

# The role of gisting and contextual guessing reading strategies in learners' performance in multiple-choice cloze tests of reading comprehension

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## Abstract

This paper investigated the effects reading comprehension (RC) strategies, namely, contextual guessing and gisting on second language (L2) students' ability in comprehending multiple-choice cloze passages. Ninety students out of 170 students were chosen through non-random judgment sampling and randomly divided into two experimental groups, each group consisting of 30 homogeneous students (i.e., group A as Gisting and group B as Contextual guessing) and a control group (n=30) as group C. The groups were instructed to apply gisting and contextual guessing reading strategies on the same reading materials except the control group who received the placeboes of reading comprehension materials. The treatment period on the experimental group lasted 10 weeks. The mean scores of both experimental and that of control group were compared through One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). The results of post-hoc analysis of Scheffe test showed that the L2 learners who utilized contextual guessing and gisting reading comprehension strategies outperformed the control group ( $p < .05$ ). Furthermore, the experimental group who received contextual guessing revealed a significant efficiency than gisting group ( $p < .05$ ). As a result it can be concluded that contextual guessing and gisting have had positive effect on students' rate of reading comprehensibility.

**Key words:** reading comprehension (RC) strategies, contextual guessing, gisting, cloze passages

## 1. Introduction

One of the main problems that learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) confront is how to improve their reading comprehension proficiency. This is actually the concern of both EFL learners and teachers in Iran since it is the major classroom activity in the Iranian educational system. Reading skill is necessarily required in the Iranian university entrance exam which most high school and pre-university graduates need to pass. Reading is one of the most important activities in language classes Kirby (2007). It enables learners to work at their own pace and to increase their world knowledge. It also helps them consolidate their knowledge of language. Reading is a means of getting information from different sources including scientific and literary books and journals as well as the internet websites in an EFL context.

Reading tasks encourage students to reflect upon what they are going to read. For the information to stay with the students, they need to go beyond simply reading it. By engaging students in reading tasks, teachers not only support students understanding of content, but also provide them with opportunities to develop their comprehension, vocabulary and study skills without interrupting content learning (Pakhhare, 2007). The learners retain information more easily if they use reading tasks during and after reading materials. There are many tasks that will refine, enrich, and heighten interest in the assigned topic; however, the primary goal of the reading tasks in many studies is to further develop and clarify interpretation of the text, and to help students remember what they have individually created in their minds from the text (Phan, 2006; Willingham, 2006).

Reading is not merely a receptive process of picking up information from the page in a word-by-word manner (Grabe, 1991, p.1). Rather, it is a selective process and characterized as an active process of comprehending. Therefore, non-English-speaking readers find it important to employ reading strategies to read English texts more effectively. According to Grabe (1991), effective reading is rapid, purposeful, comprehending, flexible and gradually developing. So, reading is a very complex

process, and this is what drives many researchers to attempt to understand and explain its process.

Reading Comprehension tasks are chosen to be studied in this study since the most important channel that Iranian pre-university students can use to communicate with an English language society is through reading. Moreover, the reading communication skill is considered as an important skill in learning English as a foreign language at Iranian universities. In effect the present study aims at focusing on gisting and contextual guessing reading strategies as two valuable reading strategies related to Iranian EFL pre-university learners since in university entrance examinations and final-term exams a lot of reading comprehension questions can be answered correctly by using these strategies (Lee & Oxford, 2008; Birjandi, Mosallanejad & Bagheridoust, 2006; Nunan, 1999).

Perhaps the most valuable reading strategies for learners are gisting and contextual guessing reading strategies. Gisting reading strategy consists of quickly running one's eyes across a whole text (such as essay, article, or chapter) for its gist. Gisting reading strategy gives the advantage of being able to predict the purpose of the passage, the main topic, or message, and possibly some of the developing or supporting ideas. This gives them a head start as they embark on more focused reading (Brown, 2001, pp. 308-9). Contextual guessing is using context to discover the meaning of unknown words to comprehend a reading text. By contextual guessing readers can identify important words in reading and can in fact make semantic predictions about their relationship to one another. Aspatore (1984) suggests that contextual guessing is asking students to underline unknown words without looking up the meaning in the dictionary, to use contextual clues to guess the general meaning; to skip unknown words; and to focus on cognates, roots, prefixes, and suffixes while reading a text (Chastain, 1988, p. 238).

### ***1.1. Statement of the problem***

Learners may read different textbooks to build up their lexicon in Iran, but the degree of the amount of comprehensive input provided by such textbooks would be

questionable. Second language teachers do not know for certain whether or not learners know how to improve their reading comprehension. Consequently, majority of the L2 students may fail to gain adequate comprehensive input. It is believed that this is mostly because of insufficient familiarity and practice of various reading comprehension strategies provided by teachers filled with active roles of students that majority of the students, especially pre-university ones fail to do well on multiple-choice cloze passages questions in different kinds of exams. Therefore, the questions are raised as follows:

(1) To what extent do gisting and contextual guessing reading strategies affect Iranian pre-university learners' reading comprehension?

(2) Is there any significant difference between gisting and contextual guessing reading strategies and learners' reading comprehension ability? To pursue adequate answers to the above research questions, the following null hypotheses may be proposed as follows:

HO1: Gisting and contextual guessing do not significantly affect EFL learners' performance in multiple-choice cloze tests of reading comprehension.

HO2: There is no significant difference between gisting and contextual guessing reading strategies on the EFL learners' performance in multiple-choice cloze tests of reading comprehension.

### ***1.2. Significance of the study***

This study will help EFL learners improve their reading comprehension proficiency by these RC strategies and doing much more activities related to these RC strategies. These reading comprehension strategies help teachers promote their students' reading comprehension and find the most important points that help students enhance their performance in taking reading comprehension cloze tests. Moreover, it would prove pedagogical value gisting and contextual reading strategies in EFL classrooms and lead EFL instructors provide the learners with enough information to utilize these strategies in reading comprehension to take cloze test passages. Since the newly published pre-university textbook provides no instructions concerned with cloze passages for students to do their exercises by using these strategies while the test of cloze passages are a part of university entrance examination. In this case, the

significance of this study is to make the teachers familiar with the construction of multiple-choice cloze passage tests. The results of this study may be beneficial for syllabus designers, textbook writers and EFL teachers at pre- intermediate level students.

## **2. Literature review**

### ***2.1. Theoretical Background***

Reading comprehension has always been of paramount importance in Iranian educational system, and comprehension of both general and academic texts has been the aim of many educational centers for years. This precisely can be due to the fact that there have been many people wishing to understand what the texts of both academic and non-academic wants to say in the target language so that they can follow their aims regarding their profession and/or any other motivation they have. Therefore, in many language centers and institutes much attempt has to be made by teachers to teach students the appropriate strategies for understanding the texts of the target language they learn.

Reading is not merely a receptive process of picking up information from the page in a word-by-word manner (Grabe, 1991, p. 1). Rather, it is a selective process and characterized as an active process of comprehending. According to Grabe (1991), effective reading is rapid, purposeful, comprehending, flexible and gradually developing.

According to Kirby (2007, p. 1), students who cannot read or comprehend are those who might not know how to process the texts meaningfully by making use of appropriate strategies. Linguistically speaking, there are a number of particular textual characteristics influencing the comprehension of texts. In addition to those textual characteristics, metacognitive strategies impact the degree of comprehending and/or understanding of the text. Metacognitive strategies are used in information-processing theory to indicate an executive function of strategies that involve planning for learning, thinking about the learning process as it is taking place, monitoring of ones production or comprehension.

According to Pakhare (2007) and Phan (2006), the degree by which a passage or text is understood is called reading comprehension. Reading comprehension improves through the use of methods which include training the ability to self-assess comprehension, using some questions to put comprehension to the test, and improving metacognition. An active process of comprehending is called reading which a selective process is. And it is important that non-English-speaking readers use reading strategies effectively to read English texts.

Hyland (2003, p. 216) points out cloze tests are widely used in international large-scale standardized tests, such as TOEFL and IELTS, which are aimed at students who are going to study abroad. Cloze procedure involves assessing the readability of a text as well as the reading comprehension of individual students. However, Rye (1982, pp. 47-48) points out that cloze procedure has also been used to help learners improve their reading ability in many studies. Rye (1982) also describes the use of the procedure as a teaching instrument to improve learners' reading ability.

Cloze procedure has been used in English teaching for decades since 1953. It was firstly used as an instrument for assessing the readability of written materials for school children in the United States (Brown, 2002, p. 79). Then it was used in teaching for different purposes. Researchers such as Rashid (2001, p. 10) conclude that cloze tests are reliable for measuring the language proficiency of ESL students. Chinese scholars (Tao, 2004; Li, 2004; Zhu, 2004) recognized cloze procedures as a very efficient means of measuring integrative English language competence.

According to Oxford (1990), reading strategies are operational learning techniques, behaviors, and problem-solving or study skills that enhance learning more effectively and efficiently. In the light of second language learning, however, it is crucial to see the difference between strategies that enhance learning and strategies that improve comprehension. For this study, reading comprehension strategies are the main focus and are seen as comprehension processes that enable readers to construct meaning from the printed page most effectively. Strategic reading is a prime characteristic of expert readers because it is woven into the very fabric of "reading for meaning," and the development of this cognitive ability. Reading strategies--which are

related to other cognitive strategies enhancing attention, memory, communication and learning--allow readers to elaborate, organize, and evaluate information derived from text. Because strategies are controllable by readers, they are personal cognitive tools that can be used selectively and flexibly. And, reading strategy use reflects both metacognition and motivation, because readers need to have both the knowledge and the disposition to use strategies (Kern, 1997).

Hong (2007, p. 15) has suggested that cognitively, reading comprehension defined as construction of meaning from a printed or a written message is a two-way process between reader and author. And a lot of processes interact with text features and these are interactive as far as they are widely accepted models of fluent reading. Willingham (2006) adds that by prior knowledge, students are encouraged to apply what they know from their own lives to the text, or to consider the theme of the text before reading it. And by vocabulary comprehension relationship Willingham states that students are encouraged to use background knowledge to make educated guesses about the meaning of unfamiliar words.

Birjandi, Mosallanejad and Bagheridoust (2006, pp. 212-213) believe that in the past reading was considered as a language learning process in which the teachers used the reading material to teach vocabulary and grammar, now reading is considered as a communicative process in which the goal in learning to read is meaning. So the teacher's responsibility is to teach reading strategies that enable the students to read at higher levels of proficiency. They noted that analyzing language as part of the process of comprehension comes in two different ways. One way is bottom-up or text-based and the other one is top-down process or inside-the-head approach. In the first one, the readers make use of information already present in the text. According to this view, meaning resides in the text and has to be inferred by the reader. However, in the other one, readers understand a text by using their previous and or background knowledge. In this approach, reading comprehension is in the knowledge of students with some background knowledge they already have about the topic.

According to Nunan (1999, pp.250- 265), teachers at Chinese University developed one of the most comprehensive typologies of reading strategies. They find out that second language readers can significantly develop their reading speed

and comprehension if they choose the best strategies for different texts and purposes. Hence, one might bring to notice the selection of the proper strategies in promoting reading comprehension. According to Nunan (1999), the choice of strategies on reading depends on the purposes that readers have in mind. The readers might have the purpose of reading for pleasure and or they might choose the strategy of skimming to ensure that the written passage is in line of the recollection of what was happened. Scanning is also used as a strategy for looking a specific piece of information.

## ***2.2. Empirical background***

Kong (2006, pp. 21-22) suggests that readers have to be strategic, use their linguistic knowledge and the knowledge of the topic being discussed in order to understand the written symbols. Kong adds that good comprehension happens when readers initiate appropriate schemata to form hypotheses by using cues from text. As they read on, they put these hypotheses to the test and make adjustments as necessary. So reading is an interactive process between the text and what the readers have in their mind.

There have been several other case studies similarly showing relationships between various reading strategies and successful or unsuccessful second language reading (Lee & Oxford, 2008; Zhang, 2007; Kong, 2006; Nunan, 1999; Hauptman, 1979; Sarig, 1987). Yet, the picture is more complex than suggested by these early case studies. Unfortunately, the relationships between strategies and comprehension are not simple and straightforward. Research reported by Anderson (1999) shows that there are no simple correlations or one-to-one relationships between particular strategies and successful or unsuccessful reading comprehension. His research with native Spanish-speaking, university level, intensive English as a Second Language (ESL) students reading in English as their second language and self-reporting their strategy use, suggests wide individual variation in successful or unsuccessful use of the exact same reading strategies. Rather than a single set of processing strategies that significantly contributed to successful reading comprehension, the same kinds of strategies were used by both high and low comprehending readers. This gives them a head start as they embark on more focused reading. By contextual guessing readers can identify important words in reading and can in fact make semantic predictions



about their relationship to one another (Brown, 2001, pp. 308-9). Gisting and contextual guessing are two key skills identified in the Programs of Study for Key Stage 2 (KS2) Reading in the National Curriculum. Gisting and scanning are particularly valuable techniques for studying scientific textbooks. Brown (2001) calls gisting and contextual guessing reading strategies the most valuable reading strategies for learners (as well as native speakers), but unfortunately they have not been capitalized sufficiently in the existing pre-university textbook.

Lee and Oxford (2008, p. 15) conducted a research and concluded that strategy awareness and strategy use were related to the Korean cultural context. They noted that teaching appropriate learning strategies enable EFL learners to become more independent, autonomous and lifelong learners. Ozek and Civelek (2006, p.15) focused on cognitive strategy use among EFL learners reading comprehension strategy use. They obtained data based on self-reported questionnaires and Think Aloud Protocols (TAPs) to determine the cognitive strategies employed during the actual reading process and to compare the results of the data. They compared the results of questionnaires and TAPs and found both similar and contradictory results in learners' cognitive strategy use in reading comprehension.

Ahmad and Asraf (2004) did a research study on the underlying strategies used by second language learners in responding to English texts. This case study investigated how the learners made an effort to comprehend the texts by selecting, understanding and integrating information in the context of eight reading comprehension sub-skills in the form of comprehension questions, such as word meaning, words in context, literal comprehension, and drawing inferences from single strings. The main goal of this study was to test the hypothesis which according to Ahmad and Asraf (2004, p. 34), "there is a difference between good and average readers in their response to the various question types within the framework of the eight sub-skills". In this study, average readers were selected by their class teachers, the school supervisors, the head teacher, their language teachers, and their mid-year language test scores, which were from 50-70 out of a possible 100. In addition, the monthly test scores for English were counted, and their verbal communication ability was good. Likewise, the same selection criteria were applied for good readers whose mid-year language test scores

were from 80-100 and oral and written abilities were very good. The results suggested that the same comprehension answering strategies were used by the good and average readers. This, therefore, shows the importance of cognitive contextual awareness in obtaining reading comprehension. Zhang (2007, p. 4) states that metacognition is of much importance in reading comprehension; so, those who are metacognitively aware of the nature of reading and types of appropriate strategies are different from those who are not in terms of success in reading comprehension.

The participants of this study were 67 undergraduate students at an Israeli university enrolled in EFL reading comprehension course; they were drawn from four classes, three classes (n=43) at 'the low-advanced' level (108 hours of instruction) and one class (n=24) at 'the high-advanced level' (54 hours of instruction). The results of the study showed that for the low-advanced group, there was no significant difference in comprehension performance for the two contents (sample texts given to them) in the 'example' condition. In the 'summary' condition, there was a significant difference in comprehension performance for the two contents. In summary condition the low-advanced group was more successful in doing more difficult texts than the less difficult ones (Lee & Oxford, 2008).

Takala (2006) studied reading comprehension of fourth and sixth graders was promoted with reciprocal teaching in three mainstream classes, and three special classes for pupils with Specific Language Impairment (SLI). Four cognitive strategies were used to enhance these pupils' reading comprehension skills. Six coordinated, 5-week interventions were held during regular class sessions in the spring and autumn terms of 2003. These interventions, which varied in length from 10 to 15 lessons, were given to all students attending fourth-grade and sixth-grade science classes in general science and sixth-grade history lessons. A control group/experiment group design was used. According to pre-, post- and retention tests the intervention proved to be beneficial, especially to the mainstream fourth-grade class. Some positive development could also be noticed in the SLI groups. The results of children improved mostly in expert-designed tests on reading comprehension. According to the interviews, children and teachers were pleased to have had the opportunity to

participate in the interventions and to learn a new method of improving reading comprehension.

In order to probe the relationship between reading strategies and comprehension monitoring strategies and how they function to help readers in comprehension process, another study conducted by Yang (2006) utilizes think-aloud and retrospective verbal reports to examine 20 EFL readers' performances in reading texts. The results reveal that the engagement of reading strategies is a cognitive action by which readers solve their problems resulting from the insufficiency of language knowledge in understanding textual information (within the text), while the employment of comprehension monitoring strategies is an intentional and remedial action by which readers integrate, monitor, and control their own reading processes (beyond the text). Both of the strategies may aid readers in achieving reading success from failures. The utilization of strategies positively functions only when the readers use them under specific occasions in reading a particular text. Otherwise, the readers may still fail to comprehend the texts even though they apply some reading strategies. A reading strategy may turn into a comprehension monitoring strategy as soon as it is engaged to aid readers to evaluate their own reading comprehension.

Ozek's (2006) study aimed to find out which reading strategies are generally employed by ELT students while reading a text, and which reading strategies are needed to be developed to understand the text better, and therefore, to continue academic studies successfully. The population of his study was composed of the 1st and 4th year students in English language teaching (ELT) department at Dicle University. Two different methods were used to collect data. In the first part, a self-report questionnaire consisting of 25 items was administered to 185 students. In the second part, Think-Aloud Protocol was conducted with 23 subjects. Reading strategies were evaluated under three headings: *pre-reading*, *while-reading* and *post-reading* in both parts. The results of TAPs analysis revealed that the students used only one strategy namely, "*relating the title to the text content*" in the pre-reading phase. As for the while-reading phase, the most effectively employed strategies were: using the dictionary parsimoniously, guessing the meaning of a word from the context, skipping some unknown words, thinking-aloud during reading, and assimilating the text with

the background knowledge. However, none of the post-reading strategies were found to be used by the participants. The data collected from the questionnaire was analyzed statistically. The results of the analysis indicated that there were some significant differences on the effective use of cognitive reading strategies with regard to students' gender, age, and proficiency in reading, school source, and duration in learning English.

There have been several other case studies similarly showing relationships between various reading strategies and successful or unsuccessful second language reading (Hauptman, 1979; and Sarig, 1987). Yet, the picture is more complex than suggested by these early case studies. Unfortunately, the relationships between strategies and comprehension are not simple and straightforward. Use of certain reading strategies does not always lead to successful reading comprehension, while failure to use these strategies or use of other strategies does not always result in unsuccessful reading comprehension. Analyzing as a metacognitive strategy is used to decompose elements in a text for better comprehension of a reading passage and also for the analysis of the events which have been described in the text. In this regard, Shang (2006, p. 2) suggests that teachers' task is to help students comprehend the meaning which the writer has expressed. Teachers also have to develop the critical skills of students and help them think of solving their comprehension problems in problem-solving situations. Students should have the ability of discovering questions, evaluating evidence individually, and forming judgment based on synthesis and analysis.

Zhang (2007, pp. 5-7) conducted a study which was set up to explore the types of metacognitive knowledge of reading strategy EFL learners of different proficiency levels have while learning to read EFL. In doing so, ten EFL readers were selected from a sample of 312 participants. For the purpose of comparison, an orthogonal design was adopted. In both the high-scorer and the low-scorer groups, five students were sampled. Results from a subjects' background questionnaire showed that they started their formal education in Chinese when they were in kindergarten or primary school. The data also showed that they began to learn English as a foreign language at the age of 13, as required by the ministry of education. They had a total of about seven years of classroom EFL learning. Their average EFL proficiency was estimated to be

equivalent to about 450 on the TOEFL. Their Chinese reading abilities ranged from good to excellent. Their average age was around 19 on the basis of ordinal scale.

Research reported by Anderson (1999) showed that there are no simple correlations or one-to-one relationships between particular strategies and successful or unsuccessful reading comprehension. His research dealt with native Spanish-speaking, university level, intensive ESL students reading in English as their second language and self-reporting their strategy use. He suggests a wide individual variation in successful or unsuccessful use of the exact same reading strategies. Rather than a single set of processing strategies that significantly contributed to successful reading comprehension, the same kinds of strategies were used by both high and low comprehending readers. However, those readers reporting the use of a higher number of different strategies tended to score higher on Anderson's comprehension measures.

Yang (2006) proposed a small-scale study which focused on reading strategy instruction for learners of French or Spanish as a modern foreign language. The objective of the study was to explore the potential of reading strategy instruction in raising the learner readers' awareness of reading strategies, in extending the range of strategies they employed and in encouraging learners to monitor and reflect upon their reading. Having initially established the learners' existing strategy awareness and use, the researchers embarked upon explicit strategy instruction, during which learner readers' strategy use was promoted and reviewed at regular intervals by means of review exercises and interviews. The findings of the study point to the problematic nature of reading strategy instruction. While indications emerged that strategy training appeared to raise learners' awareness of reading strategies and may have encouraged use by some learners of certain top-down processes, other strategies seem harder to acquire. Some learners do not make the transition to more complex strategies. Nonetheless, strategy training can encourage learner readers to reflect on their strategy use and seems to boost their confidence in their own reading abilities.

Another study conducted by Li (2004) to find out what particular problems Chinese students had with cloze tests or exercises, and to determine whether these difficulties were associated with inefficient use of reading strategies. This study

focused on a group of Chinese students who were studying at the University of the Western Cape. The data was collected through interviews with the students, a cloze test completed by the students, a questionnaire distributed to the students and five English teachers in China. The findings of the study reveal that the problems the Chinese students had with the cloze procedure were related to their inefficient use of reading strategies as well as their lack of awareness of their own reading processes. In addition, the students did not receive sufficient instruction in strategies to deal with cloze. The cloze procedure used by teachers and for tests can be improved to facilitate students' reading competence. The findings of this study also reveal that the problems the sample population of students had with the cloze test, were to some extent associated with their inefficient use of reading skills. To perform better in cloze tests, the students must learn to use reading strategies more effectively. Mastering reading skills does not, however, mean that the students can employ them effectively. Firstly, self-monitoring and awareness reading processes and strategies must be promoted.

O'Sullivan (2003) focused on teaching of reading in primary classrooms in developing countries, particularly, the teaching of English reading to second-language pupils, receives very little attention in the literature. One notable study that highlighted the low standard of reading in developing countries claimed that the teaching of reading in these countries is in crisis. This can be attributed to teachers' reliance on a rote memory approach to teaching reading. There is, however, very little research available on efforts that attempt to address this problem. This article emerged from a research study of an in-service program in Namibia and it begins to address this gap. The program, for mainly unqualified primary teachers, sought to develop teachers' capacity to teach reading more effectively.

Aarnoutse and Schellings (2003) examined the effectiveness of an intervention aimed at the development of reading motivation and reading strategies within problem-oriented learning environments is evaluated. The basic assumption underlying the intervention is that reading should occur in meaningful contexts and that reading and science should be regularly integrated. The intervention challenges pupils to investigate a self-formulated problem, read several books or texts on the topic and report the results of their study. The participants were six experimental

third-grade classes and seven comparable control classes. The effects of the intervention were measured using a pre-test and post-test control group design. Analyses of covariance were conducted to examine the effects as measured by a standardized Reading Comprehension Test, a Reading Comprehension Questionnaire, a Reading Strategy Test and a Reading Motivation Scale. The results showed the experimental group to outperform the control group with regard to knowledge of reading strategies (Reading Comprehension Questionnaire) and the use of such strategies (Reading Strategy Test). A significant difference in favor of the experimental group was also found for the Reading Motivation Scale. An effect on the standardized Reading Comprehension Test was not found.

Although much literature has been devoted to reading, there is still little known about the reading process of EFL learners. Block (1986) stated the significance of widening the knowledge about the process of reading, not just the product of reading, so as to design reading programs that truly meet the needs of students. Grabe (1991) emphasized the need to conduct more second language reading research. Furthermore, with an overview of the research on L2 learners and reading strategies, Singhal (2001, p. 8) called for more studies, such as studies of reading strategies and metacognitive factors in L2 reading, because “many questions about reading comprehension and the reading process still remain”. Similarly, after Brantmeier (2002) carried out her second language reading strategy research at the secondary and university levels, she stressed that there remains important research to be done in this area, especially similar studies to obtain consistent results before generalizing to the whole population.

The previous investigations (e.g., Block, 1986) have focused mainly on the question of comparing effective readers with less effective readers in terms of reading strategies. What is apparent is that not many studies have specifically examined which reading strategies are selected and employed by Iranian pre-university students while coping with a reading text in English. Consequently, teaching and examining reading comprehension strategies of gisting and contextual guessing reading strategies may be used by Iranian pre-university students when interacting with an English reading text and showing the most effective one is the goal of this study. Another goal is to deepen the understanding of the process of their employing reading comprehension strategies.

As the literature review shows, some research findings concerning the effect of different reading strategies are inconsistent and as yet, we are far from a consensus on the issue. In other words despite the importance of the issue, we hardly have any consistent evidence, as a result, many of the assumptions as well as findings remain thorny.

This study will examine two kinds of reading comprehension strategies of gisting and contextual guessing reading strategies and hope to suggest the best and most effective one regarding multiple-choice cloze passages in increasing Iranian pre-university students' reading comprehension.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1. Subjects***

This research was conducted through the participation of 90 students who were selected out of 170 pre-university learners. The participants were females, 17-19 of age are selected from students of three majors (i.e., Natural sciences, Human Sciences and Mathematic and Physics) who participated the population of study. To make the homogeneity of all the participants, the researcher used multiple-choice cloze passage tests developed by Fowler and Coe (1976). Ninety subjects whose scores were around mean were selected for the present study and determined as pre-intermediate level. They were divided based on their scores into two experimental groups and one control group (each group consisting of 30 students). Group A was named as Gisting and group B as Contextual guessing and group C as control group.

#### ***3.2. Instrumentation***

In this study a number of instruments were used. A pre-test (Fowler & Coe, 1976) was utilized just to witness the initial reading comprehension proficiency of the learners in each group. The researcher made use of a multiple-choice cloze passage from (Fowler & Coe, 1976) and it was administered to 170 EFL pre-university students at the pre-intermediate level to arrive at a homogenous research sample.



During the instruction, various multiple-choice cloze passages (Fowler & Coe, 1976) were provided for experimental and control groups. The experimental group (A) was dealing with gisting reading strategy, experimental group (B) was involving in contextual guessing and control group (C) received conventional reading strategies without focusing on gisting or contextual guessing reading strategies while all of the groups involved in taking cloze passages each week. At the end of the term the subjects' reading achievement was assessed through post-test period after 18 sessions of providing various multiple-choice cloze passages. A general multiple-choice cloze passage (Fowler & Coe, 1976) was given to examine the participants' comprehension in reading proficiency post-test. To ensure the internal consistency and the reliability of the pre and post-test, they were piloted on fifteen pre-university students of the same population. Kudar and Richardson (KR-21) was used to calculate the reliability coefficients. The reliability coefficient of the pre-test was ( $r=0.76$ ) and that of the post-test was ( $r=0.78$ ). These tests are presented in Appendices.

### ***3.3. Procedure***

The following steps were followed in the process of conducting the study. At the beginning of the course, a multiple-choice cloze passage test as a sample of reading proficiency test (Fowler & Coe, 1976), was administered to all three groups, two experimental and one control group, in their first session of reading course to ensure the homogeneity of the subjects. In order to increase the precision of the results and to control as many as extraneous factors as possible, the homogeneity of the instructional material, course objectives, whole-term syllabus and even the daily lesson planned were strictly controlled. The next step was to conduct the experimental treatment. This classroom based experimental study examined the effects of two different kinds of reading strategies: gisting and contextual guessing. In order to investigate the possible effects of these reading strategies on the learners' reading comprehension, the homogeneous participants were divided into three groups. Three groups worked on the same reading materials of the school textbook while the only difference which was the focus of the study was that the teacher conducted gisting and contextual guessing as reading comprehension strategies for group (A) and group (B) as the experimental

groups, respectively. Group (C) lacked such reading activities and received conventional reading activities. The treatment period on the experimental group lasted 10 weeks (two 60 minute sessions each week).

Over a period of two months (i.e. 18 sessions of instruction and two sessions for pre- test and post test) the same teacher gave a post-test including a multiple- choice cloze passage test as a sample of reading achievement test to for experimental and control groups at the end of the semester to consider which group performed efficiently. The experimental and control groups' performances on the multiple-choice cloze passage as a sample of reading proficiency test means were compared through one-way ANOVA. In the subsequent analysis, a reading proficiency post-test developed by Fowler and Coe (1976) was administered and the One-way ANOVA was utilized to compare the obtained adjusted means. After scoring, descriptive statistics was performed on the tests, including mean, standard deviation, and variance. Then to investigate the significant differences on the three groups' performances, One-way ANOVA and F-ratio were applied to the results of three groups' means in order to find out whether the possible differences were statistically significant. Finally, the post-hoc analysis of Scheffe test was conducted to determine the significant differences at the 0.05 level among the research groups' means.

The participants' performances were scored in the following way: each correct answer in the multiple choice questions received 0.5 point and each incorrect answer received 0 point and minus point was not considered. The total score given to pre-test and the post-test was also 20. This procedure was applied in the tests conducted during the present study through out the whole courses. Then, the participants' scores in both groups were calculated and subjected to the statistical analysis.

## **4. Results and discussion**

### ***4.1. Results of the pre-test stage***

In order to show the significant difference in the reading ability in experimental and control groups before providing any treatment, they took a multiple-choice cloze

passage as a sample of reading proficiency test. There were a total of 90 subjects in all three groups at this stage. The mean scores of both experimental and control groups were compared through One-way ANOVA. The mean and the standard deviation of the means are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. One-way ANOVA for comparing the performance of groups (pre-test)

Source of variation	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F
Between groups	0.47	2	0.23	0.04
Within groups	457.03	87	5.25	
Total	457.5	89		

The results indicated no significant difference between the groups in terms of reading ability of the subjects in pre-test reading achievement test at the beginning of the study since the F-observed was less than the F-critical. Thus it could be concluded that the three groups met the condition of homogeneity. In other words, there was not any significant difference among the groups regarding heterogeneity of reading comprehension level before research treatment period.

#### **4. 2. Results of the post-test stage**

The treatment was completely carried out after 10 weeks and the post- test that was three multiple-choice cloze passages as a sample of reading proficiency test. The results presented in Table 2 revealed that the treatment has been effective, since the F-observed was greater than the F-critical, i.e. the experimental groups have shown significantly better performance than the control group.

**Table 2. One-way ANOVA for comparing the performance of the groups (post-test)**

Source of variation	Sum of squares'	df	Mean square	F
Between groups	42.022	2	21.011	6.180*
Within groups	295.800	87	3.400	

Total	337.822	89		
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\*The difference is significant at ( $P < .05$ )

The mean score of the experimental group (A), which received gisting reading strategy as the treatment, was raised from 11.9 on the pre-test to 13.13 on the post-test, which showed an improvement in reading comprehension. The mean score of the experimental group (B), which received contextual guessing reading strategy as the treatment, was increased from 11.73 on the pre-test to 13.83 on the post-test which indicated an improvement more than what we observed in group (A). The control group's (C) mean score was improved from 11.86 to 12.16 showing 0.3 point of improvement. Consequently, the performance of each group on the pre-test with that of the same group on the post-test was compared through matched *t*-tests to investigate the difference between experimental and control groups before and after the treatment procedures. The results are provided in table 3.

Table 3. Matched *t*-tests comparing the performance of the groups (pre & post-tests)

Groups	N	Pre	Post	df	SD	t-observed
G A	30	11.90	13.13	29	0.28	4.39
G B	30	11.73	13.83	29	0.168	12.5
G C	30	11.86	12.16	29	0.28	1.07

The results in Table 3 indicated that the reading comprehension of both experimental groups improved significantly from the reading achievement pre-test to the post-test, since the observed *t*-value for both groups were much greater than the *t*-critical as opposed to that of the control group in which no significant improvement was observed. However, the improvement in the experimental group (B), who received contextual guessing reading strategy as the treatment, was more than that of the first experimental group who received gisting reading strategy as a treatment. In other words, observed *t*-value revealed that the mean score of the group (B) was greater than the other groups (A and C).

Table 4. Post-hoc Scheffe test for three groups' performance (post-test)

(I) group	(J) group	Mean	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
		Difference			Lower	Upper
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Lower Bound
C	A	-.96667	.47610	.133	-2.1524	.2190
	B	-1.66667*	.47610	.003	-2.8524	-.4810
A	C	.96667	.47610	.133	-.2190	2.1524
	B	-.70000	.47610	.344	-1.8857	.4857
B	C	1.66667*	.47610	.003	.4810	2.8524
	A	.70000	.47610	.344	-.4857	1.8857

\* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

The significant difference among the three groups' performance was estimated based on the statistical results of the post-hoc Scheffe test regarding the utilizing of the above reading strategies to take the cloze reading passages. The mean differences might lay between groups C and B, respectively. In other words, there is a significant difference between the group who utilized gisting and the group who manipulated contextual guessing reading strategies. In conclusion, contextual guessing reading strategy is the most effective reading strategy in this study.

#### **4.3. Discussion**

According to the result of the study, regarding statistical analyses, the answers to the research questions can be discussed in investigating the effects of gisting and contextual guessing reading strategies on students' performance in multiple-choice cloze tests among pre-intermediate Iranian EFL learners. Therefore, the answers to the research questions could be replied and discussed as follows:

**Question one:** To what extent do gisting and contextual guessing reading strategies improve pre-university learners' reading comprehension of cloze passages?

Based on the statistical results of the study gisting and contextual guessing reading strategies affect pre-university learners' reading comprehension based on the subjects' scores gained in the administering the cloze passages. However, the extent of improvement that occurs was not the same for both of them, that is, contextual guessing as a reading strategy would help learners, to a greater extent, to comprehend cloze passages better than those learners who received gisting as a reading strategy to comprehend cloze passages. The findings of this study also prove the Ahmad and Asraf's (2004) finding as well. Ahmad and Asraf conducted a research on the reading strategies used by second language learners in responding to English reading comprehension texts. Therefore, they found out the importance of cognitive contextual awareness facilitated reading comprehension.

Ozek's (2006) research revealed that one of the most effectively employed strategies was guessing the meaning of a word from the context. Therefore, the results of this study matched Ozek's findings which sized that cloze passages need to be completed through guessing reading strategy. Birjandi, Mosallanejad & Bagheridoust (2006) focused on questioning the meaning of a word or words before trying to paraphrase the sentence and making an inference, which is deemed to be bottom-up processing, characteristics of poor or less proficient readers' strategies. So guessing the meaning of the unknown words based on the context leads to better reading comprehension and helps the reader to become a much more professional one. The results of one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences between the type of reading strategies and learners' reading comprehension ability. A close examination of comprehension scores for each test indicated differences in reading comprehension by participants. ( $p < .05$ ).

**Question two:** Is there any significant difference between the type of reading strategies and learners' reading comprehension of cloze passages?

We can see a significant difference between the types of reading strategies conducted in this study based on the statistical result of the post-hoc Scheffe test. A significant

difference lies between the control group and contextual guessing group. So there is a significant difference between gisting and contextual guessing and it is shown based on this statistical analysis that contextual guessing can improve significantly the ability of learners in comprehending cloze passages and is regarded as very effective reading strategy in this study.

Anderson (1991) believed that there are no simple correlations or one-to-one relationships between particular strategies and successful or unsuccessful reading comprehension. In this study the researcher found that contextual guessing reading strategy was more effective than gisting reading strategy affecting learners' reading comprehension to perform on multiple choice cloze passages. On the other hand gisting as a reading strategy would help learners to take the tests of cloze passages better than those learners who receive conventional reading activities, and those students who receive conventional activities do not significantly show improvement in reading comprehension of cloze passages. Contextual guessing reading strategy is more successful and it maybe the result of focusing on context and contextual clues. It may be the result of special attention that was paid to the surrounding words of a gap to choose the best answer among the given items.

In control group (C), the poor performance of the students' comprehension of cloze passages may be due to the lack of instruction on the awareness raising of reading strategies taught by the EFL teacher in the classroom. In control group (C) there was no focus and emphasis on instructing reading strategies by the researcher. This can lead to different results in students' learning how to perform in cloze tests. The group (C) was not aware of these two reading strategies, so they did not apply them while performing a reading cloze text. Since there was no direct and specific attention and instruction from the EFL teacher's, the subjects did not pay enough attention to reading strategies. However, there was not guarantee whether they performed these reading strategies through experience. Those subjects who applied reading strategies in comprehending cloze passages may become better and more skillful readers since they used to apply reading strategies while reading a cloze passage in the classroom in general. This is in line with Kern's (1997, p. 2) idea which noted that "strategic reading is a prime characteristic of expert readers because it is woven into the very fabric of "reading for meaning". The subjects who applied

reading strategies might become motivated to find a kind of internal self-confidence which is the result of becoming familiar and aware of their practical advantage that may be experienced in the context of a cloze passage.

The subjects who applied gisting reading strategy might receive the advantage of being able to predict the purpose of the passage, the main topic, or message, and possibly some of the developing or supporting ideas. This gives them a head start as they embark on more focused reading (Brown, 2001, pp. 308-309), it might be perceived that gisting reading strategy predicts the purpose of the text and the attention is given to whole text not the details. On the other hand, contextual guessing puts a lot of emphasis on pre and post words of a sentence which is left blank. So it may be one of the reasons that the reader who is following contextual guessing strategy chooses the exact word for each blank and consequently comprehends better than a reader who applies gisting reading strategy.

The subjects who utilize the whole text to detect the main ideas of the text are receiving a lot of attention while in contextual guessing the words and the relationship among the words of a sentence are taken into consideration. Since some of the sentences of cloze passages are incomplete, the sentences must be paid a lot of attention to comprehend passages well.

The findings of this study can answer some parts of the demands raised by Singhal (2001, p. 8) who called for more studies, such as studies of reading strategies and metacognitive factors in L2 reading, because “many questions about reading comprehension and the reading process still remain”.

## **5. Conclusion**

The analysis of data revealed that contextual guessing and gisting led to significantly better performance of the subjects. Furthermore, the higher performance of the experimental groups, especially group (A) who received contextual guessing reading strategy revealed that contextual guessing is more effective than gisting. As a result it can be concluded that the contextual guessing and gisting reading strategies



have had positive effect on subjects' learning and teachers' instruction. This may be due to certain factors, as follows:

First, the cloze passages were of appropriate difficulty, announced well in advance and based on the course objectives. Therefore, the subjects had a better chance to become more acquainted with course objectives and areas of emphasis and probably benefited from the constructive role of such cloze passages in providing feedback and improving motivation.

Second, in an attempt to become more prepared, the students in experimental groups may have also benefited from class discussion regarding the cloze passages in subsequent sessions that pinpointed problematic areas of individual students.

Third, students focused on one reading strategy that had been introduced in detail by the researcher and drew their attention to comprehend the cloze passages based on that well introduced strategy. This helped them concentrate better than those students who had no defined reading strategy.

These studies may be suggested for further research: (1) in order to investigate the effect of gender on the application of reading strategies, a study can be done employing male participants or a study including one or two groups of male to examine the effect of gender in this area experimentally. In this regard, the Two-way ANOVA would be applicable to analyze the results of the study statistically, because it allows us to compare several group means simultaneously; (2) the optimal frequency of various reading strategies with regard to the number of sessions in a course that would cause the highest positive backwash effect is due to further research; (3) the optimal time allocation of reading strategies that would account for class-time constraints and result in the most beneficial backwash is also due to further investigation; (4) the exact and appropriate time and level of education to start teaching reading strategies regarding cloze passages is also due to further research; (5) the reason that the Iranian students are not very successful in doing cloze passages at high school level might be due to the lack of further research on optimizing EFL Learners' reading comprehension strategies; (6) other studies may be done in other areas with other and pedagogies as well as testing language skills; and (7) conducting this study may raise different results if administered to students with higher or lower educational levels. Similarly, after Brantmeier (2002) carried out her second language

reading strategy research at the secondary and university levels, she stressed that there remains further research to be done in this area, especially similar studies to obtain consistent results before generalizing to the whole population. The findings of this study may help her and other researchers conducting related studies to generalize their findings since the findings of this study may be for or against theirs’.

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Appendix: Pre & post-test scores for all control and experimental groups

S	Pre-test Group C	Post-test Group C	Pre-test Group A	Post-test Group A	Pre-test Group B	Post-test Group B
1	9	10	10	13	11	13
2	8	8	12	11	12	15
3	11	10	12	14	11	13
4	13	14	11	12	10	12
5	12	12	14	13	9	11
6	16	14	13	13	8	12
7	14	13	15	15	9	12
8	10	12	17	18	13	15
9	13	13	13	15	10	12
10	12	11	14	14	14	14
11	11	13	10	12	14	16
12	9	10	9	10	12	15
13	10	11	8	12	11	12
14	12	13	7	11	16	18
15	13	12	15	16	14	16
16	17	15	13	14	13	15
17	15	14	15	15	14	15
18	13	14	14	13	14	16
19	11	10	13	12	13	16
20	15	12	11	15	12	13
21	15	17	10	13	11	12
22	11	12	11	14	9	13
23	9	10	13	15	10	12
24	9	11	14	15	12	14
25	10	13	10	12	13	15
26	11	12	10	12	10	13
27	13	12	9	9	12	13
28	13	11	8	10	13	14
29	12	15	13	12	11	14
30	9	11	13	14	11	14