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# ENHANCING IRAQI EFL PREPARATORY SCHOOL STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION THROUGH KWHL CHART STRATEGY

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## ABSTRACT

*This study aims to investigate the influence of the implementation of the KWHL chart strategy on enhancing Iraqi preparatory school students' reading comprehension and their involvement in classroom activities. This study employed an experimental method design; there were two classes that were selected to be samples of the study: one class of control group and one class of experimental group. The experimental group consisted of 35 students, whereas the control group consisted of 30 students. The experimental group received instruction based on the KWHL chart strategy, which helped students to organize their thoughts in this graphic organizer strategy, while the control group was taught using the traditional methods. Both groups completed a pre-test and post-test to measure the reading comprehension gains. Statistical analysis revealed that the experimental group demonstrated a significantly higher improvement in reading comprehension compared to the control group. It indicated that the implementation of the KWHL strategy had a large effect on students' reading comprehension. It can be confirmed that the students' reading comprehension skills could be developed through the implementation of the KWHL strategy. The results from the classroom observation and the post-test of the experimental group revealed that each step of the KWHL strategy contributed to improving reading comprehension and developing students' engagement in classroom activities.*

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**KEYWORDS:** KWHL Chart Strategy, Reading Comprehension, Iraqi Preparatory School Students.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is an essential skill for learners of English. In fact, for most learners it is the most important skill to master to ensure success in learning (Anderson, 2004). Reading is a process in which readers combine information from a text with their own background knowledge to construct meaning. Reading is a fluent process, and the goal is comprehension. Strategic reading is defined as the ability of the reader to use a wide variety of readings and accomplish a purpose for reading. Good readers know what to do when they encounter difficulties. Fluent reading is defined as the ability to read at an appropriate rate with adequate comprehension. Meaning exists beyond both the reader and the text. The reader's background knowledge integrates with the text to create the meaning. The text, the reader, fluency, and strategies combined define the act of reading (Anderson, 2003). Reading foreign language texts is usually difficult. Factors such as insufficient vocabulary and grammar knowledge, ineffective learning strategies, lack of prior knowledge, and failure in grasping the main idea contribute to such difficulty (Hart & Risely, 2003; Koda, 2007; Nor & Rashid, 2018). Moreover, reading is a complex mental process that involves many critical skills such as thinking, evaluating, judging, imagining, reasoning, and problem-solving (Hoover & Gough, 1990). Reading strategy instruction is essential to using reading activities in the language classroom.

Instructors can help their students become effective readers by teaching them how to use strategies before, during, and after reading (Anderson, 2015). In Iraq, English is taught as a foreign language and as an academic subject; therefore, unlike contexts in which English functions as a second language, it does not play an essential role in everyday life (Borg and Capstick, 2024). According to Anderson (2015). Instruction in reading strategies is not an add-on but rather an integral part of the use of reading activities in the language classroom. Instructors can help their students become effective readers by teaching them how to use strategies before, during, and after reading. However, the teaching of English in primary, secondary, and non-formal education remains largely characterized by teacher-centered approaches, in which learners often assume a passive role. Classroom instruction is dominated by grammar-focused practices, and the most typical activities include reading aloud and vocabulary exercises, while opportunities for meaningful spoken interaction are limited (Borg and Capstick, 2024).

Based on the problems above, the KWHL, which

is adapted from the KWL strategy (Ogle, 1986), is essential for improving student reading comprehension because it teaches them to actively develop and apply their background knowledge, or schema. These four steps are cognitive procedure, identifying what they already know, determining what they want to learn, and recalling how they find what they have learned transform the reading of expository material into an active process. By using this method, students learn to ask meaningful questions, focus on the most important information, and reflect on their learning, which ultimately allows them to better organize and synthesize information from various sources (Wiesendanger, 2001). The KWHL strategy develops autonomous learning (Usman et al., 2019), and this is what we need in our Iraqi schools, especially in large classes. Large classes consume much time and effort. Using a KWL strategy may save a lot of time and effort and lead to the creation of more learner-centered instruction and autonomous learners.

This study aims to investigate whether using the KWHL chart strategy improves the reading comprehension of Iraqi EFL preparatory students.

**Based on the aim of the current study, the research hypotheses are:**

1.  $H_0$  (Null Hypothesis): There is no statistically significant difference at the ( $\alpha \leq 0.05$ ) level in reading comprehension performance between Iraqi EFL fifth preparatory students who receive instruction using the KWHL chart strategy and those who receive traditional instruction.
2.  $H_1$  (Alternative Hypothesis): Implementing the KWHL chart strategy will lead to significantly higher reading comprehension performance among Iraqi EFL fifth preparatory students compared to traditional instruction.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Reading Comprehension

According to Mckee (2012), reading is vital to an individual's personal and pedagogical growth. It is the concept of understanding that can be even more important. Reading is not enough; an individual must be able to analyze and reorganize ideas and information. One person needs the ability to understand what the writer tries to communicate. Reading comprehension is a complex, multiple-task capacity. These processes were divided into two main types, equally difficult: processes at a lower level and higher levels (Stoller, 2022). The lower level includes the detection of words, graphemes, and

others, while the skills at a higher level include syntax, semantics, and others. Students need reading comprehension skills to succeed both in academic and personal lives. In the academic life of students, reading is the basis for understanding all academic content (Clarke et al., 2011). Reading comprehension is also an essential skill that individuals need to be successful in their personal lives (Blair et al., 2007). For instance, to be successful, individuals need to understand the basic text that appears in utility bills, housing contracts, career applications, and newsletters (Hoch, 2015). In addition, individuals need reading comprehension skills to be able to have and maintain a job and successfully engage in different daily activities. In addition, individuals who can recognize what they are reading can safely live their lives and continue to gain socially and intellectually (Hoch et al., 2015).

Reading is essential not only for enhancing learners' English proficiency but also for facilitating the enhancement of their knowledge and comprehension of the world; reading ought to be pleasurable and can assist learners in cultivating their imagination. Reading furnishes learners with information for discussion, recall, and writing, thereby facilitating the practice of speaking, listening,

and writing skills (Anderson, 2015).

Oakhill et al. (2015) demonstrate that reading proficiency is contingent upon the interplay of the two components. Reading is defined as the product of word reading and language comprehension ( $R=WR \times LC$ ), indicating that it is not solely dependent on language comprehension but rather on the combination of both factors. If either component (word reading or language comprehension) is absent, overall reading ability will be null. Therefore, if a reader lacks the ability to read words or possesses no language comprehension skills, they are unable to read. An example of the essentiality of both elements, word-reading abilities and language comprehension, arises from a narrative regarding John Milton's approach to reading Greek texts following his blindness. Milton instructed his daughters to master the decoding of the ancient Greek alphabet. They were subsequently able to recite the texts in ancient Greek to their father; however, they lacked comprehension due to their unfamiliarity with the language, while Milton possessed understanding but was unable to decipher the words. Consequently, the daughters contributed reading proficiency, while Milton supplied language comprehension abilities.

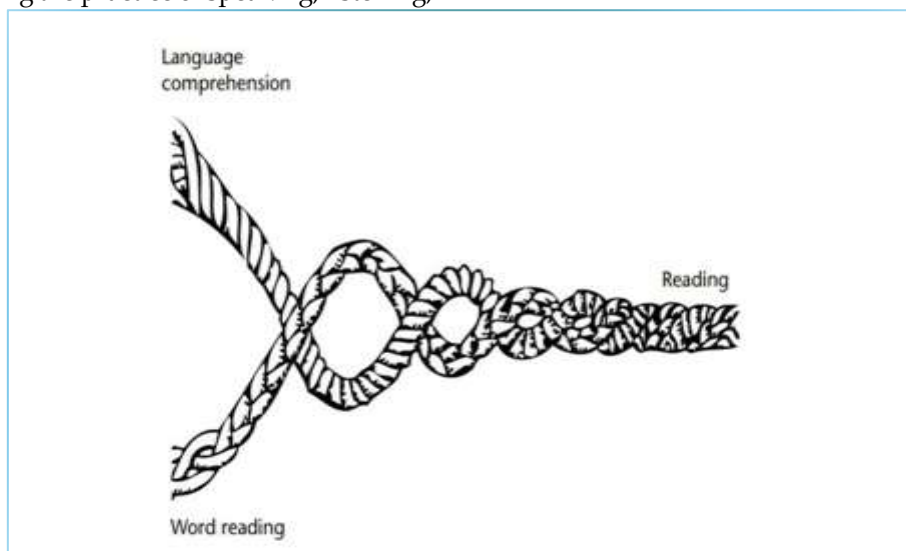


Figure 1: The Reading Rope: Components of Language Comprehension and Word Recognition.

Note: Adapted From Scarborough (2001).

## 2.2. Types Of Reading Comprehension

### 2.2.1. Literal Comprehension

It denotes the initial tier of reading comprehension, considered the most basic and elementary level of understanding. Also, literal comprehension identifies the straight meaning of the text, such as facts, times, vocabulary, dates, and locations. This emphasizes concepts and information

that are clearly delineated within a context. In addition, the literal level focuses on reading and hearing the words or viewing the images. It contains important and basic information; with guidance, readers can distinguish between the important and less important ideas (Nuttal, 1996).

### 2.2.2. Inferential Comprehension

Inferential comprehension, the subsequent level,

denotes a reader's capacity to comprehend information that is inferred or implied within a text. If a text indicates that a character is wielding an umbrella while traversing a street on an overcast day, one can deduce that the character anticipates precipitation. Inferential comprehension surpasses literal comprehension in complexity, as it necessitates the integration and manipulation of textual information alongside the reader's background knowledge (Barrett's Taxonomy, as cited in Clymer, 1968).

### 2.2.3. Critical Comprehension

The critical level aims to evaluate the printed material by comparing the discovered ideas with established standards and drawing conclusions about their validity and appropriateness. The students are asked to express their judgment on the worth of materials or about the writer's intention, perspective, and style (Manzo, 1995).

All three types of comprehension are essential and must be cultivated. Nonetheless, numerous educational environments and literacy initiatives typically inadequately address inferential and critical comprehension. These levels are difficult to assess and do not facilitate the conventional "teacher poses questions and student responds" format of comprehension discussions that typically accompany reading lessons. Nonetheless, emphasis on inferential and critical understanding is conducive and fosters the advanced cognitive processes typically observed in high-achieving classrooms (Brassell & Rasinski, 2008).

### 2.3. Kwhl Chart Strategy

A KWHL chart (Know-Wonder-How-Learned) is

a type of graphic organizer that functions as a matrix for planning and information collection. This is an instructional activity created by Donna Ogle in 1986 that functions as a model for active reading comprehension. KWHL charts are effective instruments for identifying existing knowledge, formulating an investigative plan for a problem or topic, and encapsulating newly obtained knowledge and abilities (Prairie Wetlands Learning Center, n.d.). According to Jennings and Caulfield (2005), the KWHL strategy seeks to assist students in utilizing their obtained knowledge. It is a modification of the classic strategy known as KWL. McKnight (2010) asserts that KWHL is an adapted KWL that integrates primary and secondary resources for research. Students can integrate existing information while formulating a plan to investigate a topic. Moss and Loh (2010) assert that this strategy enables students to engage their prior knowledge on a subject and systematically identify information while reading.

Moss and Loh (2010) assert that KWHL charts aim to stimulate interest regarding a text, activate prior knowledge, and engage students in formulating their inquiries about a subject and identifying relevant information sources. They also offer documentation of students' learning outcomes from their reading. Mason et al. (1991) and Tharp and Gallimore (1989) assert that proficient readers have both the inclination and capability to contemplate their reading and engage in discussions about their insights with others; they also take pleasure in posing numerous questions and reacting to the material they have consumed. They pose inquiries regarding themselves, the writers, and the texts they examine. Critically evaluating their reading material is, in fact, fundamental to their reading process.

*Table 1: The Kwhl Framework.*

K	W	H	L
Documentation of students' prior knowledge.	Documentation of students' inquiries and curiosities.	Documentation of the methods to attain the desired objectives.	Documentation of acquired knowledge or accomplishments.

#### 2.3.1. Advantages Of the KWHL Chart Strategy

On the side of the learners, this strategy, according to Ogle (1986), helps them elicit prior knowledge of the topic of the text; set a purpose of reading; monitor and assess their comprehension; expand ideas beyond the text; enhance the memory of the reader to retain information and boost the reader's ability to link different types of information; and motivate them to get interested in reading and developing their own inquiries.

On the side of the teachers, the KWHL strategy is very beneficial. According to Opp-Backmen and

Klinghammer (2006), this strategy allows the teachers to evaluate learners' prior knowledge and interests. In addition, it allows them to evaluate what has been learned. Moreover, the KWHL strategy stimulates background knowledge and provides an opportunity for teachers and learners to evaluate whether this previous evidence is reliable and valid or not. According to Holmes & Roser (1987), developing effective reading lessons is highly dependent on the teacher's awareness of what his/her students know and don't know about the subject of the text. Therefore, they should provide specific information about the topic to be read to

compile and construct a background on the topic. Scott (2008) highlights another advantage of KWHL strategy. Accessing students' previous experiences helps teachers encourage learners to have objectives for reading text. Attached to the above-mentioned advantages of KWHL strategy, Fritz (2002) confirms that the use of this strategy improves the quality and quantity of connections between the teacher, learner, and the text.

#### 2.4. Empirical Studies on KWHL Strategy in EFL Context

To evaluate the practical efficacy of metacognitive reading frameworks, several empirical investigations have been conducted within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environment. For instance, AlAdwani et al. (2022) demonstrated that the structural application of the KWL-plus method significantly optimized reading performance among primary EFL learners in Kuwait by activating their metacognitive strategies, shifting them from passive decoders to active readers who systematically monitor their comprehension. Their pedagogical outcomes align with a broader consensus in Middle Eastern EFL research; studies by Amree and Alnatoor (2006) as well as Ismail and Tawalbeh (2015) have historically corroborated that metacognitive tracking tools are highly practical for improving textual comprehension and regulating self-directed learning.

Crucially, a relevant baseline study focusing strictly on the expanded four-column framework was conducted by Sari (2012), who empirically investigated the effect of using the KWHL strategy on the reading comprehension of descriptive text at the senior high school level. Utilizing a quasi-experimental non-equivalent control group design, the quantitative findings obtained through an independent sample t-test revealed a statistically

significant difference in students' mean scores, proving that the comprehensive KWHL scaffolding systematically enhanced secondary learners' capacity to identify detailed textual information and extract main ideas compared to traditional methods.

Furthermore, empirical evidence presented by Riswanto et al. (2014) highlighted that EFL students instructed via metacognitive scaffolding consistently outperform those subjected to traditional, teacher-centered rote learning, noting that such strategies actively foster a reflective classroom atmosphere. While these regional and international studies collectively validate the foundational success of metacognitive graphic organizers across various stages, the current investigation advances this line of inquiry. By implementing the expanded KWHL chart strategy within Iraqi preparatory schools, this study explores how the explicit 'How' (H) column reinforces learners' metacognitive awareness and autonomy, directly addressing the localized classroom management constraints and comprehension gaps that traditional models often overlook.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Research Design

This is a quantitative study in which a pretest-posttest experimental design was adopted to investigate the influence of implementing the KWHL chart strategy on enhancing Iraqi EFL 5th preparatory school students' reading comprehension. In this study, the KWHL chart strategy served as the independent variable, while the students' reading comprehension achievement was the dependent variable. Two groups were involved: the experimental group, which was taught using the KWHL strategy, and the control group, which followed the conventional instructional method.

*Table 1: The Experimental Design of This Study*

Group	Test	No. of Students	Methods	Test
Experimental	Pretest	35	KWHL	Posttest
Control	Pretest	30	Conventional Method	Posttest

#### 3.2. Population And Sample

The sample implies a smaller, manageable subset utilized by researchers to infer and deduce conclusions regarding the overall population (Taherdoost, 2018; Bhardwaj, 2019). The population of this study comprised fifth preparatory school students in Babylon Province, from this population, a purposive sample of 65 students was selected from two comparable classes at the same school in Babylon, and the sample was divided into the

experimental group (n = 35), taught using the KWHL chart strategy, and the control group (n = 30), taught using traditional reading methods.

#### 3.3. Data Collection Instrument

The main instrument employed for data collection was a reading comprehension test developed by the researcher. The test comprised two components: a pretest to evaluate the initial reading comprehension levels of both groups prior to the intervention and a

posttest to measure the advancement following the application of the instructional interventions. The test was created to correspond with the cognitive levels of Bloom's Taxonomy of educational objectives (remembering, understanding, application, and analysis). The assessment had multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions necessitating student responses. The instructional intervention was executed over a duration of two months.

### 3.4. Validity Of the Instrument

Face Validity: A panel of specialists in English as a foreign language and professors of English language education from several universities assessed the test to ensure face validity. They evaluated the content's suitability for Iraqi EFL students, along with its clarity and linguistic quality.

Content Validity: The alignment of test items with the EFL curriculum objectives set by the Iraqi Ministry of Education confirmed content validity. The test encompassed reading comprehension skills such as inference, vocabulary, major idea identification, and overall understanding. Prior to final administration, modifications were implemented based on expert feedback.

### 3.5. Test Reliability

The researcher used this approach, based on the

inter-item correlation within the test, to assess its reliability. McDonald's Omega ( $\omega$ ) is one of the most robust and contemporary formulas for assessing the internal consistency of scales. Using this strategy, dependability was determined by applying the McDonald's Omega formula to the students' scores. The outcome produced a high reliability coefficient for both the pre-test and post-test. Specifically, the pretest recorded an omega value of 0.919, while the posttest recorded 0.958, indicating an excellent degree of dependability and internal consistency for the instrument.

## 4. PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS

An Independent-Samples A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to examine whether there was a statistical difference between the two groups in the results. The test assesses whether, given sampling variability, the mean ranks of groups differ beyond what is expected by chance. The descriptive statistics, such as sample size (N) and mean ranks, along with the U-value, Z-statistic, and significance level, were presented for the comparison and allowed for evaluation of group differences and support for subsequent interpretation of the study hypotheses. The following table provides a systematic arrangement and exhibits the numerical data derived from the statistical analysis conducted in this study.

**Table 2: Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test Results.**

Group	N.	Mean Rank	Group statistics			
			Mann-Whitney U	Z-Value	Level of Sig.	Asymp.Sig(2-tailed)
EG	35	46.69	46.000	-6.308	0.05	.000
CG	30	17.03				

To determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the EG and the CG on the measured outcome, an independent samples Mann-Whitney U test was used. The mean rank for the EG was 46.69, while the mean rank for the CG was 17.03. The findings showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the groups ( $U = 46.000$ ,  $Z = -6.308$ ,  $p < .001$ , 2-tailed). According to the alternative hypothesis, the EG performed noticeably better than the CG, indicating that the intervention had a meaningful impact on the outcome variable.

The researcher also used the difference method (also called the gain in score method); this method is one of the most common methods in analyzing the

results of experiments. It is based on simplifying the data from the pre-test and post-test by transforming bivariate (pre-test, post-test) into univariate via the relationship:  $\text{Difference} = \text{Post-test} - \text{Pre-test}$ . The resulting scores, called the response variable, can be obtained from the post-test calculated minus the pre-test and vice versa (Bonate, 2000). Differences are then compared using an appropriate statistical test. One of the most important advantages of this method is the ease of interpreting the transformed variable, either a net gain or loss in score. Based on the above, the researcher subtracted the pre-test scores from the post-test scores to obtain the transformed variable (Gain of Scores).

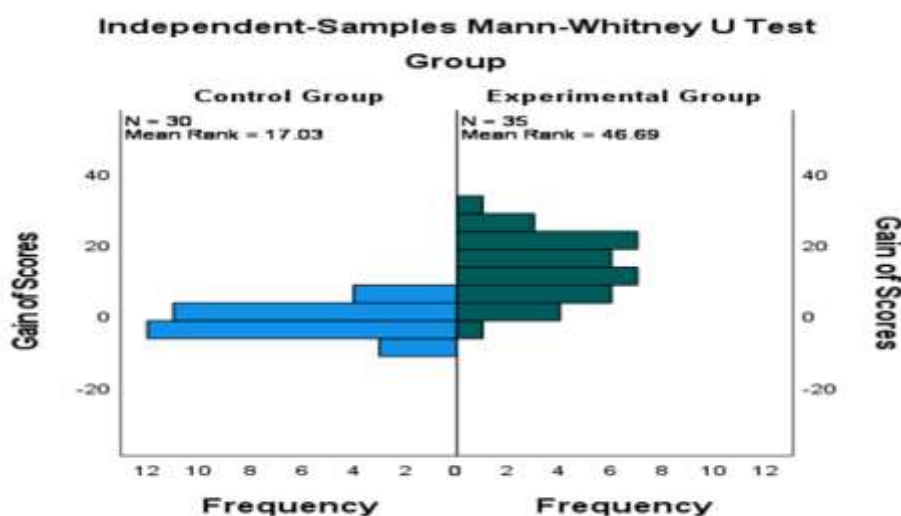


Figure 2: Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test: Gain of Scores Across Groups.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Reviewing the results obtained from the statistical analysis, the researcher found a significant difference between the participants of the experimental group and those of the control group. This confirms the achievement of the study's primary aim, which was to investigate the influence of implementing the KWHL chart strategy on enhancing Iraqi EFL fifth preparatory school students' reading comprehension performance.

These results highlight the necessity of shifting away from traditional, teacher-centered methods that focus on literal translation and rote memorization. Instead, the findings advocate for active, student-centered strategies that support learners in comprehending complex reading passages. By applying the KWHL strategy, students' participation increased significantly. The researcher facilitated this by dividing learners into small groups, creating a supportive environment for collaborative learning. This approach was particularly effective in addressing individual differences, as students with lower proficiency levels felt encouraged by their peers to participate in the W column (What I want to know), thereby reducing learning anxiety. To stimulate curiosity and activate prior knowledge, the researcher utilized realia and short educational videos before the students filled the first column (K). This instructional scaffolding aligns with schema theory, which views reading comprehension as an active, interactive process where readers interpret new information by connecting it to existing cognitive structures. Furthermore, the H column (How to find out)

successfully bridged the gap between curiosity and information acquisition.

Finally, the process culminated in the L column (What I learned), where students summarized what they had learned. This phase is considered a vital metacognitive process, as it requires students to reflect on their understanding and engage in self-evaluation. Consequently, the KWHL strategy was more than just a reading tool; it functioned as a cognitive framework that empowered students to become independent and reflective learners. The current results correspond with the previous studies that emphasized the importance of using effective cognitive strategies that boost students' reading comprehension as well as exploit their prior knowledge. These studies highlighted the need for instructors to focus on student-centered approaches that can increase students' participation as well as allow them to practice their language.

The positive impact of the KWHL strategy on reading comprehension observed in the present study aligned with the findings of Nair (2020), as both the previous and the present study emphasized strategies that foster deeper comprehension. While Nair (2020) utilized the KWL chart as a graphic organizer to engage year-4 ESL pupils, the present study concentrated specifically on the expanded KWHL chart to enhance the performance of Iraqi EFL preparatory school students. Both studies highlighted the importance of activating prior knowledge and cognitively engaging methods in improving reading achievement.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

**Based on the outcomes of this investigation, the following conclusions can be drawn:**

1. KWHL strategy is an effective strategy for learning and teaching reading comprehension for Iraqi EFL preparatory students.
2. The KWHL strategy is very effective in terms of providing teachers with a great deal of information about how students approach reading comprehension and their learning strategies. It is a beneficial feedback tool for

both the teacher and the learner.

3. KWHL strategy contributes to autonomous learning, coaching students to practice the language.
4. KWHL strategy helps create autonomous learners.
5. KWHL forms can be used as checklists for self and peer evaluation. It provides a reflection on what the learner has achieved and what is left to be achieved.

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