

READING STRATEGIES OF MULTILINGUAL ESL LEARNERS ACROSS CULTURALLY FAMILIAR AND UNFAMILIAR TEXTS IN ESWATINI

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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension in multilingual contexts requires more than linguistic competence; it demands metacognitive regulation and strategic flexibility across culturally diverse materials. This study investigates the reading strategies employed by Eswatini English as a Second Language (ESL) learners when engaging with culturally familiar and culturally unfamiliar texts, addressing the limited evidence on strategy transfer within multilingual African contexts. A quantitative repeated-measures design was used with 200 Eswatini senior secondary learners, who each read two passages matched in length and readability, one culturally familiar and one culturally distant, and reported their strategy use using the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS). Results revealed moderate and stable engagement across Global, Support, and Problem-Solving strategies, with Problem-Solving strategies employed slightly more frequently but without statistically significant differences between text types. Correlational analyses indicated a moderate relationship between familiar and unfamiliar text strategy use, suggesting that learners relied on habitual, routine behaviours rather than adaptive, metacognitively guided strategies. Based on these findings, the study proposes the Strategic Engagement and Transfer (SET) Model, which conceptualises a developmental progression from habitual, inconsistent strategy use to conscious, context-aware deployment, and ultimately integrated, automatic strategic competence. The findings inform English Language Teaching (ELT) by offering a context-sensitive metacognitive framework for scaffolding strategy instruction, promoting adaptive engagement, and fostering transferable reading competence across culturally diverse texts.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading is widely recognised as a foundational skill for academic success, enabling learners to access knowledge, engage critically with texts, and develop higher-order thinking skills (Afflerbach et al., 2020). In English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, reading comprehension remains a persistent challenge (Toti

& Hamid, 2022). Reading comprehension requires more than linguistic proficiency, but also the effective deployment of reading strategies (Moradi & Ghabanchi, 2025; Salsyabillah et al., 2025). These strategies are deliberate cognitive processes that help learners decode, interpret, and evaluate texts, allowing them to regulate comprehension and construct meaning (Sisay & Gebeyehu, 2025). From an English Language Teaching (ELT) perspective, explicit and contextually responsive strategy instruction is vital for empowering learners to transfer reading strategies beyond classroom boundaries, fostering autonomy and lifelong literacy (Tsai & Huang, 2024).

This mandate for strategic reading is particularly challenging in the Southern African context. In Eswatini, persistent underperformance in the reading comprehension component of the Eswatini General Certificate of Secondary Education (EGCSE) examination underscores the magnitude of the problem (Examinations Council of Eswatini [ECESWA], 2023). English, though the official medium of instruction (Ministry of Education [MoET], 2018), is a second or additional language for most learners, and prescribed texts often reflect unfamiliar cultural contexts (Kunene & Mthethwa, 2020). This linguistic and cultural distance constrains comprehension by limiting learners' ability to activate relevant schemata, a process central to meaning-making (Anderson, 2018; List et al., 2024). Consequently, learners may rely on surface-level decoding rather than deeper inferential and evaluative strategies, particularly when faced with content outside their cultural experience (Emmott & Alexander, 2025; Jiang & Zhang, 2025). Addressing this issue is crucial, not only for improving examination outcomes but also for cultivating intercultural literacy, which requires understanding how strategy use interacts with context and cognitive demand (Sweller, 2024).

The literature confirms that cultural familiarity plays a pivotal role in comprehension because it mediates the activation of background knowledge and metacognitive awareness. According to schema theory (Rumelhart, 2017), familiar texts allow for efficient predictions and holistic processing (Karami & Bowles, 2021). However, unfamiliar contexts induce schema dissonance, elevate cognitive load, and reduce fluency (Ahmed, 2024; Anderson, 2018; Sweller, 2024). This cognitive tension often triggers reliance on Support and Problem-Solving strategies (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002), yet learners with limited metacognitive regulation tend to fall back on habitual rather than adaptive strategies. This distinction between habitual and adaptive strategic behaviour, however, remains insufficiently understood. It has not been systematically examined in African multilingual contexts, despite growing evidence that learners possess unique cognitive resources that could facilitate strategy transfer (Pahrizal et al., 2025; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2023).

Most existing research on strategy use (Ghimire & Mokhtari, 2025; Karami & Bowles, 2021) has been conducted in monolingual or bilingual settings, leaving open questions about how learners who navigate multiple languages and cultural frames adapt and apply their reading strategies. Furthermore, research has largely focused on measuring strategy frequency or awareness rather than adaptability and developmental progression (Dermitzaki, 2025; Köse & Güneş, 2021; Mežek et al., 2022). This trend restricts theoretical understanding of how learners evolve from routine to flexible strategic behaviour. Consequently, this gap constrains ELT practitioners' ability to design evidence-based instruction tailored to African learners.

Addressing these limitations, this study examines strategy stability, variation, and transfer across culturally differentiated reading tasks, situating the investigation within Eswatini's multilingual and multicultural learning environment. This study also introduces the Strategic Engagement and Transfer (SET) Model. This new conceptual framework delineates a developmental continuum from habitual to conscious and ultimately integrated strategic competence. The SET model presents a point of departure of existing models such as Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 2017) and the interactive model (Grabe & Stoller, 2022) by highlighting the effect of cultural familiarity in reading comprehension. Thus,

the study contributes theoretical and pedagogical insights to English language teaching. The study addresses the following research questions (RQs): (1) What reading strategies do learners use with culturally familiar texts? (2) What reading strategies do learners use with culturally unfamiliar texts? (3) Are there significant differences in strategy use between familiar and unfamiliar texts? (4) What is the correlation between strategies used in culturally familiar and unfamiliar texts?

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative counterbalanced repeated-measures quasi-experimental design to examine how Eswatini senior secondary learners use reading strategies across culturally familiar and culturally unfamiliar texts. In this design, the same participants were exposed to two conditions, allowing direct within-subject comparisons and minimising inter-individual variability (Hinton, 2024). To further control for potential order effects such as practice, fatigue, or familiarity (Alford & Teater, 2025), the study was implemented across four secondary schools (A–D), which were divided into two groups. Group 1 (Schools A and C) began with the culturally familiar text in the first stage and, after a two-week interval, proceeded to the culturally unfamiliar text in the second stage. Group 2 (Schools B and D) began with the culturally unfamiliar text and completed the culturally familiar text two weeks later. This counterbalanced arrangement ensured that any observed differences in strategy use were attributable to text familiarity rather than the exposure sequence (Coe et al., 2025). In both stages, learners read the assigned passage and completed the SORS immediately afterward to report their strategy use (see Figure 1).

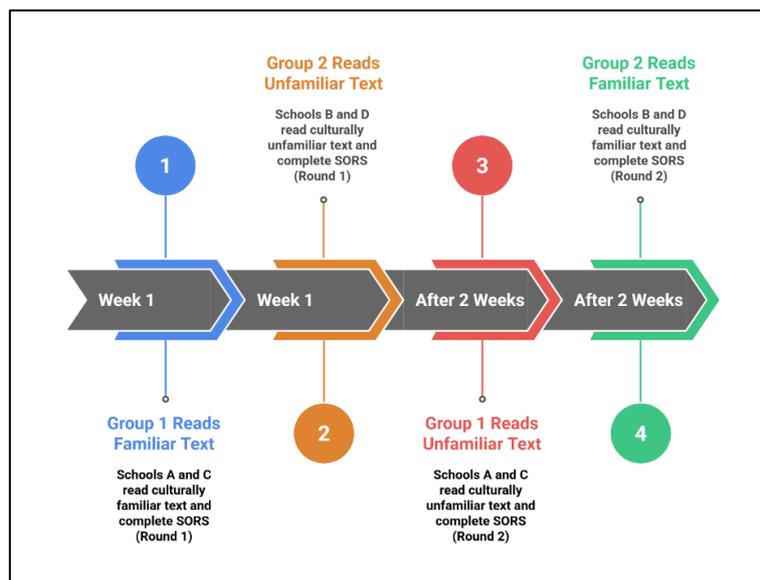


Figure 1. Counterbalanced repeated measures quasi-experimental design

Figure 1 illustrates the counterbalanced repeated-measures quasi-experimental design used in the study. The visual shows the sequence of reading conditions across two groups of schools (A–D) and within-subject comparisons of reading strategy use. Each session lasted approximately 45 minutes in regular classrooms. Learners were instructed to respond independently, focusing on strategy use rather than comprehension outcomes. Although the quasi-experimental design did not permit random assignment, within-subject comparison reduced selection bias and enhanced internal validity (Stockemer, 2019), focusing on changes in strategy use attributable to cultural familiarity.

Population and Sample

A total of 200 Eswatini senior secondary learners were selected from four schools in the Manzini region (50 per school) using multi-stage stratified random sampling (Coe et al., 2025) to ensure urban–peri-urban representation. In the Eswatini education system, each grade level at secondary school is divided into academic streams: typically, Sciences, Commercials, and Arts, representing different subject emphases rather than ability levels (Ministry of Education and Training [MoET], 2018).

However, regardless of streaming, English is a compulsory subject for all grades. In collaboration with subject teachers, the researcher further stratified learners within each selected class according to their performance in reading comprehension. Based on teachers' continuous assessments and recent examination records, at least 15 above-average, 15 average, and 15 below-average readers were purposively included from each school. This procedure ensured balanced representation across proficiency levels while maintaining randomisation within performance strata.

The final sample comprised 114 females (57%) and 86 males (43%), aged 16–22 (see Table 1). This age and proficiency range was deliberately chosen because learners at this transitional stage are consolidating strategic reading behaviours (Afflerbach et al., 2020), yet remain responsive to instructional interventions, making them ideal for examining strategy transfer (Grabe & Stoller, 2022).

Table 1
Respondents' demographic data ($n = 200$)

School	Total	Gender	No. of Respondents	Age-Range
School A	48	M	20	18–22
		F	28	17–20
School B	52	M	22	17–22
		F	30	16–20
School C	51	M	23	18–20
		F	28	16–21
School D	49	M	21	18–22
		F	28	17–20

The collaborative selection with teachers ensured that participants reflected genuine classroom heterogeneity, avoiding bias toward high-achieving readers and supporting ecological validity (Hinton, 2024). Participant proficiency was triangulated through teachers' evaluations, school-based assessments, and prior EGCSE results, ensuring the representation of intermediate-level readers capable of processing moderately complex texts while encountering challenges with culturally distant content. This triangulated assessment enhanced internal validity while reflecting authentic classroom diversity. Minor curricular or instructional differences across schools were considered negligible, as all participants followed comparable English syllabi and learning objectives.

Instruments

The study employed two primary instruments: culturally distinct reading passages representing familiar and unfamiliar contexts, and the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) questionnaire (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002). Two narrative–descriptive passages were selected, matched in length, readability, and genre, to represent culturally familiar and culturally unfamiliar contexts.

The culturally familiar text, *Maputo* (EGCSE Paper 1), described a holiday resort in Mozambique and incorporated culturally resonant features such as charcoal barbecues, flea markets, and reed-based structures. Pilot participants described it as “friendly” and “easy to understand,” suggesting cognitive and affective accessibility grounded in shared regional

experience. In contrast, the culturally unfamiliar text, *The Great Barrier Reef* (University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate [UCLES] Paper 1), depicted scuba diving and marine life in Australia. Pilot participants described this text as “alien” and “unfamiliar,” noting new settings, vocabulary, and experiential elements outside their cultural frame of reference.

Validation of cultural familiarity was achieved through a two-step process. First, an expert review was conducted with three experienced English teachers who independently rated each text on a 5-point cultural familiarity scale, achieving an inter-rater agreement of 0.91. Second, pilot testing was carried out with twenty learners comparable to the target sample, who rated perceived familiarity and comprehension ease. Their qualitative feedback confirmed a clear distinction in cultural identification between the two texts. To ensure linguistic equivalence, readability indices were computed for both passages, revealing comparable Flesch–Kincaid readability scores (58.6 versus 58.9), see Table 2.

Table 2
Linguistic and readability characteristics of the two reading passages

Characteristic	Culturally Familiar	Culturally Unfamiliar
Total	388 words	387 words
Flesch readability test results	58.6 of 100	58.9 of 100
Flesch Kincaid grade level	9.2	10.5
Paragraphs	6	6
Sentences	24	18
Average words per sentence	16.46	21.78
Complex words	54	43
Percent of complex words	13.67%	10.97%
Average syllables per word	1.55	1.49

This combination of expert validation, learner feedback, and quantitative readability analysis ensured that the two texts were linguistically comparable yet culturally distinctive. Such triangulation strengthened construct validity, ensuring that any observed differences in strategy use could be attributed to cultural familiarity rather than disparities in textual difficulty.

The SORS (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002) was employed to measure learners' perceived use of reading strategies across the two cultural text conditions. The instrument comprises 30 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (I never or almost never do this) to 5 (I always or almost always do this). It assesses three major categories of reading strategies: Global Reading Strategies, which involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating comprehension processes; Problem-Solving Strategies, which encompass contextual guessing, rereading, and adjusting reading speed; and Support Strategies, which include note-taking, translating, or using reference materials to aid understanding.

The SORS was selected over alternative instruments such as the Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory (MARS) and think-aloud protocols because it is specifically designed for ESL/EFL learners, capturing their awareness and reported use of reading strategies in second-language contexts (Ghimire & Mokhtari, 2025). While MARS (Mokhtari et al., 2018) shares a similar structure and measures metacognitive strategy use, it primarily targets native or highly proficient readers in academic settings. SORS, as an adaptation of MARS, accounts for the linguistic and cognitive challenges faced by non-native readers (Pahrizal et al., 2025), making it more contextually appropriate for the present study. Moreover, compared to think-aloud protocols, which are time-intensive and limited to small samples (Afflerbach et al., 2020). SORS offers a standardised, reliable, and scalable means of quantitatively assessing strategic reading awareness across a larger participant group.

The SORS was chosen because of its extensive validation across diverse ESL and EFL contexts, demonstrating consistent reliability coefficients above 0.85 (Dermitzaki, 2025; Köse

& Güneş, 2021; Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002; Okyar, 2021; Salsyabillah et al., 2025; Tsai & Huang, 2024). Its self-report nature provides insight into learners' metacognitive awareness of strategy use, complementing behavioural data derived from text comprehension tasks. For this study, minor contextual adaptations were made to ensure cultural relevance while maintaining the original construct structure. Specifically, items referencing "English reading assignments" were clarified as "English comprehension passages" to align with the terminology used in Eswatini classrooms.

To establish reliability within the current context, a pilot administration with 30 comparable learners yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91 for the full scale and subscale alphas ranging from 0.86 to 0.89, indicating excellent internal consistency (Hinton, 2024). The final version was administered immediately after each reading task under supervised classroom conditions, with completion times averaging 15–20 minutes. Learners were assured of anonymity and reminded that there were no "right" or "wrong" answers, reducing social desirability bias and enhancing self-report accuracy (Coe et al., 2025). They were further reminded that responses should reflect strategies actually used during the specific reading task rather than general reading habits.

This procedure ensured consistency in administration and minimised external influence on self-reported strategy use. By employing the SORS in both reading conditions, the study generated comparable within-participant measures, enabling direct analysis of how learners' strategic behaviour varied or transferred between culturally familiar and unfamiliar texts.

Data Analysis

Before analysis, data were screened for completeness and quality. Less than five percent of responses were incomplete and were therefore removed using listwise deletion (Alford & Teater, 2025). Histograms, Q–Q plots, and Shapiro–Wilk tests confirmed approximate normality across all subscale distributions (South et al., 2022), indicating suitability for parametric analysis. Although Likert-scale data are technically ordinal, they were treated as interval-level variables in line with established psychometric practice (Hinton, 2024; Norman, 2010; Streiner et al., 2024), a widely accepted approach that allows the use of parametric tests without compromising validity.

Data analysis proceeded through descriptive and inferential stages aligned with the study's research questions. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise mean strategy-use scores for both culturally familiar and unfamiliar texts, providing an overview of learners' patterns of Global, Problem-Solving, and Support strategy use (addressing RQ1 and 2). To determine whether significant differences existed between the two conditions, paired-samples *t*-tests were performed, corresponding to RQ3. These analyses enabled direct within-subject comparisons, ensuring that observed variations in strategy use were attributable to contextual differences rather than individual characteristics.

To assess the stability and transferability of strategy use across the two cultural contexts, Pearson correlation analyses were conducted, addressing RQ4. These correlations indicated the degree of consistency in learners' strategic behaviour between culturally familiar and unfamiliar reading situations. In addition to statistical significance, effect sizes (Cohen's d^2) and 95% confidence intervals were computed to evaluate the magnitude and practical relevance of each effect, thereby offering a more nuanced interpretation of the findings. Table 3 below links each research question to its corresponding statistical procedure, ensuring analytical transparency and replicability.

Table 3
Analytical procedures and corresponding outputs

Research Question (RQ)	Analytical Procedure	Statistical Output
RQ1: Strategies with culturally familiar texts	Descriptive statistics (<i>M</i> , <i>SD</i>)	Table 4, Figure 2
RQ2: Strategies with culturally unfamiliar texts	Descriptive statistics (<i>M</i> , <i>SD</i>)	Table 5, Figure 2
RQ3: Differences between text types	Paired-samples <i>t</i> -test	Table 6, Figure 3
RQ4: Correlation between strategy use across contexts	Pearson <i>r</i> , effect sizes, CIs	Table 7, Figure 4

Analytical transparency was further strengthened by reporting means, standard deviations, effect sizes, and confidence intervals, and by documenting all assumption checks (Alford & Teater, 2025). Where appropriate, both statistical and pedagogical interpretations are provided in the results section to clarify how quantitative outcomes translate into ELT insights.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC 00007315/2024). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with parental assent for minors. Data were anonymised, encrypted, and securely stored; access was restricted to the research team. Participants and teachers were debriefed post-study, providing transparency and practical benefit for future instructional planning (Coe et al., 2025). No ethical limitations were identified, as all standard protocols were observed.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

This section presents the findings for each research question, drawing on descriptive statistics, paired-samples *t*-tests, and correlation analyses. Data were analysed using SPSS version 28, with assumptions of normality, independence, and linearity verified prior to analysis. Overall, learners demonstrated moderate use of all three strategy types: Global, Support, and Problem-Solving, with no statistically significant differences between culturally familiar and unfamiliar texts. Strategy use patterns were generally consistent across both reading contexts, indicating a tendency toward habitual rather than adaptive engagement. Effect sizes and confidence intervals are reported to supplement significance testing, and brief interpretive comments are included after each table to clarify practical implications.

Reading Strategies Learners Use with Culturally Familiar Texts (RQ1)

Table 4 summarises learners' self-reported strategy use for culturally familiar texts. Overall engagement was moderate across all subscales, with mean scores clustered slightly above the midpoint of the 5-point Likert scale. A small but noticeable difference was observed in the use of Problem-Solving strategies, which were employed more frequently than the other two subscales.

Table 4
Summary of learners' strategy use with culturally familiar texts (*n* = 200)

Strategy Subscale	Mean (SD)	Key Observation
Global	3.05 (0.12)	Moderate use
Support	3.07 (0.11)	Moderate use
Problem-Solving	3.12 (0.14)	Slightly higher use

Note. Scale range = 1–5

These results suggest that learners generally approach culturally familiar texts with a consistent set of strategies, relying most on Problem-Solving strategies such as rereading, adjusting reading pace, and guessing meaning from context. This moderate but stable engagement pattern implies that familiarity with cultural content may reduce the need for intensive strategy use, allowing learners to read more fluently and with less cognitive strain.

Reading Strategies Learners Use with Culturally Unfamiliar Texts (RQ2)

Table 5 presents learners' strategy use for culturally unfamiliar texts. The pattern remains largely consistent with that observed for familiar texts, with only a marginal increase in Problem-Solving strategy use.

Table 5
Summary of learners' strategy use with culturally unfamiliar texts ($n = 200$)

Strategy Subscale	Mean (SD)	Key Observation
Global	3.04 (0.13)	No significant difference
Support	3.06 (0.12)	No significant difference
Problem-Solving	3.15 (0.15)	No significant difference

Note. Scale range = 1–5

Although learners reported slightly higher use of Problem-Solving strategies with the culturally unfamiliar passage (*The Great Barrier Reef*), the difference was not statistically significant. This stability in mean scores suggests that learners relied on familiar, routine strategies rather than adapting their approach to manage the greater cultural and conceptual distance. Such reliance may reflect limited metacognitive flexibility in responding to less familiar reading contexts.

Figure 2 visualises the comparison of strategy use for each subscale (Global, Support, Problem-Solving) between culturally familiar and unfamiliar texts.

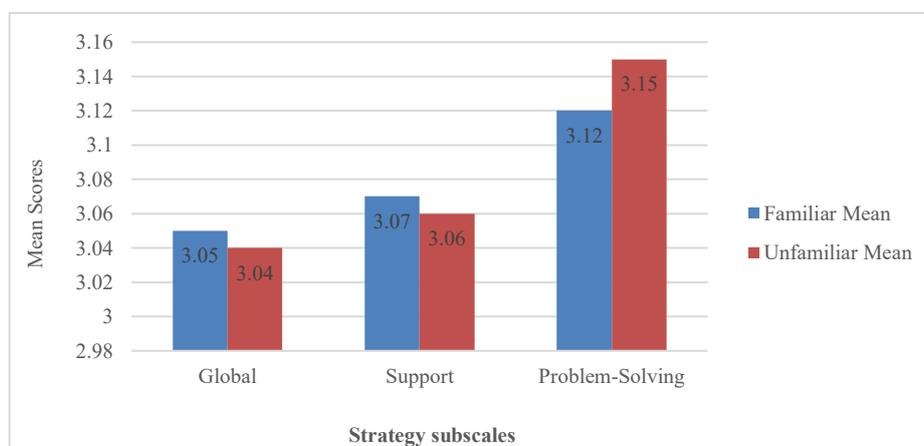


Figure 2. Visual comparison of strategy subscales across the texts

As shown in Figure 2, learners demonstrated moderate use of all three strategy types, with Problem-Solving strategies being employed most frequently, followed by Support and Global strategies. The two sets of bars (familiar vs. unfamiliar) are nearly parallel, highlighting the stability of strategy use regardless of text familiarity.

Statistical Comparisons Between Text Types (RQ3)

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to determine whether differences in mean strategy use across the two text types were statistically significant. As shown in Table 6, there were no significant differences in strategy use across any of the three subscales. Effect sizes (Cohen's d_x) and 95% confidence intervals are reported to indicate the magnitude and precision of the differences.

Table 6
Paired-samples t-test results for strategy subscales (n = 200)

Strategy Subscale	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>	<i>d_x</i>	95% CI	Key Observation
Global	0.45	199	.65	0.04	[-0.12, 0.19]	No significant difference
Support	0.52	199	.60	0.05	[-0.11, 0.21]	No significant difference
Problem-Solving	1.02	199	.31	0.09	[-0.08, 0.27]	No significant difference

Note. All tests two-tailed, none of the differences were statistically significant ($p > .05$).

The results in Table 6 indicate that learners employed broadly similar strategies regardless of text type, suggesting that their comprehension processes were not strongly influenced by cultural familiarity. The negligible effect sizes further support the conclusion that strategy use patterns remained stable across conditions, indicating that learners drew on habitual strategies rather than adapting to text familiarity. Figure 3 provides a visual presentation of the results.

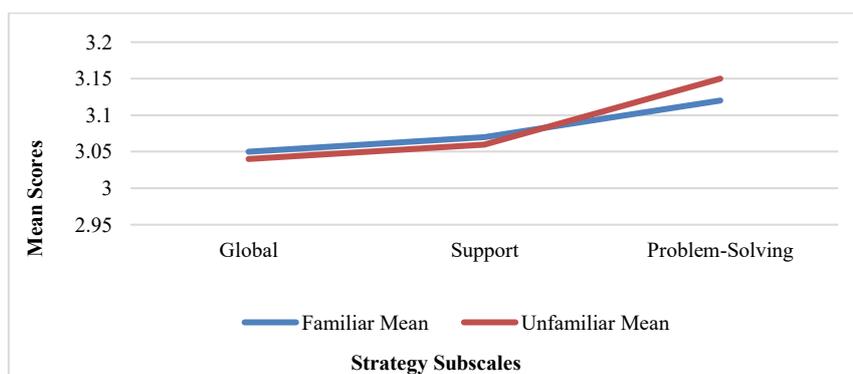


Figure 3. Mean differences in strategy use across the texts

Figure 3 illustrates the mean strategy scores for Global, Support, and Problem-Solving strategies when reading culturally familiar and unfamiliar texts. The slight differences observed across subscales reinforce the conclusion that learners made minimal adjustments to their strategy use when encountering culturally unfamiliar material.

Correlations Between Strategy Use Across Text Types (RQ4)

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated between the scores for culturally familiar and culturally unfamiliar texts for each strategy subscale to assess the consistency of learners' strategy use across contexts. The results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7
Correlations between strategy use across text types (n = 200)

Strategy Subscale	<i>r</i>	95% CI	Interpretation	Key Observation
Global (Familiar–Unfamiliar)	0.62**	[0.54, 0.69]	Medium–large	Strong consistency across contexts
Support (Familiar–Unfamiliar)	0.58**	[0.49, 0.66]	Medium	Moderate consistency across contexts
Problem-Solving (Familiar–Unfamiliar)	0.42**	[0.31, 0.52]	Small–medium	Limited consistency across contexts

Note. All correlations are two-tailed; 95% confidence intervals (CI) indicate statistical significance

The correlations indicate that learners' Global strategies were most consistently applied across familiar and unfamiliar texts, followed by Support strategies, while Problem-Solving strategies showed weaker consistency. According to Cohen's (1988) benchmarks, these coefficients suggest that higher-order strategies are partially transferable across contexts, but Problem-Solving strategies remain more context-specific. Pedagogically, this highlights the

need for explicit instruction and guided practice to help learners develop flexible, transferable strategy use across diverse reading materials. Figure 4 visualises these results.

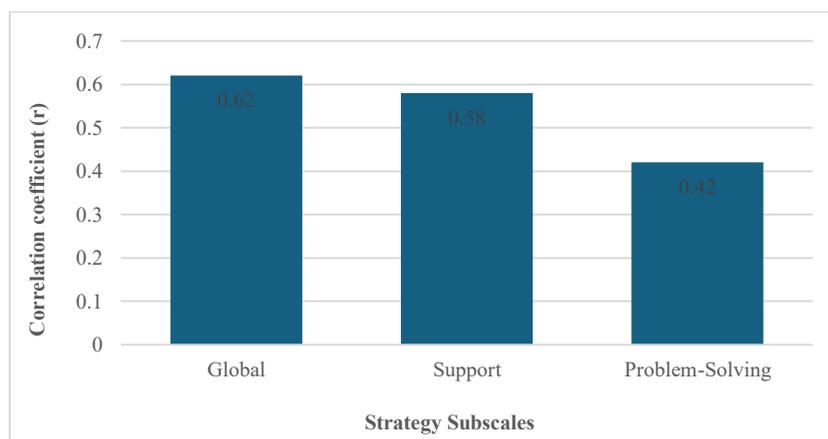


Figure 4. Correlation of Strategy Use Across the Texts

Pearson correlation coefficients (r) show the relationship between learners' strategy use for culturally familiar and unfamiliar texts across the three subscales. Global strategies demonstrated the strongest consistency across contexts, followed by Support strategies, while Problem-Solving strategies showed weaker consistency. These results indicate that higher-order strategies are more transferable across reading contexts than problem-solving strategies.

Discussion

This study examined how Eswatini ESL learners deploy and transfer reading strategies across culturally familiar and unfamiliar texts. Four key patterns emerged from the data. First, learners did not significantly adjust their overall strategy use when faced with culturally unfamiliar texts, maintaining similar levels of Global, Support, and Problem-Solving strategy deployment. Second, Problem-Solving strategies were the most frequently used across both contexts, but their application showed only moderate transferability. Third, learners relied on a relatively narrow range of familiar strategies, including rereading, translation, and contextual guessing. Fourth, exposure to cognitively challenging or culturally distant texts did not elicit substantial adaptive strategy adjustment, highlighting a gap between task demand and strategic response.

The core finding, which is the lack of a significant difference in strategy use between the two text types, runs contrary to the theoretical expectation. Conventional thinking holds that unfamiliar content should increase cognitive demand and thus trigger greater reliance on adaptive strategies such as inferencing or Problem-Solving (Rumelhart, 2017; Sweller, 2024). This challenges the assumption that awareness of cognitive challenge is sufficient to provoke strategic adjustment without explicit metacognitive intervention.

The results, which indicate stable but moderate engagement with all three strategy types, suggest a consistent but limited strategic repertoire, guided more by routine than by reflective metacognitive control. The moderate correlations between strategy use across the familiar and unfamiliar texts further reinforce this stability. The implication is that learners' strategic frameworks are partly transferable but not highly adaptive to changes in cultural or textual context. This finding corroborates previous work (Toti & Hamid, 2022) showing that EFL learners often rely on low-level, exam-oriented strategies rather than adaptive, comprehension-driven approaches.

From a cognitive perspective, this outcome is consistent with the principles of schema theory (Emmott & Alexander, 2025) and cognitive load theory (Sweller, 2024). When learners

face culturally distant material, the unfamiliar concepts increase cognitive demand. Such reading challenges may prompt learners to default to automatised, less effortful strategies to conserve working memory resources. This reliance on habitual strategies reflects what the literature describes as cognitive inertia (Salsyabillah et al., 2025), where established routines persist even when task demands increase. Although Problem-Solving strategies were the most frequently reported overall, their inconsistent application across contexts suggests limited conditional knowledge: the awareness of when and why to deploy a strategy—as observed by Ghimire and Mokhtari 2025).

The observed strategic inertia in the Eswatini context may be influenced by the interaction of cognitive, linguistic, and instructional factors. The bilingual dynamics, such as navigating siSwati and English (Kunene & Mthethwa, 2020), can complicate strategic transfer across contexts. Furthermore, classroom practices that emphasise exam performance often prioritise literal comprehension and recall. As noted by Toti and Hamid (2022), such practises reinforce habitual rather than adaptive strategies. While this study cannot provide definitive causal proof of these factors, their presence in the socio-educational context supports the interpretation that the environment discourages learners from experimenting with the adaptive strategies necessary for cross-cultural comprehension.

These findings, which demonstrate that strategy use is largely habitual, moderately engaged, and minimally adaptive across text types, are conceptualised through the Strategic Engagement and Transfer (SET) Model (see Figure 5).

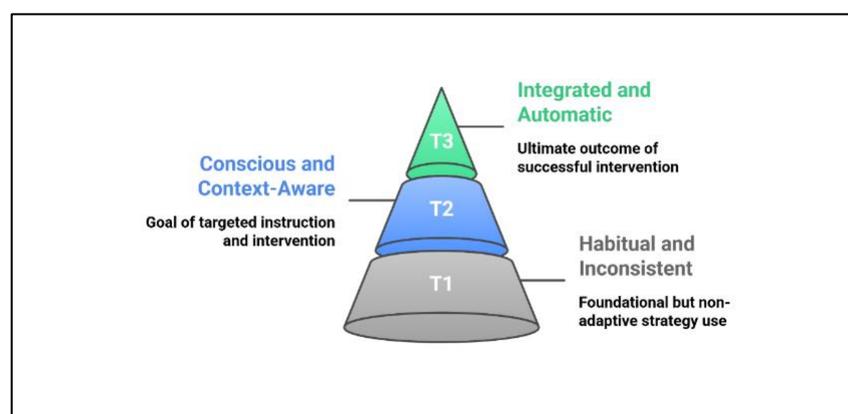


Figure 5. The strategic engagement and transfer model (developed by the authors)

The SET Model provides a developmental framework for understanding learners' strategic competence, which conceptualises reading strategy development across three distinct tiers. Tier 1, *Habitual and Inconsistent*, reflects the baseline observed in this study, where learners rely on a narrow range of familiar strategies used inconsistently, particularly under higher cognitive or cultural demands. The desired progression moves to Tier 2, *Conscious and Context-Aware*, which represents the goal of targeted instructional intervention, where learners develop metacognitive sensitivity to recognise text complexity and purposefully select adaptive strategies. This development culminates in Tier 3, *Integrated and Automatic*, which denotes full strategic competence, in which strategies are consistently applied with high automaticity and context-appropriateness, thereby supporting flexible engagement with any text.

In this study, most learners occupied Tier 1, a state influenced by the aforementioned bilingual learning environment and exam-oriented instruction. This is where the value of the SET Model becomes more apparent. The SET model moves beyond cataloguing discrete strategies such as the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) by Oxford (2017), or focusing purely on cognitive processes like the interactive model (Grabe & Stoller, 2022). Instead, the SET model conceptualises the developmental progression of strategic competence

across three tiers and explicitly integrates the cultural context of reading strategy transfer. Thus, the SET Model uniquely integrates cultural familiarity and empirical insights from multilingual ESL contexts, offering a context-sensitive framework that captures how linguistic, cultural, and instructional factors interact to shape strategic behaviour.

The study's most immediate implication is that teachers should not assume that learners will naturally adapt their strategies when encountering culturally diverse texts. Rather, explicit instruction must emphasise when, why, and how strategies should be applied flexibly across contexts. The SET Model offers a practical roadmap for intervention: for Tier 1 learners, teachers should prioritise awareness-raising activities; for Tier 2, they should use scaffolded comprehension tasks, think-alouds, and reflective discussions to cultivate metacognitive awareness (Mežek et al., 2022). The model also offers a basis for empirical validation, suggesting that future research should evaluate learner progression across tiers using longitudinal designs and richer qualitative data (List et al., 2024).

The novelty of this study lies in demonstrating that learners' strategy use is largely habitual, moderately engaged, and minimally adaptive across text types. The SET Model translates this empirical insight into a developmental and pedagogically actionable framework. This model advances theoretical understanding by integrating cognitive, cultural, and instructional dimensions, providing a foundation for designing culturally responsive instruction and teacher-training initiatives.

This study provides valuable insights into multilingual learners' strategic reading behaviours; however, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the reliance on a self-report instrument, though efficient for collecting data from a large sample, may not fully capture the dynamic and context-sensitive nature of real-time strategy use. Learners may not always be consciously aware of the strategies they employ, and reported frequencies may not correspond precisely to their actual behaviour during comprehension. Future research should adopt mixed-method designs that triangulate self-report measures (e.g., SORS) with qualitative data such as think-aloud protocols, classroom observations, or digital trace data. For instance, combining SORS responses with eye-tracking data could reveal whether learners' reported strategies, such as rereading or inferencing, are observable in their eye-movement patterns. Such triangulated approaches would yield a more comprehensive and valid understanding of strategic engagement. Second, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to capture developmental change. Although this study compared learners' strategies across two text types, it represents only a single point in time. A longitudinal approach would allow researchers to trace how learners' strategic repertoires evolve with sustained instruction or increasing exposure to culturally diverse materials. Tracking the same cohort over an academic year, particularly within intervention-based studies, could reveal whether growth in strategy use is incremental, context-dependent, or instructionally induced. Third, while this study focused primarily on cultural distance, future research could explore other moderating variables that affect strategic adaptation. For example, metacognitive instruction, teacher training, and collaborative learning environments may influence the development and transfer of adaptive strategies. Exploring these factors would clarify the conditions under which learners progress through the tiers of the SET Model. Similarly, cross-national comparisons, for instance, across multilingual African contexts such as South Africa, Kenya, or Nigeria, could determine whether habitual strategic patterns observed in Eswatini are generalisable or context-specific.

In addition, the growing prevalence of digital reading introduces new challenges for strategic transfer. Future studies should investigate how strategies operate across print and digital formats, as hyperlinked, multimodal, and distraction-rich environments may demand distinct problem-solving and metacognitive strategies not captured in this study.

Finally, learner motivation warrants further exploration as a mediating variable. Learners who perceive culturally unfamiliar texts as irrelevant may be less inclined to engage in

cognitively demanding strategic adjustments. Integrating motivational and affective dimensions into future iterations of the SET Model could enhance its explanatory power by illuminating how motivation interacts with cognitive and cultural factors to influence adaptive reading behaviour.

This study addresses a critical gap in ESL research by quantitatively examining how multilingual learners apply and transfer reading strategies across culturally familiar and unfamiliar texts. The findings reveal that while learners demonstrate moderate strategic engagement, their approach remains largely habitual and minimally adaptive, particularly when confronted with culturally distant content. These results provide empirical evidence that higher-order, Problem-solving strategies essential for deep comprehension are not consistently transferred across contexts, underscoring the need for explicit metacognitive and cross-cultural strategy instruction.

The SET Model represents the central theoretical contribution of this research. This framework synthesises key empirical insights and offers an actionable developmental pathway from habitual, low-engagement strategy use to integrated, flexible competence. Consequently, the study advances theory and practice by demonstrating how empirical findings can inform pedagogical models responsive to linguistically and culturally diverse ESL classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how multilingual secondary learners in Eswatini engage in strategic reading across culturally familiar and unfamiliar texts. Although learners employed a range of strategies, their engagement was only moderately developed and predominantly habitual. Crucially, problem-solving strategies were not consistently transferred to culturally unfamiliar texts, indicating that strategic flexibility remains weak, context-dependent, and insufficiently guided by metacognitive control.

The study's primary theoretical contribution, the SET Model, conceptualises a developmental trajectory from habitual, low-awareness strategy use to integrated, automatic strategic competence. This model advances reading strategy scholarship by situating it within African multilingual realities, where linguistic diversity and cultural distance are central to comprehension. As a novel framework applicable to multilingual ESL contexts, the SET Model extends existing theory by illustrating how metacognitive awareness and cultural responsiveness intersect in the development of strategic reading competence.

Practically, the findings underscore that effective instruction must move beyond lists of discrete strategies toward cultivating context recognition, adaptive application, and transfer across tasks. Teachers and curriculum developers can operationalise these insights by integrating metacognitive strategy training and culturally diverse reading materials into instruction, thereby fostering learners' ability to navigate texts from multiple cultural perspectives.

Future research should refine and test the SET Model longitudinally and through intervention-based studies, particularly those that embed explicit metacognitive training within culturally varied reading programs. Such studies would clarify how learners progress from routine strategy use to conscious adaptation and, ultimately, to flexible, automatic competence. More broadly, this line of inquiry can inform teacher training, curriculum design, and cross-cultural reading instruction in multilingual settings worldwide. By aligning theoretical innovation with pedagogical application, the SET Model contributes a forward-looking framework for understanding and enhancing strategic reading development in globalised learning environments.

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