

## ENHANCING ENGLISH READING PROFICIENCY: STRATEGY TRANSFER FOR TELUGU MEDIUM STUDENTS

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**Abstract:** This paper focused on the English reading skills of Telugu medium students who completed their secondary school or intermediate education in Telugu medium and joined in English medium for their undergraduate. The primary aim of this research was to assess English reading fluency skills and investigate the potential for enhancing these skills among Telugu speakers through the application of strategy transfer. By using short stories as an intervention for them in both Telugu and English with the same theme as the reading prompt. The findings of this study are the students who came from the Telugu medium background improved their reading skills through strategy transfer from their dominant (Telugu) language to English, they understood the usage of dominant language knowledge in their second language learning.

**Key Terms:** Dominant language, English/second language learning, reading skills, short stories, and strategies transfer.

### **Introduction:**

Language serves as the primary conduit for human communication, enabling individuals to articulate their thoughts and emotions. Its absence would have profoundly altered the course of history. The acquisition of language skills is a developmental process aimed at enhancing one's communicative proficiency. An individual's mother tongue, or native language, typically represents their initial linguistic exposure. Subsequently, individuals may embark on learning a second language, enabling them to engage in effective communication with those who speak it as their primary language or within comparable sociocultural environments. The emergence of one's primary language resembles an innate instinct that is triggered at birth and further developed through exposure. The choice to acquire a second language is frequently motivated by a specific communication requirement. Proficient English communication encompasses four essential modalities: reading, writing, speaking, and listening, applicable to both native speakers and individuals learning English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Individuals naturally possess varying aptitudes for different skills. Some may excel in English conversational abilities, providing insightful commentary and entertaining perspectives when responding to others' arguments, while feeling apprehensive about writing a brief cover letter. Conversely, there are those who are introverted and may struggle in social situations, yet possess strong writing skills. It's important to note that these skills are interconnected, as improving receptive skills, like reading, can enhance overall writing abilities.

This research delves into the transfer of skills from one's native language, such as Telugu, to the process of learning English, particularly for students who have been educated in Telugu from their early years and are now embarking on undergraduate studies in a mainstream higher education setting, such as a university. English language instruction is a common feature in these universities, aimed at fostering effective communication skills, particularly in scholarly contexts.

The primary focus of this study centers on enhancing the English reading skills of Telugu-medium students, recognizing the potential benefits of cross-linguistic skill transfer. The following are the objectives of the present study:

### **Objectives:**

To find out if there is any improvement in English reading skills through strategy transfer from the dominant language.

1. To ascertain the presence of any challenges associated with reading techniques (specifically skimming and scanning) in the English language.
2. To investigate the methods employed by students when engaging in reading practices (skimming and scanning) in their dominant language, Telugu.
3. To ascertain the degree of similarity between the strategies employed for reading (skimming and scanning) in English and those used in the dominant language, Telugu.
4. To assess whether there is an observable influence of strategy transfer from the dominant language, Telugu, to English.

### **Research Questions:**

1. Are there any challenges associated with the practice of reading (specifically, skimming and scanning) in the English language?
2. What techniques are employed when reading (specifically, skimming and scanning) in the predominant language, Telugu?
3. Do the reading strategies employed in English align with those utilized in the primary language, Telugu?
4. Does the application of reading strategies transferred from the primary language, Telugu, have an impact on English language skills?

### **Literature Review:**

The expression 'dominant language' refers to a favoured means of communication, often the mother tongue (Casanova, 2013). First/dominant language speakers are individuals who have been exposed to their familial language from infancy, whether solely or in conjunction with the majority language. The acquisition of the first/dominant language occurs within a naturalistic setting primarily through auditory input (Montrul, S. & Ionin, T., 2012). The dominant language is defined as the one most frequently employed in spheres such as education, government, and other official capacities (Fishman, 1972).

In the process of language learning, learners must engage with all four essential language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This study primarily focuses on certain reading skills and explores the potential transfer of these language-independent skills to English. To establish this context, it is pertinent to briefly review key studies in this domain. Reading, as one of the four language skills, falls under the category of receptive skills because it entails responding to written text rather than producing it. Reading involves the decoding and comprehension of written text at various levels, including words, sentences, and entire passages. Furthermore, reading reinforces the learner's proficiency in other language skills. It is a multifaceted communicative process that involves receiving, interpreting, and responding to written words. The reading process can be encapsulated as Decoding - Comprehending - Analysing - Responding. Reading begins with the rapid, instinctive visual recognition of language, irrespective of the context (Adams, 1990). It occurs naturally, much like other aspects of comprehensible existence (Smith, 2004), involving the continuous practice of decoding words, comprehending and analysing them, and providing responses.

Reading transcends mere word recognition and passive comprehension; it involves the ability to assimilate knowledge and respond effectively, demanding continuous practice (Lamri, 2015). This depth of engagement necessitates the application of diverse linguistic, systemic, and schematic competencies (Lamri, 2015). The notions of systemic and schematic knowledge will be further explored in subsequent sections on reading models. This underscores that the focal point of reading shifts toward comprehension, encompassing the grasp of structure and organization. To bolster fluency, students must engage in regular reading practice (Belmeki, 2009). Belmeki (2009) emphasizes that cohesive devices are frequently employed to convey the logical structure of a paragraph and facilitate the reader's navigation through the text (Belmeki, 2009). Among the four language skills, reading and speaking are productive, while writing and listening are receptive skills in any language.

Goodman's (1996) research has provided valuable insights into the intricate nature of reading practices. Reading is a cognitive process involving the acquisition and construction of meaning from written text. It is a dynamic activity that facilitates the connection with existing knowledge while anticipating and generating new meanings. When readers engage with text in a manner that aligns with their comfort and familiarity, they develop strategies aimed at enhancing their reading skills. There are four primary strategies that readers employ when receiving and comprehending written material, which include:

1. **Decoding:** Decoding involves the transformation of coded messages into understandable information. It encompasses the comprehension of written language, necessitating the ability to accurately recognize words, grasp their meanings, and comprehend their contextual usage. Proficiency in the language being used is a prerequisite for understanding written messages. The complexity of the message and its contextual environment can significantly influence the reader's interpretation. Certain meta-skills of reading, such as skimming and scanning, may remain

consistent across languages, whereas skills like syntax and vocabulary tend to be language-specific.

2. **Comprehension:** Comprehension, as a crucial aspect of reading, involves grasping the meaning conveyed by the text. It requires readers to not only recognize individual words but also understand how these words interact to convey ideas, information, or narratives effectively. Effective comprehension is contingent upon linguistic competence and an ability to connect textual content to the reader's existing knowledge and experiences.

3. **Text Analysis:** Readers engage in text analysis to dissect and examine the structure, content, and elements of a given text. This involves breaking down the text into its constituent parts, such as paragraphs, sentences, and words, to understand how they contribute to the overall meaning. Text analysis aids in identifying themes, tone, and rhetorical devices employed by the author, enriching the reader's understanding of the material.

4. **Interpretation of Responses:** The interpretation of responses pertains to the reader's ability to make sense of and respond to the text emotionally, intellectually, or critically. It encompasses the reader's reactions, reflections, and assessments of the content. Effective interpretation of responses enables readers to engage with the text at a deeper level, forming opinions, drawing inferences, and evaluating the text's significance.

Hence, reading is a multifaceted cognitive activity that involves decoding, comprehension, text analysis, and the interpretation of responses. Proficiency in these strategies is essential for readers to effectively engage with written material, irrespective of the language or context in which it is presented (Goodman, 1996).

As per Krashen's findings (1981), learners' proficiency in their native language (L1) can result in errors in their second language (L2) performance, underscoring the importance of incorporating an English context within the English language classroom. It has been determined that the extent of L1 usage in the classroom should be determined based on the learners' proficiency in the L2, with the aim of not hindering their exposure to the second language. Integrating the first language into the instructional approach enhances the program's interactivity and engagement for the students. Once a cognitive pattern is established in the brain, it becomes ingrained and influences language expression. The L1 plays a pivotal role in shaping thinking patterns, and these cognitive patterns can either intentionally or unintentionally impact L2 learning. Many L1 concepts, thinking styles, and language habits are firmly established in learners' minds prior to L2 acquisition. Typically, learners employ their mother tongue to aid in comprehending and acquiring the L2. In order to facilitate students' English proficiency, educators can intentionally use the students' native language as a scaffold in the classroom. In such a context, the languages used in the language school should be considered interconnected rather than separate entities. To achieve this, a natural connection between the two languages is imperative. Drawing on research conducted in the Indian context, Durairajan (2016) suggests a variety of strategies for leveraging L1 proficiency for both teaching literature and honing the four language skills. For enhancing writing skills, homogeneous

L1 classes can collaborate in organizing, planning, and brainstorming as a group. Once the ideational groundwork is laid, students can be encouraged to seek out equivalent English words and proceed to write their essays in English. Feedback can also be provided in the students' native language (Durairajan, 2016). Thus, to enhance these skills through the transfer of dominant language abilities to English as a second language, specific strategies should be employed for easy access to these skills. In light of the research focus and objectives, it is essential to examine appropriate language learning strategies, as they constitute a central aspect of this study. Various academics have endeavoured to classify learning strategies, particularly in descriptive studies aimed at documenting the multifaceted variations and sometimes ambiguous definitions of learners' self-reported techniques. In accordance with the requirements of this study, Oxford's model (1990) has been adopted to investigate reading strategies in English. She has proposed two categories of strategies—one for English speakers seeking to learn any language as a second language and another for non-English speakers aspiring to learn English as their second language.

In this study, the researcher employed Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) model. The study followed a structured process:

1. Learners were initially tasked with engaging in practical language activities without teacher guidance.
2. Emphasis was placed on fostering greater self-direction, and the benefits of suggesting and demonstrating additional effective strategies were communicated to students, ensuring they comprehended the rationale behind strategy use.
3. Adequate time was allocated for students to practice the new techniques within language activities, with demonstrations of how these techniques could be applied to various tasks.
4. Learners were given the autonomy to choose the strategies they deemed suitable for achieving their language learning objectives, and they were provided with opportunities to practice these techniques with new assignments.
5. Support was offered to students in evaluating their progress toward becoming more responsible and self-directed learners. They were guided on how to assess the effectiveness of their strategy use (Oxford, 1990).

### **Methodology:**

This study is dedicated to enhancing the English reading proficiency of students who have previously received their higher secondary education in Telugu medium and subsequently transitioned to English medium instruction for their undergraduate studies. The research sample, consisting of 20 students, was drawn from a central university. In the pedagogical approach adopted, culturally relevant and age-appropriate stories were employed as reading prompts.

The fundamental premise underpinning this investigation is the presumption that these students possess strong language skills in their native language, Telugu. They instinctively employ these skills, both consciously and unconsciously, when engaging in activities conducted in that language. However, they may not be fully aware that they can apply similar language skills and

strategies, or perhaps only a subset of them, when operating in another language, such as English, within a comparable context. The primary objective of this study is to facilitate the deliberate utilization of Reading Comprehension (RC) strategies, specifically skimming and scanning techniques, in the process of reading in their native language. Furthermore, this research seeks to ascertain whether these students employ the same RC strategies when reading English stories. Ultimately, this study aims to explore the potential for transferring reading skills from Telugu to English through the medium of short story RC exercises.

In this research, one Telugu-TS story (Subrahmanyam, 2016) and three English-ES1, ES2, ES3 culturally relevant stories featuring adult characters were utilized. Equivalent stories were selected in both English and Telugu, ensuring similarity in content and cognitive demands across both languages. Following the reading of each story in a sequential fashion in each language, students were tasked with an RC exercise to assess their utilization of reading comprehension strategies, specifically skimming and scanning.

The study participants (n=20) selected for this research are multilingual individuals proficient in Telugu (high proficiency), English (limited proficiency), and Hindi / Urdu / Lambadi languages. While Telugu is their dominant language, the participants perceive themselves as not fully proficient in English, citing a lack of certain skills that hinder their English reading abilities. Over a span of five weeks, the researcher conducted weekly 2-hour classes to instruct the students.

In addition to the texts and tasks, two research instruments were employed in this study: the researcher's diary and semi-structured interviews conducted with the students upon completing the teaching sessions. These instruments were used to corroborate and triangulate the findings obtained from the students' RC responses to the stories.

The ensuing discussion provides an overview of the entire study, a concise description of the participants' performance, an analysis of their responses, and, wherever feasible, supplementary insights drawn from the researcher's diary.

**Step 1:** The participants were provided with a text stimulus (TS) by the researcher, and they were then instructed to read this text as part of the reading comprehension (RC) task, with a time limit of one hour for their responses. During the task, twelve of the students employed the skimming and scanning strategies, while three students specifically followed the scanning strategy. The utilization of these strategies, whether conscious or unconscious, was observed by the researcher and documented in the research diary, although this information was not disclosed to the students at this juncture.

**Step 2:** Following the completion of the task in Telugu through TS, the researcher administered ES1 to the students and allowed a one-day interval for preparation to perform task RC in English. In this particular task, it was observed that twelve students did not employ either of the recommended strategies, namely skimming and scanning. Among them, three students did not utilize the scanning strategy but successfully merged events within the task. Remarkably, five out of the twenty students did not employ any strategy at all. The researcher documented these

observations in the diary, leading to the understanding that a significant number of students lacked proficiency in completing a Reading Comprehension (RC) task involving a story in English.

**Step 3:** Upon reviewing the tasks in ES1, it became apparent to the researcher that students were encountering challenges in applying reading comprehension (RC) strategies in English. To address this, the researcher introduced the RC task from the TS, which involved explaining the strategies of skimming and scanning utilized in the TS RC task. The students were then guided through a step-by-step completion of the RC task, with an emphasis on the universality of these strategies across languages, including English.

As a result of this explanation and the increased awareness of their abilities demonstrated in their Telugu language work, the students expressed feelings of being "tension-free" and "happy," with some even expressing surprise that the same steps could be applied to English. Their enthusiasm was evident as one student eagerly requested to "try out the ES1 please!" The students collectively requested the opportunity to revisit and redo the ES1 task.

During this second attempt at the ES1 task, the majority of students, specifically twelve, successfully applied the skimming and scanning strategies. Five students primarily utilized the scanning strategy, while three students did not employ any specific strategy. Responding to the students' enthusiasm and request for similar tasks, the researcher provided ES2. In response, fifteen students attempted to use both skimming and scanning strategies, while five students did not engage in skimming.

**Step 4:** In the context of ES3, a total of sixteen students employed specific strategies, namely "skimming" and "scanning." Specifically, two students exclusively employed the "scanning" strategy, while two students refrained from employing any strategy at all. The predominant approach adopted by the majority of the students for the ES3 task in English reading comprehension involved the combined utilization of both "skimming" and "scanning" strategies.

The study aimed to investigate the process of Reading Comprehension (RC) specifically focusing on skimming and scanning strategies when performed in the participants' dominant language, Telugu. In the initial RC task, conducted in Telugu and based on the story "TS," seventeen of the students employed a combination of RC strategies in Telugu. The remaining three students exclusively utilized the scanning strategy. Observations recorded in the researcher's diary indicated that the students exhibited proficiency in Telugu RC, as they frequently rechecked their responses to scanning questions even before submitting them. This finding was further corroborated during the semi-structured interviews, where the students expressed their confidence in their ability to complete RC tasks in Telugu, citing their Telugu medium educational backgrounds as a contributing factor.

The study also aimed to investigate the application of similar strategies by students when dealing with tasks in the English language. In the context of the ES1 RC task, it was observed that twelve students did not employ any of the specified strategies, namely skimming and scanning.

Among these, three students did not utilize the scanning strategy, while five out of the twenty students did not employ any strategy at all.

Entries in the researcher's diary indicate that the students completed the ES1 task promptly, expressing their uncertainty about how to approach reading comprehension in English. This sentiment was echoed during the semi-structured interviews, where a significant portion of the students revealed their lack of familiarity with the usage of these strategies in the English language. Furthermore, they articulated their apprehension about potentially making mistakes when attempting to apply these skills in an English context.

The study also aimed to investigate the potential for students to transfer reading skills from Telugu to English, specifically through the utilization of a short story RC. The researcher elucidated the reading comprehension (RC) strategies employed in Telugu and their potential applicability to English RC. Subsequently, the students, motivated by this knowledge, reattempted the RC task for ES1. In this task, twelve students applied these strategies, encompassing skimming and scanning, while five students exclusively adopted the scanning strategy. Three students, however, did not employ any specific strategy.

In alignment with the students' preferences and the researcher's methodological design, another task (ES2) was undertaken by the students. In this task, fifteen students endeavoured to employ both skimming and scanning strategies, whereas five students refrained from incorporating the skimming strategy. Consequently, it can be concluded that the students effectively transferred these strategies from their Telugu reading experiences to their English reading through the intervention.

Entries in the researcher's diary indicate that the students expressed their attempts to apply reading skills acquired in Telugu to their English reading. Furthermore, they conveyed a heightened level of proficiency in performing RC in English following the intervention. Insights obtained from semi-structured interviews corroborated these findings, as the students reported gaining valuable RC strategies from their Telugu reading experiences. Prior to the intervention, they acknowledged a deficiency in their ability to complete RC tasks in English.

In the ES3 RC task, sixteen students employed specific strategies, namely skimming and scanning. Among them, two students exclusively employed the scanning strategy, while two did not utilize any strategy at all. In the context of the ES3 RC task, the majority of students attempted to apply both skimming and scanning strategies when reading in English. Consequently, these strategies were introduced to the students through a short story reading intervention. Analysis of the researcher's diary entries reveals that the students reported an enhanced ability to transition their reading skills from Telugu to English following the researcher's explanation. Furthermore, the students expressed that they had acquired proficiency in performing Reading Comprehension (RC) tasks in English. In the semi-structured interviews, the students conveyed a comprehensive understanding of the application of RC strategies in English that they had initially learned in Telugu.



### Conclusion:

The study's objectives were successfully achieved through a four-stage process. In the initial stage, students unconsciously employed reading comprehension (RC) strategies in their dominant language, Telugu, for the Telugu story (TS). During the second stage, students refrained from using any strategies for the English story 1 (ES1). Moving into the third stage, after receiving guidance from the researcher, students became aware of the utilization of strategies in their dominant language and started transferring these strategies to the English language. In the second part of the third stage, students practiced reading ES1 and ES2, acquiring knowledge about strategy usage and attempting to apply these strategies in English.

In the fourth and final stage, a substantial number of students successfully transferred strategies from their dominant language, Telugu, to enhance their reading skills in English. This transfer of strategies had a notable impact on their reading comprehension abilities in English. The study's findings revealed that students possessed the ability to execute RC effectively in their dominant language, Telugu, by following the required steps and using appropriate strategies. Despite initial apprehensions about their capability to complete an RC task in English, the students demonstrated their proficiency in doing so. This achievement was facilitated by the successful transfer of reading skills from Telugu to English, which was facilitated through the introduction of three different stories.

In each of the stories, particular focus was placed on two key strategies, namely skimming and scanning. This emphasis was notably reflected in the students' performance in the RC of the third English story when compared to ES1. The study highlights that reading skills inherent in one's dominant language can serve not only as a valuable resource but also as an asset in the language learning classroom. Through the transfer of strategies from their dominant language to English, students exhibited improvements in their English reading skills.

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