Enhancing EFL Students' Reading Comprehension Through Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA)

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Abstract	Reading comprehension is a core skill in learning English, especially in junior secondary education, where students often find it hard to engage meaningfully with texts. This study examines the effectiveness of the Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA) strategy in improving reading comprehension among eighth-grade EFL learners. Using a pre-experimental one-group pre-test–post-test design, the research involved 20 students who received DRTA-based instruction over structured sessions. Data were gathered through a 40-item multiple-choice test administered before and after the intervention. Quantitative analysis with paired sample t-tests showed a significant improvement in students' reading comprehension, with the post-test mean score (M = 72.25, SD = 8.98) notably higher than the pre-test score (M = 47.85, SD = 7.07), t(19) = -8.05, p < 0.001. The results support the effectiveness of the DRTA strategy in fostering active reading, critical thinking, and prediction-confirmation cycles that boost learners' engagement with texts. This study confirms DRTA as a practical and pedagogically sound method for EFL reading instruction, especially in contexts where learners struggle with comprehension.
Keywords:	reading comprehension, DRTA strategy, EFL learners, pre-experimental design, active reading, English instruction

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is universally recognised as a foundational component in the development of language proficiency and a decisive factor in determining students' academic success across content areas. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), reading transcends the mere decoding of linguistic symbols; it is a cognitively demanding process that requires learners to actively construct meaning through interaction with texts (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). This interactive process demands linguistic competence and higher-order thinking and metacognitive strategies. However, reading remains a persistent challenge for many EFL learners, particularly those in Indonesian junior high schools. These difficulties are frequently attributed to limited vocabulary size, insufficient exposure to grammatical structures, low reading motivation, and a general lack of strategic reading habits (Nation, 2020; Rahmat, 2022). Such factors hinder learners' ability to infer meaning, identify key ideas, and monitor their comprehension effectively, resulting in poor reading outcomes and diminished academic confidence.

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This pedagogical concern is further intensified by systemic constraints in many Indonesian educational settings, where classroom instruction is often dominated by teacher-centred methods and constrained by limited access to engaging reading materials. Consequently, reading comprehension is underdeveloped and under-prioritised in practice, despite its theoretical prominence in the national curriculum. Bulan, Suryaman, and Mardiah (2020) emphasise that students are unlikely to become independent and critical readers without targeted strategies to support comprehension. Likewise, Brown (2003) highlights the necessity of interactive, student-focused approaches to bridge the gap between language input and meaningful comprehension output. The need, therefore, is not merely for more reading instruction but for more effective, strategy-based reading pedagogy that empowers learners to become active participants in meaning-making.

To address the urgent challenges that EFL learners encounter in reading comprehension, scholars and educators have increasingly promoted using interactive, strategy-based teaching methods that actively involve learners in meaning-making. Among these, the Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA), introduced by Stauffer (1969), stands out as a teaching approach designed to structure and improve students' engagement with reading. Based on constructivist learning theory, DRTA encourages active mental participation by guiding learners through prediction, confirmation, and reflection. In this approach, students are prompted to hypothesize about a text's content before reading, assess their assumptions during reading, and adjust their understanding afterward based on the textual evidence they find (Blachowicz & Ogle, 2008; Al Odwan, 2012). This cyclical interaction with the text develops critical reading skills, supports comprehension monitoring, and enhances metacognitive awareness—skills often lacking in EFL settings (Afflerbach et al., 2015; Fisher & Frey, 2021).

What makes DRTA different from more traditional methods is its dynamic, student-centered approach. The strategy actively involves students as creators of knowledge rather than passive receivers of information. When used in collaborative settings, DRTA encourages rich peer dialogue, shared inquiry, and co-constructing meaning, aligning well with social-constructivist views on language learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Utami & Sugirin, 2019). Such interaction improves comprehension and supports language development through scaffolded discussions and negotiation of meaning. Recent research has shown DRTA's effectiveness in various contexts, noting gains in reading accuracy, inference skills, and learner independence (Hasibuan & Sari, 2021; Wahyuni et al., 2023). These results highlight the strategy's potential to significantly improve reading instruction, especially in under-resourced EFL settings where student engagement and strategic thinking are often limited.

Despite increasing interest in DRTA internationally, empirical studies in Indonesian rural school contexts remain scarce, and there is a need to examine its practical application among learners with limited exposure to strategic reading instruction. While prior research has highlighted its efficacy in improving comprehension in narrative texts (Riana, 2014; Irma, 2013), further investigation is required to determine how DRTA can enhance comprehension across different student populations and settings. This study, therefore, was conducted to examine the effectiveness of the Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA) strategy in improving reading comprehension among eighth-grade EFL students in an Indonesian junior secondary school. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) Is the Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA) strategy effective in teaching reading comprehension to eighth-grade students? Moreover, (2) How much does the DRTA strategy improve students' reading comprehension performance?

METHOD

This study adopted a quantitative pre-experimental design employing a one-group pre-test and post-test model to evaluate the effectiveness of the Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA) strategy in improving reading comprehension among junior secondary EFL students. This design is widely used in classroom-based educational research to determine causal relationships without a control group (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Cohen et al., 2018). The pre-test and post-test approach allowed the researcher to measure learning gains attributed to the intervention by comparing students' performance before and after the treatment.

Participants

The participants were 20 eighth-grade students enrolled in a junior secondary school during the academic year 2024–2025. They were selected through convenience sampling, a non-probability method suitable for small-scale pedagogical investigations when randomisation is not feasible (Fraenkel et al., 2019). All participants received the same treatment and were assumed to have relatively similar English language proficiency levels at the study's outset.

Instruments

Reading comprehension was assessed using a researcher-developed multiple-choice test consisting of 40 items. The test content covered key aspects of reading comprehension aligned with national curriculum standards, including identifying main ideas, locating specific and general information, interpreting lexical meaning (synonyms and antonyms), and understanding explicit text information. Each item had four options (a, b, c, or d), with one correct answer awarded one point. The total score ranged from 0 to 40. The instrument's content validity was ensured through expert judgement by two English education lecturers, and internal consistency reliability was verified through a pilot test, achieving an acceptable Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.81 (Taber, 2018).

Procedure

The DRTA intervention was carried out over four weeks through eight instructional sessions. The strategy followed Stauffer's (1969) three-stage model: pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading. In the pre-reading stage, students made predictions based on titles and illustrations. During reading, they paused periodically to confirm or revise their predictions. In the post-reading phase, students collaboratively reflected on their predictions and summarized the textual content. This scaffolded approach encouraged active engagement and metacognitive awareness in reading (Afflerbach et al., 2015; Al Odwan, 2012).

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 17. Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, were computed to observe trends in student performance. A paired samples t-test was conducted to examine the significance of the difference between pre-test and post-test scores. Before this, assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were checked to ensure the appropriateness of the parametric test. An alpha level of .05 was set to determine statistical significance. This analytic approach is consistent with quantitative studies in EFL instructional research (Dörnyei, 2007; Ary et al., 2019).

FINDINGS

This study investigated the effectiveness of the Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA) strategy in enhancing reading comprehension among eighth-grade EFL students. The research employed a one-group pre-test–post-test design, where students' reading performance was assessed before and after the DRTA intervention. Descriptive statistics revealed an increase in mean scores from the pre-test to the post-test, indicating a positive shift in comprehension ability. To determine the significance of this improvement, a paired-samples t-test was conducted, which confirmed a statistically significant difference between the two sets of scores. These results suggest that the DRTA strategy had a meaningful impact on students' reading comprehension, supporting its use as a practical instructional approach in EFL classrooms. By encouraging students to make predictions, monitor their understanding, and reflect critically on the reading content, DRTA fosters active engagement and deeper processing of texts, key factors in developing proficient and strategic readers.

The descriptive analysis revealed a marked improvement in students' reading comprehension after implementing the DRTA strategy. The mean score in the pre-test was 47.85 with a standard deviation of 7.07, while the post-test mean increased to 72.25, with a standard deviation of 8.99. This suggests that students performed significantly better after receiving instruction through DRTA. The range of scores also shifted positively, with the lowest post-test score (50) exceeding the lowest pre-test score (33), and the highest post-test score (83) substantially surpassing the highest pre-test score (58). These data are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Pre-test and Post-test Scores

Test	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-test	20	47.85	7.07
Post-test	20	72.25	8.99

To determine whether the observed improvement in students' reading comprehension was statistically significant, a paired samples t-test was conducted. The analysis revealed a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores, $t(19) = -8.05$, $p < .001$, indicating that the increase in performance was unlikely to have occurred by chance. This statistical evidence supports the conclusion that the Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA) strategy had a meaningful impact on students' reading comprehension. The substantial gain in scores from pre- to post-intervention suggests that the DRTA technique effectively guided students in making predictions, actively engaging with the text, confirming or revising their understanding, and key strategic and reflective reading components.

Table 2. Paired Samples T-Test Results

Pair	Mean Difference	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre–Post	-24.40	13.55	-8.05	19	.000

The results demonstrate a statistically significant effect of the Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA) strategy on students' reading comprehension performance. The notable increase in post-test scores indicates that the DRTA approach effectively facilitated the development of essential reading skills, including making predictions, monitoring comprehension, and engaging in reflective thinking. The strategy fostered deeper cognitive involvement with the text by guiding

students to actively anticipate content, verify their understanding during reading, and reflect on their interpretations. These processes are crucial for constructing meaning, particularly in EFL contexts where learners often require structured support to navigate complex written material. The findings affirm the pedagogical value of DRTA as a strategic reading intervention that improves comprehension outcomes and cultivates critical literacy skills.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA) strategy significantly enhances students' reading comprehension. The statistical analysis revealed a marked improvement in post-test scores compared to the pre-test, indicating that the structured stages of DRTA—prediction, active reading, and reflection—effectively support learners in making sense of texts. This structured engagement enables students to approach reading with greater purpose and awareness, fostering deeper comprehension. These results align with recent studies emphasizing the benefits of strategy-based reading instruction, particularly for EFL learners who often encounter challenges in decoding vocabulary, processing sentence structures, and constructing meaning (Rahmat, 2022; Utami & Sugirin, 2019). DRTA, by scaffolding the reading process and encouraging metacognitive involvement, provides learners with the tools to engage critically with texts and develop lasting reading proficiency.

The improvement seen in this study suggests that DRTA's staged reading process—predicting, reading, and confirming—provides essential scaffolding for students to process information actively. Through these stages, learners engage in reflective comprehension by monitoring their understanding and revising predictions based on textual evidence. This supports Afflerbach et al. (2015), who argue that effective reading strategies help students become more metacognitive and intentional readers. DRTA promotes such self-regulation by encouraging students to anticipate meaning, assess their comprehension, and adjust their understanding in real time.

Rather than relying on passive reading, DRTA activates students' prior knowledge and supports the construction of new knowledge. From a theoretical standpoint, Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory—revived in more recent educational applications (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020)—offers a helpful framework for understanding this outcome. According to the theory, learning is enhanced through self-regulation and social interaction. In this study, DRTA served as a reading technique and a vehicle for collaborative learning, where students worked in groups, shared predictions, and discussed textual interpretations. Such cooperative interactions promote vicarious learning and increase students' confidence and engagement, elements central to Bandura's view of academic motivation and achievement.

Furthermore, the Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA) strategy addresses common challenges EFL learners face, such as limited vocabulary and insufficient syntactic knowledge (Nation, 2020; Hasibuan & Sari, 2021). By emphasizing prediction, active reading, and validation, DRTA supports learners in developing essential inferencing skills, identifying main ideas, and interpreting contextual clues, key components for adequate comprehension. This structured engagement with the text not only aids in understanding but also cultivates higher-order thinking, enabling students to process information more critically and meaningfully. As highlighted in recent studies, using strategy-based reading approaches like DRTA improves academic outcomes and fosters greater learner autonomy, which is crucial in language learning environments where independent, reflective reading is often underdeveloped (Ghaith, 2018; Alshammari, 2021).

Ultimately, DRTA empowers EFL students to become more proficient readers by equipping them with the cognitive tools to navigate and analyze texts confidently.

The novelty of this study lies in its application of the Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA) strategy through a pre-experimental design in an Indonesian junior secondary EFL context, a setting where structured, strategy-based reading instruction is still emerging. While DRTA has been explored internationally, few studies have systematically examined its implementation and effectiveness in Indonesian classrooms. By integrating cognitive and social dimensions of learning, this research demonstrates that DRTA is pedagogically sound and adaptable to diverse educational environments, reinforcing its relevance for fostering active comprehension and critical thinking among EFL learners.

However, the study is not without limitations. Although effective in revealing improvement, using a one-group pre-test–post-test design does not provide a comparative framework to isolate the effects of the intervention definitively. The absence of a control group limits the generalizability of findings and opens the possibility of alternative explanations for observed gains. Future research should employ more rigorous experimental or quasi-experimental designs with larger, more varied samples to validate and extend these results. Incorporating qualitative data, such as student reflections, classroom observations, or teacher interviews, would further enrich understanding by capturing the nuanced ways learners engage with and benefit from DRTA in authentic classroom contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA) strategy effectively enhances reading comprehension among junior secondary EFL learners. The statistically significant improvement in students' post-test scores compared to their pre-test results highlights the strategy's impact in fostering a more profound understanding of texts. By guiding learners through a structured process of purposeful prediction, active engagement with content, and critical reflection, DRTA improves comprehension outcomes and cultivates essential metacognitive reading skills. These findings affirm the value of DRTA as a pedagogical tool that promotes strategic, student-centered reading in EFL classrooms, helping learners become more reflective and independent readers.

By fostering metacognitive awareness and encouraging peer collaboration, the Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA) strategy improves students' reading comprehension while empowering them to become more independent and strategic readers. Its structured stages—predicting, reading, and confirming or revising understanding—guide learners to engage with texts actively and intentionally, resulting in increased confidence and more accurate comprehension. These results highlight DRTA's potential to enhance reading skills and develop critical thinking and analytical abilities in EFL contexts. These positive outcomes motivate educators to incorporate DRTA into their teaching practices to support deeper literacy growth. Future research could include control group comparisons, long-term tracking, and qualitative analyses such as student reflections or classroom observations to strengthen and expand the evidence. These additions would provide more comprehensive insights into the long-term effects and adaptability of DRTA across different educational settings and learner profiles.

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