



**MOROCCAN EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS'
RELIANCE ON GOAL-SETTING AND BACKGROUND
KNOWLEDGE IN PROCESSING ENGLISH (L3) WRITTEN TEXTS:
AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY**

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Abstract:

The present study investigates the extent to which EFL university learners engage in metacognitive planning strategies for conducting the multifaceted process of reading in an effectual, self-regulated manner. Addressing this set objective, this exploratory study, which is part and parcel of my unpublished dissertation (defended in 2015) dealing with the interplay between metacognition and EFL reading, targeted 113 Moroccan English department students (Group 1: N=50; Group 2: N=63) pursuing their English Language Studies at the first-semester level. The data were elicited from the respondents employing two advanced-level EFL reading comprehension texts (i.e., narrative, expository) and a retrospective questionnaire. The attained results indicate that the targeted EFL groups (Group 1 & Group 2) did have recourse to their background knowledge as an efficient platform for making sense of the assigned written discourse without setting explicit, self-directed goals prior to processing the textual content. Thus, some pertinent recommendations falling within the parameters of pedagogy and research as well as a few limitations are presented.

Keywords: background knowledge, goal-setting, metacognition, planning strategies, textual reading

1. Introduction

It is plausible that any sophisticated, high-order form of EFL textual reading performed by university-level learners necessitates heavy reliance on controlled, conscious processing modes (Msaddek, 2015). Given the premise that the interactive nature of the reading process requires the learners to relate the textual content to their prior knowledge

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on a seemingly large scale, the cognitive engagement in strategic planning and the activation of the working memory mechanisms remain the valuable footsteps for facilitating the process of textual comprehension. Actually, many academic researchers (e.g., Afflerbach & Meuwissson, 2005; Gayo, Deaño, Conde, Ribeiro, Cadime, & Alfonso, 2014) lend sturdy support to the higher significance of planning strategies as effective steps in approaching differing written texts. Afflerbach and Meuwissson (2005), for instance, postulate that through the use of these strategies, students may choose a purposeful path toward their goals, as opposed to a random path (p.142). For clarity purposes, the use of planning strategic moves entitles the learners to be metacognitively conscious not only of what they are expected to accomplish, but also of how they intend to deal with the assigned reading task. In this particular respect, planning strategies can be deemed the crucial metacognitive reading strategies that assist EFL learners to embark on and self-regulate the reading process in a more organized, planned manner.

It is true that the meta-strategic moves of setting goals and activating prior knowledge entail self-direction and metacognition among the learners whilst attempting to decipher the EFL textual input. This features that in tackling diverse learning/ reading tasks, learners are meant to make use of effective planning strategies so that they can plan, check, regulate, and evaluate their developmental, systematic progress towards achieving an overall comprehension of the studying task (e.g., reading, writing). Obviously, considering the effortful nature of the university-level reading, learners are expected to exhibit a sequence of self-regulated steps for decoding the textual meaning. In this regard, Corno and Mandinach (1983) view self-regulation as the effort exerted by students to deepen, monitor, manipulate, and improve their own learning. Thus, the appropriate use of planning strategies depends, to a considerable extent, on the process of self-regulation with a view to purposefully directing one's strategic behavior and potential moves toward the ultimate achievement of optimal comprehension.

Situated within the framework of EFL reading comprehension research and being part and parcel of my unpublished doctoral thesis entitled "*Moroccan EFL University Students' Learning of Cognitive and Metacognitive Reading Strategies: Rabat FLHS Semester One Students as a Case Study*" (defended in 2015), the present study is concerned specifically with the exploration of the extent to which goal-setting and background knowledge use, as two metacognitive planning strategies, are resorted to by English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in tackling a diversity of written texts (i.e., narrative, expository) in tertiary education. Granted the scant attention paid to the role of the self-regulatory planning strategies in textual reading within the Moroccan EFL contexts, the current study is intended to reflect whether Moroccan EFL first-semester university students, as dynamic, independent learners, proactively call upon and deploy these two strategies (i.e., goal-setting, background knowledge activation) in the act of processing and analyzing advanced-level EFL written discourse.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Metacognitive Planning Strategies in EFL Reading

A massive array of research studies (e.g., Boyraz & Altinsoy, 2017; Brown, 1980; Gelderen, *et al.*, 2003; Griffith & Ruan, 2005; Msaddek, 2015) undertaken within the vast scope of metacognitive theory accord a measurable amount of importance to the role of metacognition in textual reading. In fact, metacognition, as a form of high-order thinking, originated from cognitive psychology which is associated with the cognitive processes and psychological aspects that are inherent in the performance of a wide spectrum of learning tasks. This concept was first introduced by Flavell (1971) with a view to expounding the core processes and intricate mechanisms of human memory. Being referred to as 'thinking about thinking' in the cognitive literature, metacognition assists learners to regulate and control their thinking processes with the primary purpose of achieving successful performance in a particular cognitive task (Msaddek, 2015). This showcases that goal-setting and background knowledge activation, which are addressed in this study, imply methodical recourse to metacognition and self-regulation for facilitating the cognitive process of textual comprehension.

It is axiomatic that the proactive process of reading, as straightforwardly declared by many reading researchers (Alderson, 2000; Boakye, 2017; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; Davies, 1995; Gelderen, *et al.*, 2003; Haas & Flower, 1988; Hoeft, 2012; Kendeou, Van Den Broek, Helder, & Karlsson, 2014; Kern, 1989; Msaddek, 2015; Msaddek & Boudassamout, 2023; Suyitno, 2017), is viewed as a cognitive receptive skill entailing the coordinated use of strategies to facilitate textual comprehension. It requires the exertion of self-regulation as well as the reflection of metacognitive capacity on the part of EFL learners (Msaddek, 2015). Without the dependence on the executive control processes and the strategic moves directed through metacognitive thinking, learners cannot developmentally advance in the dynamic act of processing and synthesizing the ideational content declared in the text(s) by the writer(s)/ author(s). This manifestly showcases that textual processing, as an attentionally and cognitively demanding endeavour in tertiary education, presupposes self-regulatory processes for the proper enactment of the sense-making procedure (Msaddek, 2015).

In essence, the implementation of planning reading strategies, as effectual tools of attaining sufficient understanding, entails self-regulation which is a seemingly essential, defining characteristic of any strategic step taken by learners to decipher the implied meaning of the text. This stated fact is plainly corroborated by Weinstein and Hume (1998) who note that "*strategic learners are able to self-regulate by selecting and integrating strategies appropriate to the specific learning goals*" (p.36). To illustrate, it is obvious that being regularly exposed to a wide plethora of written texts assigned by professors along the continuum of the semesters, university learners are meant to reflect self-regulated reading behaviour for guiding their cognitive efforts toward the end goal of analyzing, synthesizing, and digesting the included textual content.

Hence, the approach adopted by EFL learners to deal with the college-level written discourse should be firmly predicated on self-regulation. That is, it is required that such self-regulatory attributes as cognitive sophistication, effective self-efficacy, and higher-order reasoning that constitute the facilitative agents for the operation of the foundational processes of working memory be reflected by the university learners so as to trace the fitting pathway toward having a full grasp of the textual input. In effect, many strategies can be tapped by the learners for cognitively navigating the written text in order to craft a conceptually efficient understanding. Given this, the crucial higher-order strategies, which readers can make use of to plan and direct their reading of the text at the outset, encompass goal-setting and background knowledge which are tackled in the following sub-sections.

2.1.1. Goal-setting

Goal-setting is conceptualized as a self-regulatory, meta-strategic process that can be enacted by learners prior to immersing themselves in text processing. It is an essential signpost that directs readers towards the achievement of textual understanding. Many reading researchers and specialists (e.g., Al-Bataineh, *et al.*, 2019; McCrudden & Schraw, 2007; Zhu, *et al.*, 2023) have accorded intrinsic value to this higher-order strategy of goal-setting. According to McCrudden and Schraw (2007), "*readers frequently establish reading goals to meet particular task demands*" (p.113). In so doing, they can self-regulate their reading act and focus their attention on the significant parts of the written discourse in an attempt to comprehend the desired meaning. For instance, readers can read a given text with a view to providing accurate answers to comprehension questions, pinpointing the generally stated ideas, or explaining the writer's/author's attitude towards a specific issue. These, and perhaps other purposes, are the ones that determine the pathway through which readers can approach the text under study in a more efficient, proper fashion. Thus, forming a goal before engaging in the reading process is the foundational basis upon which readers depend for developing their comprehension of the written text by selecting the effective strategies.

Most saliently, setting goals equips learners with the basic potential "*to monitor their comprehension, and stimulate active thinking as they read*" (Willis, 2008, p.133). By formulating goals pertaining to the target written text, EFL learners can rightfully regulate the process of how they make sense of the presented text information. This implies that learners are expected to think critically, proactively, and metacognitively in an attempt to conduct an effective reading performance (Msaddek, 2015). In this regard, many researchers argue that the act of goal-setting leads to assessing the task at hand and thinking about the appropriate strategies in a metacognitive manner (e.g., Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Locke & Latham, 1990; Ridley *et al.*, 1992). Broadly speaking, the specification of the text-bound goals to be pursued during the execution of the reading task can make learners acutely aware of how to operate their working memory mechanisms and how to orient their cognitive performance towards reaching

meaningful, optimal comprehension of the author's/ writer's intended views and conceptions.

2.1.2. Background Knowledge Use

As a metacognitive planning strategy used in coping with the EFL textual input, the activation of the background knowledge (schemata) forms a great part of the attainment of a thorough understanding of the writer's/author's stated perceptions and ideas. This view is supported by many researchers who maintain that the readers' prior knowledge plays an important role in reading comprehension (Adams, 1990; Carrell, 1983; Grabe, 1991; Lin, 2002; Msaddek, 2015; Ulijn & Salager-Meyer, 1998; Weaver, 1994). It assists learners to predict the content and infer what the author/writer intends to reveal via the text, for the fact of relating what is presented in the written discourse to what they already know helps learners identify the intended meaning and strengthen their understanding of the content (Msaddek, 2015). In this respect, learners are supposed to bring up a suitably proper schema in order to critically engage in the text and make complete sense of its core message. This, in effect, depends on the learners' reading experience and the overall knowledge they have about certain ideologies and views.

In a real sense, when they are exposed to the content of any particular piece of information, EFL student-readers are required to depend on their acquired knowledge as a typically rich source for understanding what is implicitly stated by the writer/author. Actually, the learners' methodical recourse to formal, content, and cultural schemata is of underlying importance for assimilating the formulated conceptualizations embedded in the written discourse (Alderson, 2000; Msaddek, 2017). In other words, the interaction between the reader and the text, through reading, can be an essential condition for both building the stated meaning and generating efficient sense of the concepts, assumptions, and standpoints reflected in the text. This involves both the processing of the textual information and the dependence on prior knowledge in order to establish the interpretation of the text (Carrell, 1984; Celce-Murcia & Alshtain, 2000; Grabe, 1991).

Apparently, in order to unveil the utmost importance of the role of prior knowledge in the interpretation of the different types of texts, Maria and MacGinitie (1983, cited in Alvermann *et al.*, 1985) conducted a study among the foreign language (FL) learners which revealed that imprecise background knowledge which does not match up with the information of the target text can be a potential obstacle to achieving an effective content analysis. This can attest to the underlying view that the relevance of previously acquired knowledge to the textual content is of prime significance in that it facilitates the process of understanding in diverse ways and to different degrees (Msaddek, 2015). Thus, for a text to be more comprehensible, readers are supposed to relate the given content to their prior knowledge as well as to their views and thoughts pertaining to the key theme of the text. This stated premise is dealt with in this current research study in an attempt to show if the target EFL learners find their background knowledge important and the extent to which they depend on it while reading the two assigned texts (i.e., narrative, expository).

On the whole, the meta-strategic moves of establishing clearly defined goals and bringing up appropriate background knowledge, which embody self-regulation in differing ways and to varying degrees, constitute the primary metacognitive planning strategies that student-readers can make use of so as to plan, direct, and self-regulate their reading performance in an efficient manner. It is through these stated planning strategies (e.g., goal-setting, background knowledge use) that readers can lay a solid foundation for cognitively mapping the inferential reading process and interpreting the textual input in a principled manner.

3. Research Objectives & Research Questions

This exploratory study intends to reveal whether Moroccan EFL university learners make use of metacognitive planning strategies (e.g., goal-setting, background knowledge use) when they are exposed to advanced-level EFL written discourse (e.g., narrative, expository).

In considering this explicitly set goal, two primary research questions have been formulated for the systemic conduct of this study:

- 1) Do Moroccan EFL university learners resort to goal-setting before reading EFL written texts?
- 2) To what extent do Moroccan EFL university learners depend on their background knowledge in processing EFL written texts?

4. Method

4.1. Participants

Two randomly selected groups of Moroccan students of the English language department at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences in Rabat were targeted. Both the first group (N=50) and the second group (N=63) were undertaking their English Studies at the first-semester level during the Autumn Semester (2012-2013). Actually, they were mixed-ability learners and they had the same educational background since the great majority of them started learning English as a foreign language at the junior high school level.

4.2. Procedure

The current study is basically premised on an exploratory research design with the intent of uncovering whether Moroccan English department learners have recourse to self-regulatory strategies used in methodically planning the reading process. To achieve this straightforward goal, two advanced-level reading texts (e.g., narrative, expository) coupled with a multiplicity of questions were used. Indeed, many tasks were incorporated into the two reading comprehension texts such as the wh-questions task, the meaning-infering task, the paraphrasing task, and the summarizing task. Further, a

retrospective questionnaire was administered to the targeted groups (Group 1 & Group 2) for unraveling how the two groups tapped the planning strategies in their reading act.

Hence, the retrospection-based views and strategic behaviors exhibited by the two EFL groups (Group 1 & Group 2) addressed in this study were elicited by means of the retrospective questionnaire and were numerically interpreted. Indeed, the frequencies of the reading-related planning strategies (i.e., goal-setting, background knowledge use) that are of a metacognitive nature were tacitly foregrounded in the form of figures and tables.

5. Results

5.1. EFL Learners' Reliance on Goal-setting in Textual Processing

To start with, as one of the basic metacognitive planning strategies enabling the methodical achievement of text comprehension, goal-setting was not adequately depended upon by the target EFL learners in their cognitive engagement in the process of reading. This is statistically illustrated in the following two figures (1 & 2).

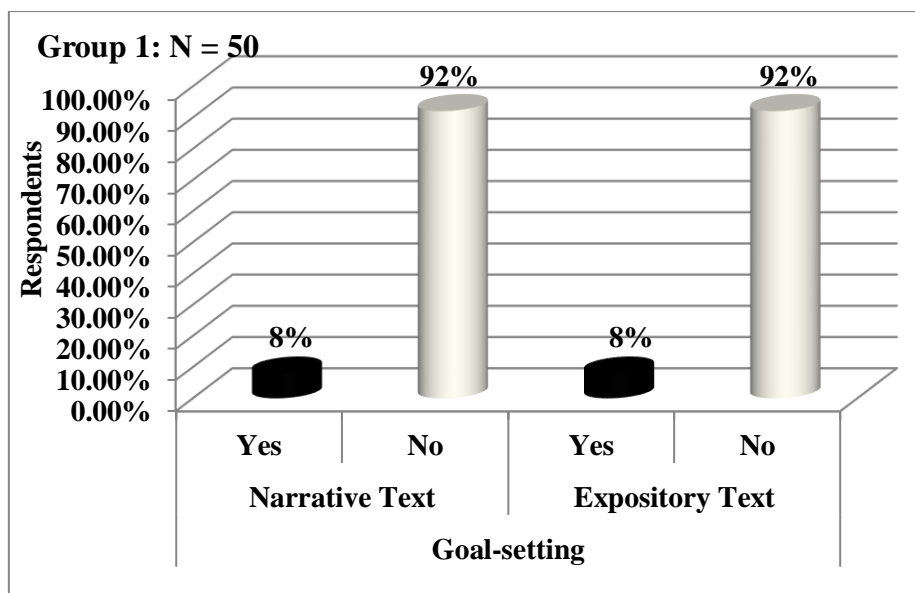


Figure 1: Implementation of Goal-setting Technique among EFL Learners (Group 1)

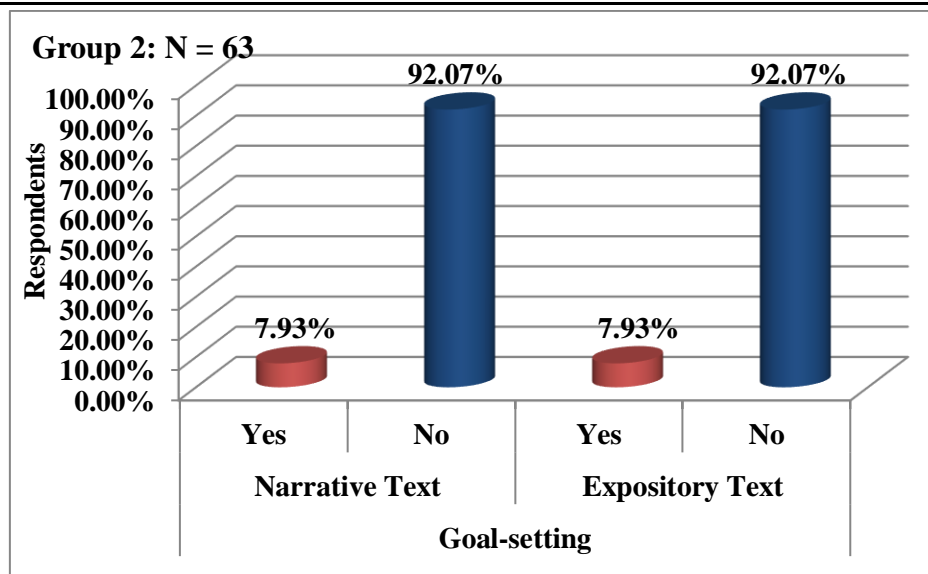


Figure 2: Implementation of Goal-setting Technique among EFL Learners (Group 2)

Clearly, insufficiency in defining clear-cut objectives at the outset of reading either the narrative or the expository text was a manifest fact among the EFL participants. In particular, the overwhelming majority of the first group (N=50), 92%, did not report setting any goals before embarking on the reading process. Similarly, 92.07% of the second group (N=63) read the text without setting any goals to trace a suitable path for comprehending the textual meaning. This lack of goal determination can be an ample indication that most EFL learner readers targeted in this study randomly performed the reading task without being aware of what is required from them to achieve by the end of the textual processing. Plainly, they did not specify and plan the appropriate pathway prior to the involvement in the reading process. Thus, ineffective understanding can be the ultimate outcome.

5.2. EFL Learners' Dependence on Background Knowledge in Textual Processing

The other planning strategy, which is the activation of previously acquired knowledge, was effected in processing both the narrative and expository written texts by the target EFL participants of both groups (Group 1 & Group 2). The most striking aspect is that heavy over-reliance on this planning act was not observable among both the two groups (1 & 2). This is attested to by the following tabulated data.

Table 1: Importance of Background Knowledge among EFL Learners

Subjects (N=113)		Group 1 (N=50)		Group 2 (N=63)	
		Narrative Reading Text	Expository Reading Text	Narrative Reading Text	Expository Reading Text
Not Important	N	11	15	14	15
	%	22	30	22.22	23.80
Important	N	34	31	35	36
	%	68	62	55.56	57.15
Very Important	N	5	4	14	12
	%	10	8	22.22	19.05
Total	N	50	50	63	63
	%	100	100	100	100

Table 2: EFL Learners' Dependency on Background Knowledge during the Reading Process

Subjects (N=113)		Group 1 (N=50)		Group 2 (N=63)	
		Narrative Reading Text	Expository Reading Text	Narrative Reading Text	Expository Reading Text
To a Limited Extent	N	11	15	14	15
	%	22	30	22.22	23.80
To Some Extent	N	35	31	33	35
	%	70	62	52.39	55.56
To a Large Extent	N	4	4	16	13
	%	8	8	25.39	20.64
Total	N	50	50	63	63
	%	100	100	100	100

As manifested above (see Table 2), the majority of the subjects in the first group (1) stated that they depended, to some extent, on prior knowledge with percentages of 70% and 62% for the narrative and expository texts respectively. However, only 8% of the respondents did affirm that they relied, to a large extent, on their schematic knowledge in reading both types of texts. This reveals that this tiny category of EFL learners found the mediating role of their previously acquired knowledge highly important during the process of textual analysis. On the other hand, the participants in the second group (2) maintained that they relied, to some extent, on their background knowledge in trying to comprehend the narrative and expository content with percentages of 52.39% and 55.56% sequentially. Further, 25.39% and 20.64% of the participants in this group declared that they extensively resorted to their prior knowledge while coping with both types of texts (narrative and expository) respectively. However, the limited dependence on previous knowledge by some of the target learners during the reading act means that they found it unimportant and unnecessary.

6. Discussion

This study was intended to reveal the extent to which Moroccan EFL university learners make use of metacognitive planning strategies (i.e., goal-setting, background knowledge use) as efficient mechanisms aiding textual comprehension. The results attained feature that the establishment of goals before engaging in the reading process was not put into effect by the targeted EFL learners (Group 1 & Group 2) since only a small number of the participants resorted to this planning strategy. This underlines the basic assumption that most EFL first-semester learners tend to cognitively process the written discourse in the pursuit of textual comprehension without being cognizant of both the nature of goal-setting and its application at the outset of text processing.

In addition, the majority of the EFL learners involved in this study found it somewhat crucial to relate the written texts' content under investigation to their previously acquired knowledge. This amply reflects the centrally functional role of prior knowledge use in the area of textual reading since learners seemed, to some extent, aware of the facilitative effect of that process. As was expected, activating the background knowledge did fundamentally assist the target EFL learners in dealing with both types of texts (i.e., narrative, expository). This evinces that reliance on prior knowledge serves as a framework of 'reference' to achieve an overall comprehension of the author's intended and unintended conceptualizations.

In explicit terms, it can be stated that not all the participants, both in the first and second groups, showed heavy reliance upon their prior background knowledge, as a 'frame of reference', for the sake of attaining a sufficient interpretation of the text meaning. The only difference observed from the presented findings is the degree to which the two groups resorted to their schematic knowledge base. In fact, the majority of learners in both groups did relate, to some extent, the text content (e.g., narrative, expository) to what they already know with a view to achieving an effective comprehension.

Granted the attested fact that activating schemata is part of the process of reaching an adequate comprehension, the lack of background knowledge can be an obstacle for making complete sense of the text. This particular fact is underlined by Carrell (1984) who maintains that a reader's failure to activate an appropriate schema during reading may culminate in non-comprehension. Carrell (1984) suggests that this failure is attributable to one of the following causes: (a) the reader's inefficient use of his/her bottom-up processing skills to activate schemata or (b) the reader's non-possession of the appropriate schema anticipated by the author. Yet, the findings attained through this study feature that most EFL participants did have access to their prior knowledge. This denotes that a full understanding of the textual content requires readers to possess sufficient background knowledge they can call upon in the course of their reading act. Hence, the activation of convenient schemata can be a prerequisite of overall text comprehension (Msaddek, 2015).

In effect, the construction of a well-conceived understanding of the written text depends, to an extent, on the previously acquired knowledge which can be deemed a facilitating variable since it allows readers to interpret the information more properly. Readers, in engaging in the reading process, tend to analyze the meaning in accordance with the knowledge they already have (Msaddek, 2015). Thus, the role of background knowledge in language comprehension has been formalized as schema theory (Rumelhart, 1980; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1988). Under this account, the schema-theoretic approach asserts that activating existing knowledge prior to reading can improve or alter reading comprehension and recall (Johnson, 1982). This succinct view suggests that the readers' schema is of tremendous importance in that it serves as a clear signpost for gearing readers toward building the comprehension of the text.

It is of particular note that most of the EFL learners involved in this case study did not adequately engage in and recruit the metacognitive planning strategies to ensure the attainment of an efficient textual understanding. As a case in point, setting the goals before embarking on the reading process was only reported by a tiny number of the target subjects. This indicates that a substantial number of EFL first-semester student-readers involve themselves in the cognitive task of reading without defining the primary rationale and objectives prior to processing and analyzing the written texts. Thus, they tend to approach the textual content 'unplanfully'. Worth considering is the fact that a small percentage of the respondents who provided affirmative answers as to the act of setting the goals in the retrospective questionnaire (RQ) did not list the underlying goals that can underpin their way of coping with the given written texts' content. As some researchers postulate (e.g., Bandura, 1982; Mikami, 2012; Zimmerman, 2008), goal-setting is an essential that should be accorded core importance in the proactive process of textual reading since it increasingly optimizes EFL learners' sense of self-efficacy and facilitates their sense-making process.

Clearly, though a great number of the participants tended to infuse the textual message with what they already know for facilitating the comprehension process, the planning strategy of goal-setting, as an executive process taken prior to the textual analysis, was not employed by the majority of EFL learners. This finding is in line with the results of prior research studies (e.g., Mikami, 2012). In this regard, goal-setting, as stated by some researchers (e.g., Mikami, 2012; Shih & Reynolds, 2018), should be part and parcel of the cognitive reading process. This substantiates the view that the planning procedure involved in textual reading remains ineffective unless there is an interactive interplay between setting the rationale for reading and activating the previously acquired knowledge. Generally, it is deducible that the planning strategies (e.g., goal-setting & background knowledge use), which incarnate the heuristic aspects of metacognition, were not implemented by the target EFL learners to a highly extended degree.

7. Conclusion

Constituting a major part of my unpublished doctoral thesis (defended in 2015) that targets the intercorrelation between metacognition and university-level EFL reading within the Moroccan context, the present study tended to unravel the degree to which the learners' cognitive engagement in planning reading strategies (Goal setting & background knowledge use) is characterized by sufficiency and efficiency. The research findings revealed that most of the targeted EFL university learners automatically resorted to their background knowledge as a potential frame of reference for grasping the textual meaning. However, the act of specifying potentially self-directed goals prior to embarking on the reading process is starkly lacking among the EFL learners addressed in the study. Indeed, to undertake an efficiency-driven kind of textual processing, especially at the university level, entails rigorous recourse to goal-setting and prior background knowledge which constitute the underlying cornerstones for optimally proceeding in textual processing and analysis.

The implied view is that, given the inadequate use of goal-setting among most EFL university learners targeted in this study, it is imperative that the pre-reading strategic moves (e.g., goal-setting, background knowledge use) be explicitly instructed at the first-semester level. This can contribute to strengthening the learners' sense of control over the reading process and revamping their regulation of cognition as well as their cognitive mapping skills while being engaged in EFL textual analysis. That is, learners should be exposed to the essentiality of setting goals and activating their background knowledge in order to conduct an efficiency-based type of reading, thus improving their inferential reading abilities. For instance, learners should be taught not only how to set goals such as exploring the intentions and conceptualizations of the writer/author and providing accurate answers to the comprehension questions, but also how to relate the textual content to their stored knowledge. Only via knowing how to formulate goals prior to textual reading and having recourse to the previously acquired knowledge can EFL learners undertake text processing in a well-conceived, effectual fashion.

Though the findings reached in light of the conduct of this study are deemed insightful, it is advisable that future research studies address a large number of EFL learners belonging to diverse Moroccan higher education institutions. In addition, different research instruments (i.e., interviews, self-reports) should be implemented by prospective researchers whose interest is couched within EFL reading research in the Moroccan higher education context. This will unravel whether Moroccan EFL university learners adequately resort to the metacognitive planning strategies (e.g., goal-setting, background knowledge) that govern the reading process in differing EFL settings and across various levels.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Mohammed Msaddek is an associate professor at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences- Mohammedia, Hassan II University, Casablanca. He obtained his PhD on the effect of explicit instruction in cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies on Moroccan EFL university learners' strategy use and reading achievement gains from Mohamed V University, Rabat. His main research interests include metacognition, self-regulated learning, learning strategies, and reading strategies.

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