

How “Guessing Meaning from Context” and “Making Inferences” Can Be Taught through Literature Teaching

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The purpose of this study is to show how the two most basic reading skills in an EFL teaching of reading - guessing meaning from context and making inferences - can be taught through literature teaching. To this end, this study has chosen two of the most popular English literature in Korea to show how in practice it can be applied in an EFL reading class. This study points out and explains 10 instances of guessing meaning from context and 33 instances of making inferences. In this way, this study shows that when examples that are relevant to the two reading skills are well-chosen they promote and strengthen the learners overall reading competency and make them more fluent readers. The limitation of this study, however, lies in the absence of specific teaching suggestions based on the “actual classroom experiment.” The administration of reading tests to ascertain how well Korean EFL learners perform the two reading skills - guessing meaning from context and making inferences - and with which features of them they have most difficulty with would have provided a better framework for developing a ‘teaching plan’ for the above two reading strategies.

[context/inferences/literature/문맥/추론/문학]

I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching English literature to learners whose native language is not English is challenging for any EFL teacher. It is challenging because, unlike the texts found in ELT books, the texts of literature make use of literary writing techniques which even advanced learners of EFL often find it hard to comprehend. These

writing techniques include alliteration, similes, metaphors, irony, personification, hyperbole, flashbacks and so on. Then, how can EFL practitioners make literature more appealing to the EFL learners? Since, quite often, even the most advanced EFL learners view literature as something to be avoided unless one is required to study it, EFL teachers must narrow down the scope of their teaching when it comes to the teaching of English literature.

As such, this paper argues that the EFL learners should be taught the most basic reading skills - namely guessing meaning from context and making inferences - to gradually instill the readers' sense of confidence in their ability to comprehend and enjoy English literature. However, in order to effectively teach these two reading skills to the EFL learners a few preconditions exist. They are as follows: 1) Use simplified versions of great works of literature in which information, structure and vocabulary are controlled to suit the learners' ability. ELT teachers must keep in mind that many EFL learners, at the outset, feel intimidated by sheer number of pages they have to read in a typical work of literature. 2) Select literature that are appropriate for target reading skills. Before assigning any works of literature the teacher must screen them firsthand to see that there are plenty of examples of sentences with which to teach the target reading skills. 3) Stress top-down reading strategy when teaching guessing meaning from context. Even if all the individual words in a sentence are not understood teach the learners how to guess the meaning of a particular word or expressions from context. It is important for learners to become aware of and become used to guessing meanings from context. 4) Incorporate both extensive and intensive reading. Have the learners skim a series of condensed readers containing popular English literature. Once the learners have read a desirable number of readers (e.g. one per week for about 2 months) shift the teaching focus to explaining how to guess meaning from context and make inferences. Give them extracts which are not from the readers they have already read. Use ELT reading materials with literary extracts and exercises which are specifically designed to foster the development of the above two reading strategies.

In this way, learners can come to enjoy extensive reading of English literature without the burden of being tested. Once the learners have acquired the basic skills of recognizing how to guess meaning from context and making inferences have them go back to the readers and apply their skills through detailed reading.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

According to Kramersch (1994), “The pedagogical question may not be whether language teachers should teach literature or not, but, rather: how can language teachers help learners read texts at a variety of levels of meaning?” (p. 8). Kramersch (1994) further opines that, “Foreign language learners have to be exposed to different types of texts, from the most conventional to the most particular, but if they are eventually to find their own voice in the foreign language and culture, literary texts can offer them models of particularity and opportunities for the dialogic negotiation of meaning” (p. 131). As such, guessing meaning from context and making inferences are two essential skills that are required for dialogic negotiation of meaning.

Hall (2005) claims that one of values of teaching literature in second language teaching is that it promotes interpretative and inferential skills. Hall further states that, in the context of the rise of communicative language teaching, literature came to be valued as authentic text. In literature, it was thought that the opportunity for vocabulary acquisition, the training of critical thinking or reasoning skills, and the development of reading strategies were plenty.

An important step toward a successful teaching of reading skills through literature involves the selection of good literary works. Seok-Moo Choi (2003) argues that the selection of good literary works is a prerequisite to the successful accomplishment of both English and literary education at the same time. Seok-Moo Choi (2003) further believes that short stories with sophisticated literary elements are ideal for the language classroom because they can more easily satisfy students' desire for reading than novels. In this sense, condensed literary readers are like short stories with sophisticated literary elements. All the literary elements, alliteration, similes, metaphors, irony, personification, hyperbole, flashbacks and so on, found in the original piece are also found in condensed literary readers. The only difference is that the information, structure, and vocabulary have been controlled to suit the learners' reading ability.

In the case of *Great Expectations* (Dickens, 2005), it has been written at the highest level - *upper* - with about 2,200 basic words. In the case of *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 2005), it has been written at the second highest level - *intermediate* - with about 1,600 basic words. When one considers that the most frequent 1,000 word families of English covers over 80 percent of the running words in novels (Nunan, 2003), the above two pieces of condensed reader are sufficient enough to teach guessing meaning from context and making inferences even to the advanced EFL learners. Although no survey had been conducted, the

above two pieces have shown to be most popular works of literature, based on student responses, during my more than a decade of teaching a first-year course called “culture seminar.” Students were especially attached to the protagonist of each story, Pip and Gatsby. It most likely is due to a storyline where both protagonists aspire to succeed against all odds, like students themselves in “post-IMF Korea.” The feelings of empathy and sympathy seemed to be especially pronounced. In the process of teaching, I made plenty of references to the many sample sentences which were used to point out how to guess meaning from context and make inferences. The first year students, after years of English study that focused on preparing them for the university entrance examination, responded very positively to the learning of reading strategies through literature.

Brumfit and Carter (1984) espouse that guessing meaning from context is an important reading skill when teaching reading through literature, for they believe:

It is unreasonable to expect non-native speakers to approach literary texts in English with the intuitions of a native speaker, but they can be encouraged to approach them with increasing command of different levels of language organization so that they can systematically check and work out *for themselves* the expressive purposes a writer might embrace in fulfilling or deviating from linguistic expectations. ... The processes which the teacher adopting this kind of stylistic approach can facilitate are essentially ones which are open and problem-solving, which complement intuitions about and responses “to the context of the text” and which lay a basis for fuller understanding, appreciation, and interpretation. (p. 20)

Brumfit and Carter (1984) also claim that making inferences is important:

... literature can encourage in students an ability to infer meaning by “interacting with the text.” That is, things are often deliberately left unclear in literary text. The nature of the communication can be problematic, and the student has to search both backwards and forwards, in and across and outside the text for clues which might help to make sense of it. The meaning is self-contained in the language but it is not to be discovered by appeal to neat, simple, conventional formulas. It has ... to be “inferred by procedural activity.” (p. 14)

III. “GUESSING MEANING FROM CONTEXT” THROUGH SELECTED EXAMPLES FROM *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*

Beginning readers and advanced readers have been shown to use the guessing strategy more than readers in the middle levels (Barnett, 1989). This is probably because beginners don't know much language and have to guess. Advanced readers are likely to guess for the opposite reason; they know enough L2 vocabulary to successfully apply the strategy to unknown words (Dycus, 1997). It is important to remember that not all contexts are equal. Haynes (1984) found that guessing which only required reference to immediate sentence context was more effective than guessing which depended on textual elements farther away from the target word. In other words, guessing using local context is superior to guessing using global context. Because of this, she believes that EFL teachers should only encourage guessing if clues are in the immediate context, but that EFL teachers should also teach when not to guess (Dycus, 1997). Accordingly, if guessing requires global context, the guessing strategy should be abandoned and the dictionary or other resource should be used instead (Dycus, 1997).

In teaching guessing meaning from context, EFL teachers must point out that the context generally gives the following four types of information: a definition of the word, a synonym, an example and contrasting information about the word (Preston, 2003). But, due to the learners' lack of the understanding of the mechanics of retrieving information from each kind of 'context information,' she or he could easily make an error. For example, in the sentence “Anthony wrote about playing ‘Jenga’, a game of blocks, with two friends (Preston, 2003, p. 114),” learners could easily misinterpret Jenga and construe the following meaning - ‘Anthony and two other people wrote about playing a game of blocks with a person named Jenga.’ In this kind of learner error, obviously, the learner does not have the skill of noticing that the definition of a word generally follows a comma or dash. Also, the sentence “Anthony and the other young man had the same idea of what was fun, but Alicia did not ‘share’ that idea (Preston, 2003).” can be construed to mean “Anthony and the other young man discussed their ideas about what would be fun, but did not discuss it with Alice.” The learner who misconstrues this type of sentence, most likely, does not have the automatic awareness that the words like “but” and “although” indicate contrasting information.

On page 11 it shows Joe Gargery, the brother-in-law of the main character

Pip, having this conversation with Pip, “Mrs Joe has been out looking for you, Pip, She's out there now, Pip. And she's got 1) ‘Tickler’ with her. This was very bad news. ‘Tickler’ was a *stick* that I had often ‘felt on my thin body.’ For although I had food, clothes and shelter, my sister was a ‘hard and angry woman’ and would often ‘beat’ me.”

Here, learners have to guess meaning from context. At first, the word “Tickler” doesn't sound like anything its meaning has. The word “tickle” means “to move your fingers gently on someone's skin in order to give them a pleasant feeling or to make them laugh.” But, when Pip says that it is a stick that he had often felt on his thin body and that his sister was a hard and angry woman who would often beat him, the reader must work out a new meaning from context which would fit the above conversation between Pip and Joe. Soon enough, the readers could work out a context that Tickler is a stick with which Mrs. Joe beats Pip.

On page 13, Pip asks his sister where the firing of the guns is coming from. His sister says straightforwardly, “From the 2) ‘Hulks’, the ‘Hulks.’ Then, Pip asks, “... what are the ‘Hulks?’ Mrs. Joe, then, explains “Hulks are prison ships ...” Pip continues, “I wonder who's put into prison ships and why they're put there.” Finally, Mrs. Joe angrily retorts, “People are put in the ‘Hulks’ because they murder and rob and do all kinds of bad things.” Here, the context is very local and straightforward.

On page 24, when Miss Havisham asks Estella to play cards with Pip, Estella exclaims, “Look at his clothes. He's just a 3) ‘common’ working boy!” Here the learners have some local context from which to guess meaning when Estella continues, “What rough hands this boy has! And what heavy boots he's wearing!” As such, learners can guess that the word “common” here refers to someone whose appearance look very plain and of a proletariat class.

On page 27, Pip thinks about the time he spent with Estella. He says “As I walked along, I thought about the strange things I had seen. I thought of Estella and her 4) ‘scorn’.” The clue to guessing the meaning of the word “scorn” follows immediately when Pip continues, “She had made me ashamed of my clothes, my boots and most of all, myself. I wished I had never seen her.” So, learners can, from context, guess that the meaning of “scorn” is to make “someone ashamed of their appearance including all of himself.”

On page 31, Miss Havisham tells Pip to bring his brother-in-law Joe Gargery. When Joe comes to see her she says: “It is time Pip became your 5) ‘apprentice’. Pip has earned his 6) ‘premium’ and here it is. There are

twenty-five guineas in this bag. ... He is your master now. ... Gargery is your master and you must work for him.” She also says this to Joe when Pip says, “But don't you want me to come again, Miss Havisham?” “Pip has been a good boy here. This money is his reward.” Here, the learners must guess the meaning of two words (apprentice, premium) from context. Local context hints that “apprentice” is “someone who works for a master.” Also, local context hints to the readers that “premium” is “a money a person earns as a reward.”

On page 37 comes two expressions whose meaning must be worked out from context. They are 7) “come of age” and 8) “guardian.” When Mr Jaggers says, “Now, Pip you will come into your property when you come of age - when you are twenty-one. Until then, I am your guardian. I have money to pay for your education and to allow you to live as a gentleman.” It is clear here that when a person turns twenty-one he or she becomes old enough or “comes of age.” He or she can spend money freely and make his or her own living arrangements. Likewise, “guardian” is “someone who takes care of a person who hasn't yet come of age.”

Page 40 describes Pip's first meeting with Herbert. “Mr Pip, isn't it? the young man said, with a smile. I went to the market for some fruit. My father tells me you are to be my 9) ‘companion.’ I hope you will like living here. I'm sure we shall be friends.” Learners can guess that a “companion” is “someone you live together with and someone close like a friend.”

Near the end of the story, Pip and Estella, after a long hiatus, meets and shares their feelings for each other. Estella says, “I have changed. I am a better person, I hope. You were kind to me all those years ago, Pip. Be kind to me now. Let us 10) ‘part’ from each other as friends.” Pip answers, “We are friends, friends who will never ‘part.’ For now I have met you again, Estella, I will never let you go.” Then, it is stated, “Estella smiled. I held her hand and we walked together out of the overgrown garden. And I knew that, this time, we would never, never ‘part.’” When Pip says, “I will never let you go,” it is clear that “to part” is “to say goodbye to a person.”

IV. “MAKING INFERENCES” THROUGH SELECTED EXAMPLES FROM *THE GREAT GATSBY*

In order to teach the ability to make inferences to learners, Nunan (2003)

points out that it is imperative that the teacher select a passage that lends itself to making inferences. Nunan (2003) suggests that the class read a portion together and the teacher model the inferences that can be made while reading. It is also suggested that as the class continues to read together, the teacher ask the students to verbalize the inferences they are making. Therefore, Nunan (2003) emphasizes that instead of waiting to test students' ability to make inferences after they read, the class should work together at making inferences while reading.

Often, one of the hardest type of ‘inference questions’ is inferring the ‘moral’ of a story. Moral is not always directly stated. In many cases, the writer suggests the moral through events which take place in the story. For example, a story could talk about a person who does a deed of a ‘Good Samaritan’ and the other person who fails to help because she or he is too busy to stop and take care of the person in need of a help. The ending of story could show the ‘helped man’ thanking the Good Samaritan and praising him as a ‘good man.’ If the reader fails to logically follow the given information of the story, she or he could easily fail to pinpoint the exact moral of the story.

The Great Gatsby is an ideal reader for teaching EFL learners how to make inferences from what is implied or suggested for it has numerous example sentences. Thus, the goal of teaching “making inferences” should focus on teaching learners how to draw out their own conclusion when the information is not stated directly. In total, there are more than 30 instances of text in *The Great Gatsby* where EFL learners can be taught how to make inferences in order to interpret the meaning of what they read.

On page 11, Tom has this to say about Jordan Baker. 1) “She's a nice girl, but she shouldn't travel round the country alone.” What Tom is trying to say here is that when she travels the country she should travel with a man, meaning that it is safer for a young woman to travel with a male companion. On the same page, Daisy tells Nick, 2) “Jordan's from my home town, Nick. We grew up together.” Here Daisy is, in fact, telling Nick that they are very close. Finally, on the same page, Nick Carraway describes Gatsby who was standing on the lawn of his own house as, 3) “But he seemed happy to be alone.” From this description we can infer that Gatsby enjoys solitude.

On page 13, when Tom Buchanan drops by to see Myrtle Wilson, who is married, and tells her to get on the next train to New York for their rendezvous, Nick Carraway asks, 4) “Doesn't her husband care?” Here, what Nick means is that “Does her husband know that she goes to New York to meet

you?”.

On page 20, Nick describes one of the party Gatsby had hosted. He says about Gatsby, “Sometimes they were introduced to Gatsby. 5) Sometimes they never saw him.” From this statement it can be inferred that sometimes Gatsby did not like to meet his guests. As a matter of fact, Gatsby remained aloof from what was going on in his own house.

On page 24, Nick Carraway was speaking to Gatsby without realizing that the man in front of him was Gatsby. Then, Gatsby said, “I’m Gatsby, I thought you knew, old sport. 6) I’m not a very good host, am I?” Here, it can be inferred that since every well-mannered host introduces himself first, Gatsby is saying that he hasn’t been a good host. When Gatsby smiled as he was saying the above, Nick states that, “7) His smile made me feel important.” Here, it could be inferred that not only Gatsby’s smile, but his manners and the way he spoke made Nick to feel that he is very important guest. On the same page, Nick describes Gatsby as the band was playing a new tune in honor of Gatsby. Nick describes Gatsby as, “His face was tanned and his hair was cut short. Gatsby stood there, very straight, his hands in his pockets. 8) I wondered why people seemed a little afraid of him.” The inference that can be made here is that Nick is not afraid of Gatsby at all. Actually, he is beginning to admire Gatsby.

On page 25, near the end of party, Gatsby summons Jordan Baker for a private conversation. After their conversation, Jordan tells Nick “I’ve heard the most surprising thing. But I can’t tell you about it - it’s a secret! I must go. My friends are waiting. 9) Do phone.” Here it can be inferred that only when Nick calls Jordan privately will she tell him the details of her conversation with Gatsby.

On page 26, Gatsby talks about his car to Nick, 10) “It’s pretty, isn’t it, old sport? Have you seen it before?” Gatsby here is implying to Nick that, “Did you know that I had a car as nice as this?”

On page 30, Wolfsheim lauds Gatsby to Nick. He remarks, 11) “He’d never look at another man’s wife.” Any native speaker of English or experienced ELT teacher could infer that Wolfsheim is commenting that Gatsby knows better himself not to become romantically involved with a married woman. On the same page, Nick asks Gatsby about Wolfsheim’s job. Then, Gatsby replies, “No, Meyer Wolfsheim’s a gambler. He’s clever, but he’s done a lot of dangerous things.” Then, Nick asks, “Has he ever been in jail?” Gatsby, then, replies, 12) “They can’t prove anything, old sport. He’s too smart.” Thus, it can be inferred that, due to lack of evidence, Wolfsheim wasn’t convicted of any crime, thus avoiding

going to jail.

On page 32, Nick describes Daisy when she was younger. He says, “She went out with all the young officers. 13) The telephone in her house rang all day long.” When teaching the skill of inferring from the given information we must teach EFL learners to go beyond the literal meaning. Here, the given sentence implies that she was very popular to young man. The phone rang all day long because men were always calling Daisy.

On page 35, Nick talks to Jordan how Gatsby wants to invite Daisy to tea at his house. Nick asks Jordan, “Does Daisy want to meet Gatsby again?” Jordan answered, “Oh, she doesn't know about it. 14) Gatsby wants it to be a surprise.” This remark clearly means that Gatsby wants the moment of his meeting with Daisy to look like a chance meeting.

On page 36, Gatsby asks Nick whether he had talked with Jordan Baker about Daisy's upcoming visit to Gatsby's house. When Nick says, “I've had a talk with Miss Baker, I'll phone Daisy tomorrow. What day would be best?”, Gatsby replied 15) “I don't want to put you to any trouble ...” Here, we can infer that Gatsby is worried and hopes that nothing bad happens to Nick for helping him to meet Daisy. We can be certain about this interpretation for Gatsby continues to plan with Nick about his rendezvous with Daisy. On the same page, he finished off his conversation with Nick by saying, 16) “We must have everything right, old sport.” Here, we can see that Gatsby wants to make sure that all preparations for his upcoming meeting with Daisy are meticulously executed to increase his chance of a perfect reunion with Daisy.

On page 37, Gatsby comes after Nick to the kitchen and closes door. This was right after he finally met Daisy almost five years after their last meeting. Gatsby says, 17) “This is a terrible mistake! It's too late, old sport, too late.” Here it can be inferred that Gatsby is regretting already and feels that nothing good will come out of this meeting. He realizes that it's too late to win back Daisy's love. On the same page, Nick says this after leaving Gatsby and Daisy so that they can talk to each other. 18) “I went to the window. When I took in the tea, I made a lot of noise. But I don't think they heard a sound.” Nick, on purpose, made a lot of noise so that Daisy and Gatsby could talk without being aware of him. Interestingly, Nick states that he doesn't think they heard him make any noise for they were so much into their own conversation.

On page 38, Nick describes Gatsby when Daisy is given the tour of Gatsby's house. 19) “Gatsby had never stopped looking at Daisy. Once, he nearly fell downstairs. He was trying to see everything in his house through her eyes. He

was like a man walking in his sleep.” We can, infer from Nick's description of Gatsby, that Gatsby was mesmerized by Daisy's presence and somehow wanted her approval in everything that she saw. He also couldn't believe that the moment has finally arrived.

On page 39, Gatsby talks about Dan Cody. “He's dead now. 20) He was like a father to me.” From this statement, it can be inferred that Dan Cody was like a mentor and taught Gatsby many things.

On page 42, Tom has this to say about Gatsby. 21) “I'd like to know who Gatsby is and what he does. And I'm going to find out.” This means that he will investigate about Gatsby, because to Tom, Gatsby seems very suspicious.

On page 46, Nick describes how Gatsby and Daisy were acting in the room full of other people. 22) “They looked at each other as though they were alone in the room.” It can be inferred that this kind of sentence is typical of English to mean that they seemed to have fallen in love.

On page 48, Gatsby says this about Tom to Nick. 23) “I can't say anything to him in his house, old sport.” Gatsby obviously wants to say something about him and Daisy to Tom, but he feels that he must refrain from doing so for fear of upsetting Tom at his own house.

On page 50, Tom asks Gatsby, 24) “What kind of trouble are you trying to make between me and my wife?” Tom means, why are you trying to meddle in our marriage and cause rift between Daisy and himself?

On page 52, when Daisy tells Gatsby that she is leaving him for Tom, Nick has this to say. 25) “Gatsby's dream was slipping farther and farther away from him.” Nick realizes that Gatsby's dream would be incomplete without Daisy beside him. It was Daisy, and not Tom, who said directly to Gatsby that she was leaving him for good. As such, Nick is telling that Gatsby came so close to achieving his dream only to see it disappear right before his own eyes. On the same page, it is stated 26) “Tom smiled. He knew that he had won.” It can be inferred that Tom was successful in not losing his wife, Daisy, to Gatsby. It was certain that Daisy would not leave Tom. Tom also says to Daisy, “Go with Mr. Gatsby in his car. 27) He won't trouble you again.” This could be inferred to mean that Gatsby would not again ask Daisy to leave Tom for him. As such, Daisy shouldn't have to be afraid of riding in the Gatsby's car.

On page 56, when Jordan invites Nick to late supper at Daisy and Tom's house, he says, 28) “I had had enough of the Buchanans for one day.” This statement can be interpreted to mean that Nick did not enjoy being in the company of Daisy and Tom. Moreover, their constant quarreling ways did not

endear them to Nick. On the same page, when Gatsby talks about the car accident which killed Myrtle, Nick says 29) “I stared at Gatsby, feeling that I hated him.” From it, we can infer that Nick had believed that Gatsby killed Myrtle with careless driving and that he was beginning to hate everything about Gatsby. But, when Gatsby could not answer Nick's question, “How the hell did it happen?” Nick says, 30) “I suddenly guessed the truth.” By now, Nick realized that Daisy was the driver of the car that had killed Myrtle.

On page 58, Nick describes Tom and Daisy. “Tom was talking and holding Daisy's hand. Daisy looked up at Tom and nodded her head. 31) They looked as though they belonged to each other. They looked as though they were planning something.” Here, Nick is, in fact, saying that they both have the same dishonest character and that they are plotting to blame someone else (most likely Gatsby) for the accident.

On page 60, Nick tells Gatsby, 32) “They're no good. Gatsby! You're better than all of them!” Nick feels that, at least, Gatsby didn't lie when it came to matters where honesty was absolutely required. Also, it is at this moment when Nick felt the humane nature of Gatsby.

Finally, on page 66, Nick says, 33) “Tom stared at me and I knew I had guessed right.” Nick realizes that even though Tom knew that Daisy had killed Myrtle he didn't tell the truth to Wilson, Myrtle's husband. Tom's demeanor clearly gave away to Nick how Tom acted in the aftermath of the car accident.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has clearly shown that, through literature teaching of *Great Expectations* and *The Great Gatsby*, the teaching of two important reading skills - guessing meaning from context and making inferences - can be incorporated into an EFL reading lesson. In order to show how it can be done, ten examples for guessing meaning from context and thirty-three examples for making inferences were respectively chosen from the above two works of literature. Once the EFL teacher has chosen the works of literature with which to teach the target reading skills, she or he should develop study exercises which incorporate the example extracts. In this way, the EFL teacher can encourage the learners to foster and strengthen the two basic reading skills which are instrumental and absolutely necessary in order for the learner to develop fluency in reading.

The limitation of this study, however, lies in the absence of specific teaching

suggestions based on the “actual classroom experiment.” The administration of reading tests to see how well the learners perform the two reading skills - guessing meaning from context and making inferences - and with which features of them they have most difficulty with would have provided a better framework for developing ‘teaching plan’ for the above two reading strategies to Korean EFL learners. In addition, incorporating the latest studies on reading strategies coupled with actual classroom experiment design would have definitely provided a more solid model for teaching reading through literature.

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