

# The Use of Metacognitive Strategies in Reading Comprehension A Case of First year EFL students at Tizi- Ouzou University

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## Abstract:

Metacognitive strategies that allow students to plan, control and evaluate what they read, have an essential role in the improvement of reading comprehension. The aim of this study is to investigate EFL students' use and awareness of metacognitive reading strategies for comprehending academic texts. A questionnaire was used for data gathering and the sample of the study consisted of 49 first year EFL students at the university of Tizi- ousou. The findings reveal a low level use and awareness of the planning, monitoring and evaluating strategies. The study recommends that students should develop positive attitudes towards reading academic texts and teachers are requested to integrate a metacognitive reading strategy instruction to foster their students' metacognitive awareness and their comprehension abilities.

**Keywords:** EFL students; metacognitive awareness; metacognitive strategies; reading comprehension.

## Introduction :

In an era of communicative, interactive, learner centred classroom, learning strategies simply cannot be overlooked. Students need to have the necessary strategic competence to hold their own in the give and take of meaningful communication. Reading is among the fundamental skills required for this communication. Reading strategies are of interest for what they reveal about the way readers manage their interactions with written texts and how these strategies are related to reading comprehension<sup>1</sup>. A skilled reader not only employs diverse strategies for reading texts but also knows how to plan, monitor, control and evaluate his comprehension. If appropriate strategies are not used effectively by the reader, reading productivity and efficiency may be affected, especially for university students, as they have to constantly engage with and read diverse texts for their education. Thus, metacognitive strategies that allow students to plan, control and evaluate their learning, have a central role in the improvement of reading comprehension. Metacognitive strategies play a more significant role than other strategies because once a learner knows how to regulate his or her learning through the use of strategies, language acquisition should proceed at a faster rate<sup>2</sup>.

Notably, according to many researchers L2 readers experience greater difficulty in reading comprehension than L1 readers as a result of not having the same language

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resources, cultural and social background knowledge and basic linguistic knowledge<sup>34</sup>. Achieving comprehension of a text is not an easy task for the most learners<sup>5</sup>. The main reason for this problem comes from learners' disability to apply effective reading strategies. That is to say, employing metacognitive strategies while reading can be taken as sine qua non to arrive at a satisfactory level of comprehension. To tackle this problem, identifying what reading strategies are currently used by university students and examining their metacognitive awareness should be, the first step toward developing concrete action plan for improving the teaching of reading to EFL students<sup>6</sup>.

Meanwhile, in the Algerian context, there is a paucity of research dealing with university students' awareness and practices of metacognitive reading strategies. Accordingly, this study examines EFL students' use of reading strategies when trying to comprehend complex academic texts. Thus, it aims to answer the following questions:

1) What are EFL university students' attitudes towards using reading strategies to foster their comprehension?

2) What is EFL students' frequency use of metacognitive reading strategies (planning, monitoring, evaluating) for comprehending academic texts?

## 1- Literature Review

### 1-1 Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is regarded as the ultimate goal behind the whole reading process<sup>7</sup>. It is defined as the process of interpreting the writer's intended meaning in context. According to Snow reading comprehension is the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, contemporary definitions and understanding of reading suggest that comprehension does not merely involve the understanding of individual words but rather the meaningful interpretation of vocabulary, sentences and texts as manifested in discourse and context<sup>9</sup>. It can be described as the interaction between the different participants in the reading experience: the text, the writer and the reader in which both cognitive and metacognitive variables come into play.

Woolley identifies three levels of comprehension that are required from readers for the construction of consistent mental representations<sup>10</sup>. These three main levels of reading comprehension are entailed by three different types of reading. The first level is reading the lines or "literal comprehension" by identifying the meaning the way it has been clearly expressed by the writer in the written product. This type of comprehension is known as "objective" as it is text-driven and free of readers' interpretation and personal evaluations<sup>11</sup>. As for the second level, inferential level, it entails reading between the lines or inferred understanding which involves deducing meaning that cannot be readily observed by carefully studying the connections between the different words, sentences and paragraphs. In other words, at this level, the reader can explain what the text means: the meaning is drawn from the literally stated ideas. So, readers use information stated in the text as clues to determine what is implied. The third level of comprehension, evaluative level, concerns the critical evaluations of texts by reading beyond the lines. The fact of understanding beyond the lines is a relative product as it relies heavily on the readers' background knowledge and personal analysis and interpretation of the writers' intended meaning<sup>12</sup>. At this level, readers understand ideas and information well enough to analyse, judge and criticize the author's ideas. More importantly, they are able to explain and support their judgement clearly.

Similarly, Khalifa and Weir have classified reading comprehension levels from the less demanding understanding, literal meaning, to the most sophisticated one, critical comprehension, because the effort spent to reach every understanding level varies accordingly<sup>13</sup>. The hierarchical sequencing of comprehension levels suggests that readers

cannot attain inferred meaning until they achieve literal understanding and cannot critically interpret texts until they read both the lines and between the lines<sup>14</sup>.

Significantly, research has shown that readers use strategies wherever they recognize that they are struggling to comprehend the text, or that their interpretation ceases to be plausible. This may happen at word level, sentence level (even the native language) or particularly at the level of discourse, where the author's intentions may be misinterpreted leading to the construction of an unfaithful model of the intended meaning because the overall context of the passage is inaccurately located<sup>15</sup>. Thus, most of recent researches indicate that learning strategies and reading comprehension are closely related and that the latter is greatly affected by the former at all levels.

### **1-2 Reading Strategies**

Reading strategies are defined as ways of getting round difficulties encountered while reading<sup>16</sup>. Other researchers emphasize the purposeful and conscious dimension of reading strategies<sup>171819</sup>. For example, Pritchard defines a strategy as a deliberate action that readers take voluntarily to develop an understanding of what they read<sup>20</sup>. Oxford suggests that reading strategies are teachable, dynamic thoughts and behaviours that learners, consciously select and employ in specific contexts to improve their self-regulated, autonomous learning<sup>21</sup>.

More importantly, research on reading strategies made a useful distinction between cognitive and metacognitive strategies<sup>222324</sup>. Cognitive strategies are the more familiar mental processes that enable us to read, ranging from working out the meaning of words in context through skimming a whole text quickly to extract the gist. On the other hand, Metacognitive strategies are more concerned with thinking about the reading experience itself and are seen to involve learners stepping outside their learning, as it were, and looking at it from outside. Such strategies include an awareness of what one is doing and the strategies one is employing, as well as knowledge about the actual process of learning. They also include an ability to manage and regulate consciously the use of appropriate learning strategies for different situations. They involve an awareness of one's own mental processes and an ability to reflect on how one learns, in other words, knowing about one's knowing<sup>25</sup>. As claimed by Graham & Kelly distinctions between cognitive and metacognitive strategies are important, partly because they help us to indicate which strategies are the most important in determining the effectiveness of learning. They argue that metacognitive strategies that allow students to plan, control and evaluate their learning, have the most central role to play in improvement of learning<sup>26</sup>.

### **1-3 Metacognitive Reading Strategies**

Generally, Metacognitive reading strategies entail specifying a purpose for reading, planning how the text will be read, activating prior knowledge, adapting appropriate strategies to be used, self-monitoring for those strategies and for errors in reading comprehension, and self-evaluating of how well the overall objectives are being fulfilled, which may result in distinct successful reading task or allow for taking corrective measures if comprehension is not being achieved. Hence, metacognitive reading strategies are used at the level of three stages throughout the reading task which are: the planning stage, before reading, the monitoring or controlling stage, while reading, and the stage of evaluation, post reading.

The Planning Strategies which include two categories of pre-reading strategies identified as previewing and prediction strategies. Previewing strategies can be used to make a decision whether to read a book, an article, or a text. On the other hand, prediction strategies are used to anticipate the content of a text; to make hypotheses about the macro-propositions it might contain. It is a form of thinking about the subject and asking oneself related questions. This activity has the potential to clarify for the reader what the purposes for reading a particular text might be<sup>27</sup>.

The monitoring reading Strategies include self-questioning and self-monitoring. Self-questioning is considered as a characteristic of good reading when it promotes cognitive processes such as inferencing, monitoring understanding, and attending to structure. Self-monitoring refers to checking that comprehension is taking place and adopting repair strategies when comprehension breakdown. This strategy is seen as an important characteristic of skilled reading. It is important that students know how various strategies can help them.

The third category is the evaluating strategies that include self- evaluation and personal response. Research suggests that in learning to make the text their own the readers will better comprehend it<sup>28</sup>. Readers can be encouraged to relate the content of the text to their existing schemata and to evaluate it in the light of their own knowledge and experiences. This may lead to more successful reading.

## 2- Methodology

### 2-1 Participants

The participants of this study were 49 EFL first year undergraduate students enrolled at English Department at Mouloud Mammeri University of Tizi- Ouzou, during 2021/2022 academic year. This sample was randomly selected from a population of 250 students. The rationale behind the choice of first year students is the fact that they have been studying English for two semesters and are supposed to have gained basic knowledge of the various strategies used in English as a foreign language through regular instruction, including metacognitive reading strategies. The participants are expected to read and comprehend a plethora of English texts with various levels of complexity.

### 2-2 Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

Assessing students' use of metacognitive strategies calls for the use of a descriptive method. To achieve such an objective, a questionnaire was used. It was regarded as an appropriate tool as it affords a good deal of precision and clarity, because the knowledge needed is controlled by the questions<sup>29</sup>. Moreover, the use of the questionnaire enables the researcher to collect standardized answers since all the participants respond to the same questions and saves him/her time and effort either in data collection or handling<sup>30</sup>. The first section deals with students' demographic information such as age and gender. The second section deals with their attitudes towards practicing reading and the use of metacognitive reading strategies. The third section aims at identifying students' awareness and frequency use of planning, monitoring and evaluating strategies.

The questionnaire was administered to the participants during the second term semester of academic year of 2021/2022. The researcher asked for and received administrative approval to conduct the study. The questionnaire was administered to the participants during a regular tutorial session in collaboration with the instructor of the module, a method of completing questionnaires referred to by Dörnyei as group administration<sup>31</sup>. First, the researcher explained the nature and objectives of the study to the students and elaborated on the concept of metacognitive strategies in reading including its components. The participants were also ensured about the confidentiality of the information provided and they were asked to provide answers that are related to their own performance in academic reading comprehension as sincerely as possible. As for the data analysis, the obtained responses have been coded manually according to the type of the questions and analyzed using Microsoft Excel 2010 software. The results are interpreted and discussed in the following section.

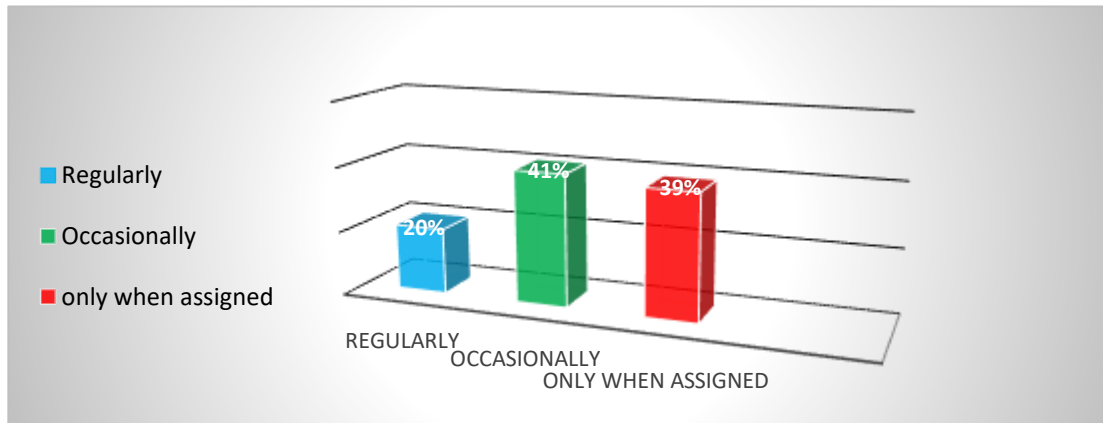
## 2- 3 Results

Demographics	Percentage
Gender	
Male	17%
Female	83%

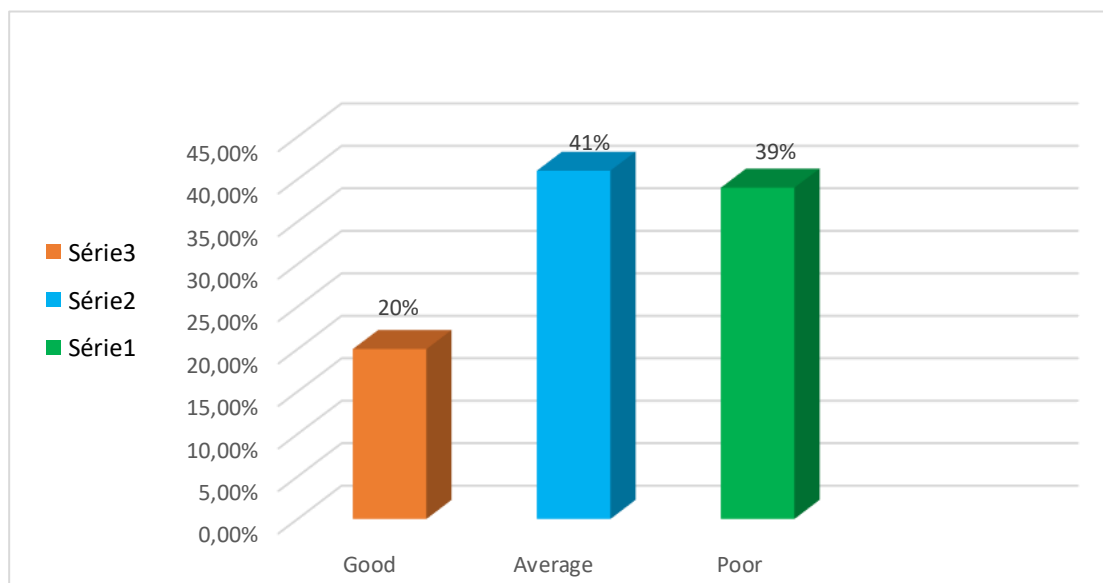
Age	
17-19	89%
20-22	11%

**Table (01): Students' Demographics**

The first table features the profile of the respondents with females representing the majority (83%) and male students 17%. In addition, 89 % of the participants, both females and males, fall within the 17-19 year- old- category which backs up the focus of this study on students enrolling to higher education directly from secondary EFL classes.

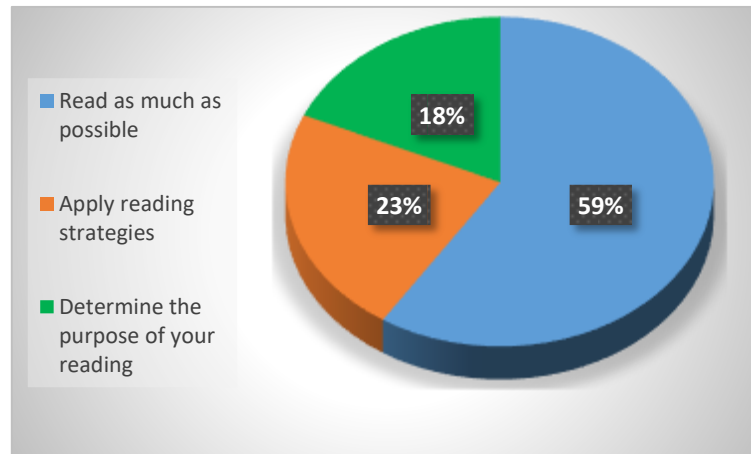
**Figure (01): Frequency of Reading practice**

As far as the frequency of reading practice, it can be inferred from the above figure that the majority of the participants (41%) stated that they read occasionally and 39% of them acknowledged that they practice reading only when assigned and 20% have reported to read regularly. This finding suggests that the participants lack awareness of the importance and the vital role that reading skill play in foreign language learning. The participants were asked then to evaluate their reading comprehension as shown in figure2.

**Figure (02): Students' self- evaluation of their reading comprehension skills**

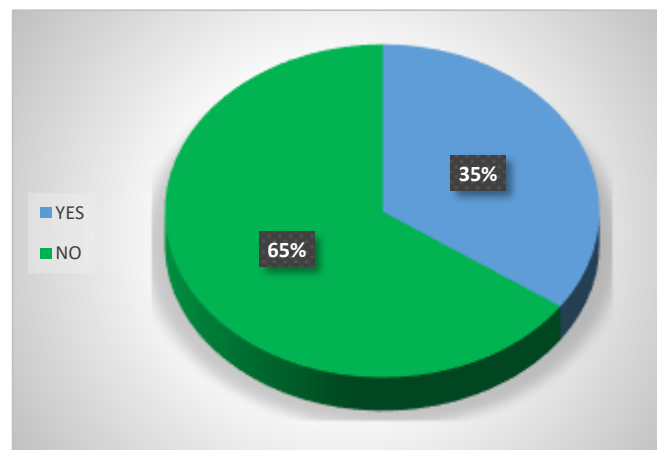
Concerning the participants' self- evaluation of their comprehension skills, the results reveals that twenty students consider their comprehension as average while nineteen students (39%) evaluate their comprehension as poor. In turn, the minority proportion

(20% assume that they are good at reading comprehension. We could say that this finding reveals that the majority of participants have difficulties and problems with comprehending academic texts and it can also explain the reason behind students' resistance for reading.



**Figure (03): Students' perceptions about how to develop their reading comprehension**

With regards to respondents' answers about the way they can overcome difficulties and develop their reading comprehension abilities, a significant percentage (59%) thought that it is through reading as much as possible. The other proportion cited applying reading strategies as a solution.



**Figure (4): Pre- University instruction on reading strategies use**

Concerning pre-university teachers' help to use reading strategies to promote comprehension, 65% of the participants answered that they did not receive instruction in using reading strategies during their middle and secondary levels. This result unveils insufficient reading strategy instruction during pre- university levels.

The third section aims at identifying students' awareness and frequency use of reading strategies. The main focus is on the metacognitive reading strategies namely planning, monitoring and evaluating strategies.

Items	Yes		No	
	Freq	%	Freq	%
1. Before I read I have a purpose in mind	29	59%	20	41%
2. I think about what I know about the topic to help me understand	25	51%	24	49%
3. I preview the text to see what it is about before reading it	35	72%	14	28%
4. I think about whether the content of the text fits my reading purpose	9	18%	40	82%
5. I review the text first by noting its characteristics like length and organization	18	37%	31	63%
6. I use tables, figures, and pictures in text to increase my understanding	20	41%	29	59%
7. I use typographical features like bold face and italics to identify key information	15	31%	34	69%
8. I try to predict what the content of the text is about	19	39%	30	61%

**Table (2): Students' Use of Planning Strategies**

The table above refers to participants' use of planning strategies that are used by skilled readers before reading and it represents an important step in the metacognitive process. The findings show a high frequency use of previewing strategy with 35 respondents which represents 72%. In turn, the low level frequency use is thinking about whether the content of the text fits the reading purpose. The respondents do not seem to pay much attention to the planning strategies in the process of reading.

Items	Yes		No	
	Freq	%	Freq	%
1. I check to see if my guesses about the text are right or wrong	40	82%	9	18%
2. I decide what to read closely and what to ignore	10	20%	39	80%
3. I use context clues to help me better understand what I am reading	4	8%	45	92%
4. I take notes while reading	21	43%	28	57%
5. I underline or circle information in the text to help me remember it.	22	45%	27	55%
6. I use reference materials (dictionary) to help me solve comprehension problems	49	100%	0	0%
7. I paraphrase to better understand what I read	8	16%	41	84%

8. I ask myself questions I like to have answered in the text	6	12%	43	88%
9. When reading I think about information in both English and my mother tongue.	48	98%	1	2%
10. I read slowly and carefully to make sure I understand what I am reading	20	41%	29	59%
11. When text becomes difficult, I pay closer attention to what I am reading	19	39%	30	61%
12. I stop from time to time and think about what I am reading	13	26%	36	74%
13. I try to picture or visualize information to help remember what I read	6	12%	43	88%
14. When text becomes difficult, I re- read it to increase my understanding	23	47%	26	53%
15. When I read, I guess the meaning of unknown words or phrases	6	12%	43	88%
16. I identify what I don't understand and I ask precise questions to solve the problem.	7	14%	42	86%

**Table (3):** Students' Use of Monitoring Strategies

The items constituting table (3) are the self- questioning and self-monitoring strategies that represent the monitoring process while reading. It is apparent from the findings that the respondents do not prefer to use their background knowledge and the context clues for comprehending the text. A noticeable percentage report using reference materials like dictionaries to help them understand the text (100%). On the other hand, only six respondents claimed that they use the guessing strategy for unknown words (12%). Another emerging result is that the participants are not familiar with the use of self-questioning strategies. As the data in table three indicates, 86 % of the participants do not use the strategy of asking precise questions to solve problems.

Items	Yes		No	
	Freq	%	Freq	%
1. After I read I check if my predictions about the topic were correct	22	45%	27	55%
2. I critically analyse and evaluate the information presented in the text.	5	10%	44	90%
3. I summarize important information that I have read.	15	31%	34	69%
4. I discuss what I read with others to check my understanding	9	18%	40	82%



5. I rate my comprehension by reflecting on how much I understood what I read.	10	20%	39	80%
6. I decide whether the strategies I used helped me to understand	9	18%	40	82%
7. I think of other strategies that could have helped	8	16%	41	84%
8. I check whether I accomplished my goal for reading	20	41%	29	59%

**Table (4):** Students' Use of Evaluating Strategies

With regards to the respondents answers to the use of evaluating strategies, results reveal a low frequency use of this category of strategies. 55% do not use the strategy of checking if the predictions about the topic were correct. An important percentage reported that they do not analyze and evaluate what they have read (90 %). They do not reflect on strategies they have used and 84% do not think of other strategies that could have helped them. Another strategy that scored a low frequency (18%) use is discussing what is read with others for checking comprehension. This may imply that the participants do not work in collaboration to correct any misinterpretations of the text and explore the text from new perspectives. On the whole, the evaluating strategies are the least used strategies in comparison to the planning and monitoring strategies. Such a low frequency can show that the participants are unable to carry on the comprehension process until the final phase where they should evaluate their comprehension and their strategy use. This finding also suggests that the participants are passive readers. Critical skills are important and helpful to university students especially when reading difficult and challenging texts and also when answering essay questions during their exams.

## 2- 4 Discussion

An important finding to emerge from this study is that the majority of the participants do not practice reading regularly and they reveal to have difficulties with text comprehension. The results also display a lack of well-grounded effective reading strategies that are developed by skilled readers over time with continuous reading practice. The respondents lack strong intellectual skills to read with a purpose, and settle for the literal and surface meaning which cause comprehension problems when dealing with rigorous texts. In addition, it can be inferred from the findings that these problems originate from insufficient reading strategy instruction in pre- university levels.

Based on the findings, participants of this study showed some spontaneous but not well grounded use and practice of metacognitive reading strategies This could be interpreted as unawareness of the metacognitive process. Their answers reveal a low use of planning strategies and a very low use and awareness of evaluation strategies. A predominant use of some self-monitoring strategies and a focus on lower-level thinking strategies such as translation and using reference materials for looking up difficult vocabulary is also found. As claimed by Mokhtari and Shoery<sup>32</sup> such strategies are supporting strategies which are used by students whose reading abilities or level of English is not up to mark. According to Yüksel & Yüksel<sup>33</sup> these strategies are time consuming ones. Another important finding, the last category of evaluating strategies have scored low frequency use among the participants. This implies that the participants are passive readers. Self –evaluation is an important process that allow the reader to assess how well the overall objectives are being fulfilled, which may result in distinct successful reading task or allow for taking corrective measures if comprehension is not being achieved. It also leads to critical reading that is important and helpful to university students especially when answering essay questions

during their exams.

All in all, participants of this study do not possess sufficient knowledge about metacognitive reading strategies and they were not initiated to strategic reading. They are less strategic readers who need to know how to apply reading strategies. They need to know the process involved when reading academic texts taking into consideration the pre-reading, while reading and post reading strategies. In a study conducted by Zhang<sup>34</sup> the results revealed that less strategic readers did not realize that reading in EFL context required them to adopt different reading strategies to solve the problems they might encounter. They reported that they tackle reading tasks by chunking, detailing every linguistic element in print and they were reluctant to stop using dictionaries or translating into their mother language to understand the text. Other previous studies<sup>35 36</sup> reported a high frequency use of metacognitive reading strategies. They concluded that reading academic related materials in EFL contexts is related to many difficulties that students encounter. As a result, students should resolve to apply metacognitive strategies where they activate their metacognition to know when to use, coordinate and monitor different strategies for understanding textual information. These three categories, namely planning, monitoring and evaluation strategies, interact with each other and have an important influence on text comprehension. Anderson highlighted that strategic reading is not only a matter of knowing what strategy to use, but also the reader must know how to use a strategy successfully and orchestrate its use with other strategies<sup>37</sup>. It is not sufficient to know about strategies; a reader must also be able to apply them strategically.

Accordingly, we can deduce that the use of metacognitive reading strategies among EFL students is not prevalent and the participants of this study are less strategic readers who need metacognitive reading strategy instruction in order to help them reflect on the processes that are needed for reading comprehension. Their strategies lack effective cognitive and metacognitive skills required in higher- order comprehension.

Thus, in the light of the obtained results, it can be suggested that students should develop positive attitudes towards reading academic texts and teachers should integrate explicit teaching of metacognitive strategies by adopting a metacognitive reading strategy instruction to boost their students' comprehension abilities.

### **Conclusion:**

The main aim of this research paper is to explore the use of metacognitive reading strategies by EFL university students' in the Algerian context. The three major categories of planning, monitoring and evaluating strategies should be known and used by EFL students to foster their comprehension of academic texts. The findings of this study lead to the conclusion that their metacognitive awareness and reading strategy use is not sufficient. It is also recommended that teachers should reconsider their teaching methods by integrating explicit teaching of metacognitive reading strategies in their classrooms. Yet, due to the limited number of the participants, the results of this study cannot be generalized. Therefore, it is suggested that further research needs to be carried out in the Algerian context in order to obtain more comprehensive results with higher level of research representativeness.

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