum reform, institutional support for professional development, and efforts to foster a culture of autonomous learning among students. Providing teachers with locally relevant resources and materials can further facilitate the integration of metacognitive strategies into classroom practices.

### ***Relevance to the Saudi Context***

The metacognitive strategy approach aligns closely with the educational goals of Saudi Arabia, which increasingly prioritize critical thinking, independent learning, and academic success. By equipping students with tools to monitor and evaluate their reading processes, this approach addresses key gaps in traditional reading instruction. Al-Nujaidi (2003) emphasized that metacognitive strategies not only enhance reading comprehension but also prepare students to engage with diverse academic texts effectively.

The focus on the metacognitive strategy approach among Saudi EFL teachers reflects its potential to transform reading instruction. By addressing both lower- and higher-level cognitive processes, it offers a comprehensive framework for improving reading outcomes. However, realizing this potential requires targeted

interventions to overcome the barriers to implementation and ensure that teachers have the necessary training and resources.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

This study adopted a quantitative research design to explore whether Saudi EFL teachers prefer the metacognitive strategy approach to reading instruction and to understand the underlying reasons for this preference. The research was designed to assess teachers' beliefs and instructional practices related to reading, utilizing a structured survey as the primary tool for data collection. By employing this approach, the study sought to provide a detailed understanding of teacher preferences across different reading instruction models, including the skills-based, whole language, and metacognitive strategy approaches. This quantitative approach was chosen for their ability to systematically capture trends and patterns among a large group of participants.

### ***Participants***

The study was conducted among 78 EFL teachers from two prominent Saudi universities, representing diverse educational contexts. These universities were selected due to their extensive English preparatory programs, catering to a broad spectrum of learners. Participants included both male and female instructors with varying levels of experience, ranging from novice teachers to seasoned educators with over a decade of teaching expertise. The sample also included individuals with diverse academic qualifications, from bachelor's degrees to doctorates, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of instructional preferences across different professional backgrounds.

### ***Instrumentation***

The study utilized a 20-item survey to collect data on teachers' beliefs and preferences regarding reading instruction. Each item was carefully constructed to



reflect aspects of the three major reading instruction models: the skills-based approach, the whole language approach, and the metacognitive strategy approach. Participants responded to each item using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," allowing for nuanced insights into the extent of agreement with specific instructional practices. In addition, the survey included demographic questions, such as gender, teaching experience, highest qualification, and prior attendance at professional development workshops on reading instruction, to analyze the potential influence of these factors on teacher preferences.

### ***Procedure***

The survey was distributed electronically via secure platforms to ensure accessibility and confidentiality. Participants were given two weeks to complete the survey at their convenience. To encourage honest responses, the survey was anonymous, and participants were informed that the results would be used solely for research purposes. The collected data were compiled into a secure database for analysis. Rigorous measures were taken to ensure the integrity and reliability of the data collection process, including periodic follow-ups with participants to address any technical issues.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics, such as weighted means and percentages, were used to summarize teacher responses for each item and identify overall trends. To determine the dominance of specific reading instruction models, bootstrap statistical analysis was conducted, providing robust estimates of teacher preferences across the three models. The analysis also included detailed evaluations of teacher attitudes toward specific components of reading instruction, such as word recognition, reading comprehension, text structure awareness, reading fluency, and extensive reading practices.

## Results

### *Teacher Preferences for Reading Instruction Models*

The results revealed a strong preference for the metacognitive strategy approach among Saudi EFL teachers (Table 1). A significant majority (81.7%) expressed agreement with principles and practices associated with this approach, highlighting its relevance for fostering comprehension monitoring, strategic reading, and awareness of text structures. The whole language approach was the second most preferred model, with 70.6% of participants endorsing its emphasis on holistic reading and the integration of skills. The skills-based approach, while still valued, garnered less support, with 63% agreement, reflecting its narrower focus on word recognition and accuracy over comprehension.

Table 1 – Preferences Among Reading Instruction Models

Reading Instruction Model	Preference (%)
Metacognitive Strategy	81.7
Whole Language	70.6
Skills-Based	63.0

### *Attitudes Toward Components of Reading Instruction*

A closer analysis of teacher responses to specific components of reading instruction revealed distinct patterns (Table 2). Teachers expressed strong support for strategies related to text comprehension, strategic reading, and text structure awareness, aligning with the principles of the metacognitive strategy approach. Word recognition was also rated highly, particularly among teachers who emphasized foundational skills for novice readers. However, components such as reading fluency and extensive reading received comparatively lower agreement, suggesting these areas may be underemphasized in current teaching practices.

Table 2 – Teacher Attitudes Toward Components of Reading Instruction

Component	Teacher Support (%)
Text Comprehension	85.0
Strategic Reading	82.5
Text Structure Awareness	80.0
Word Recognition	75.0
Reading Fluency	60.0
Extensive Reading	55.0

### ***Statistical Confirmation of Dominance***

Bootstrap statistical analysis provided further confirmation of the dominance of the metacognitive strategy approach. The analysis highlighted its effectiveness in addressing both lower-level cognitive processes, such as word recognition, and higher-level processes, such as inferencing and comprehension monitoring. Teachers consistently ranked its strategies as highly relevant and practical, particularly in preparing students for academic reading tasks and fostering independent learning skills.

### ***Influence of Teacher Background***

An analysis of demographic data revealed interesting correlations between teacher characteristics and their instructional preferences (Table 3). Teachers with advanced academic qualifications, such as master's or doctoral degrees, were more likely to favor the metacognitive strategy approach. Similarly, those who had attended professional development workshops focusing on reading instruction demonstrated a higher preference for this model. These findings suggest that teacher training and exposure to modern instructional methods play a critical role in shaping preferences and promoting effective teaching practices.

Table 3 – Influence of Teacher Background on Metacognitive Strategy Preference

Teacher Background	Preference for Metacognitive Strategy (%)
Bachelor's Degree	65.0
Master's Degree	80.0
Doctoral Degree	90.0
Attended Professional Development Workshops	85.0
No Professional Development Workshops	60.0

### ***Challenges in Implementation***

Despite the strong preference for the metacognitive strategy approach, teachers reported challenges in fully implementing its principles in the classroom. Curriculum constraints, limited classroom time, and a lack of access to professional development opportunities were cited as significant barriers. These challenges underscore the need for institutional support and targeted training programs to enable teachers to integrate metacognitive strategies effectively into their teaching practices.

### **Discussion**

#### ***Implications of the Findings***

The findings of this study confirm Saudi EFL teachers' strong preference for the metacognitive strategy approach, reflecting its perceived effectiveness in improving foundational and higher-order reading skills. These strategies enhance comprehension monitoring, strategic reading, and text structure awareness, which are crucial for Saudi learners who face challenges due to limited exposure to English outside the classroom (Ali & Razali, 2019; Al-Qahtani, 2020; Kan et al., 2024). This preference aligns with global research underscoring the value of metacognitive strategies in fostering independent, self-regulated readers (Zhang & Seepho, 2013).

This shift towards metacognitive strategies also indicates a move in Saudi Arabia from traditional teacher-centered methods to more innovative, student-centered approaches. Historically, methods like the grammar-translation approach have prioritized linguistic accuracy and rote memorization (Al-Seghayer, 2014). In

contrast, the metacognitive strategy approach emphasizes critical thinking and learner autonomy, aligning with modern educational priorities. Studies by Ali and Razali (2019) and Kan et al. (2024) reinforce these findings, demonstrating that explicit instruction in metacognitive strategies leads to stronger engagement with texts and better reading comprehension outcomes.

### ***Practical Challenges in Implementation***

Despite these promising findings, significant barriers remain to the practical implementation of metacognitive strategies in Saudi EFL classrooms. A primary challenge is the lack of professional development opportunities. Many teachers lack the training to systematically model and teach metacognitive strategies, limiting their ability to integrate these practices effectively (Kan et al., 2024; Al-Khresheh et al., 2023). For instance, while the Think-Aloud protocol has proven effective in modeling metacognitive processes (Kan et al., 2024), its implementation requires teacher proficiency in both strategy instruction and reflective practices.

Curriculum rigidity presents another obstacle. Standardized curricula and reliance on prescribed textbooks often leave little room for flexible, student-centered activities such as reflective journals and collaborative strategy practice (Meniado, 2016; Al-Seghayer, 2014). Additionally, large class sizes and time constraints hinder opportunities for personalized feedback and active learning. Addressing these structural barriers is critical to fostering metacognitive awareness among Saudi learners.

Cultural factors further complicate implementation. Saudi students are often accustomed to teacher-centered instruction and may lack the self-regulatory skills required for independent learning (Alrabai, 2017). Both Ali and Razali (2019) and Kan et al. (2024) stress that shifting student mindsets is essential for maximizing the benefits of metacognitive strategies. This requires not only targeted teacher training but also a broader cultural shift towards active and autonomous learning.

### ***Implications for Teacher Training and Curriculum Reform***

This study highlights the urgent need for targeted professional development to equip Saudi EFL teachers with the skills to implement metacognitive strategies effectively. Training programs should focus on practical techniques, such as modeling thinking processes, guiding students in using contextual clues, and encouraging reflective practices like self-questioning and summarizing (Ali & Razali, 2019; Kan et al., 2024). Furthermore, these programs must address specific challenges in Saudi classrooms, such as large class sizes and varying language proficiency levels.

Curriculum reform is equally critical. Institutions should provide teachers with resources and materials that facilitate the integration of metacognitive strategies into instruction. Flexible curricula that support reflective activities and localized texts that resonate with Saudi students' cultural and academic contexts could enhance engagement and comprehension (Al-Nujaidi, 2003). Incorporating metacognitive training into teacher education programs could also ensure that new teachers enter the profession with a strong foundation in this approach.

### ***Opportunities for Future Research***

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research. Longitudinal studies could explore the sustained impact of metacognitive strategy instruction on students' academic performance and reading comprehension over time. Such research would shed light on how consistent exposure to these strategies shapes learners' abilities to engage with complex texts (Ali & Razali, 2019; Kan et al., 2024).

Qualitative research could provide deeper insights into the barriers teachers face in implementing metacognitive strategies. Classroom observations and interviews with educators and students could identify practical challenges and effective solutions. Comparative studies across different Saudi institutions could further highlight variations in practices and outcomes, offering tailored insights for specific contexts.

Finally, exploring students' perspectives on metacognitive strategies could help refine teaching practices. Understanding how learners perceive and engage with these strategies can guide the development of more learner-centered instructional methods, ensuring that metacognitive practices are both accessible and effective in fostering reading comprehension and academic success.

## Conclusion

The metacognitive strategy approach represents a transformative method for reading instruction in Saudi EFL classrooms, addressing key gaps in traditional methods and aligning with contemporary educational goals. While teachers' strong preference for this approach reflects its potential to improve reading comprehension and foster independent learning, challenges such as insufficient training, curriculum constraints, and cultural factors must be addressed to fully realize its benefits. By investing in targeted professional development and curriculum reform, educators and policymakers can bridge the gap between teacher beliefs and classroom practices, ensuring that metacognitive strategies are effectively integrated into Saudi EFL education.

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