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Compensation Learning Strategies That Malawian Learners Use in Written Comprehension in Malawi

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This study aimed to investigate the use of compensation strategies by Malawian teachers and learners in the context of English as a second language (ESL) and its impact on learners' improvement in performance in written comprehension. Reports from the Malawi National Examinations Board (MANEB) for 2013 and 2022 highlighted persistent poor performance in this area, prompting further research. The study was grounded in communicative competence theory, which emphasises the importance of strategic, grammatical, discourse, and sociolinguistic competencies for learners to acquire language rules in various contexts. The study involved three teachers of English and twelve Form Three learners, and being a qualitative study, the sample size was adequate. A case study design was employed. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and a checklist for tracking observable compensation strategies, and employed thematic analysis. The findings revealed an inadequate knowledge gap in the use of compensation strategies among both teachers and learners, contributing to poor written comprehension outcomes. Of the eleven strategies examined, only intelligent guessing was used effectively. The following nine compensation strategies were ineffectively employed by both teachers and learners: switching to the mother tongue, getting help, avoiding communication partially or totally, circumlocution or synonyms or antonyms, adjusting or simplifying or approximating the message, re-reading the text, coining words, dividing the text into sections and literal or back translation. Lastly, selecting the topic was not known by both teachers and learners as one of the compensation strategies used in teaching and learning the English language. The study, therefore, recommends integrating initial teacher training and ongoing professional development to enhance teachers' use of compensation strategy instruction and learners' use of compensation learning strategies in written comprehension, to improve academic performance.

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INTRODUCTION

Written comprehension is a crucial aspect of language acquisition, acting as a bridge between passive language understanding and its active use of compensation language learning strategies, in real-life situations. It involves extracting and constructing meaning from written text, which goes beyond basic word and syntax recognition to include interpreting nuances, inferring context, and synthesising information. Comprehension skills are especially vital for learners to engage with language meaningfully, enabling them to learn word meanings, absorb content, deduce central themes, and respond appropriately to questions.

Compensation strategies, as outlined by Oxford (1990), highlight the proactive measures learners can take to enhance their comprehension and overall language proficiency. These strategies are particularly relevant in contexts like Malawi, where English is learned as a second language and often pose a requirement for learners striving to achieve high proficiency to use them, in written comprehension. The integration of the major language skills—listening, reading, speaking, and writing—along with compensation strategies, is essential for success in this regard.

Compensation strategies serve as a set of techniques that learners employ to navigate gaps in their language knowledge. These strategies not only assist learners but also play a crucial role in fostering a deeper, more intuitive understanding of the language. For instance, learners may seek help from teachers or knowledgeable peers, use circumlocution or synonyms and antonyms, and employ simplified messages to convey their thoughts when faced with linguistic limitations.

This study's focus on how Malawian teachers and learners use compensation strategies reflects ongoing efforts to improve language education and proficiency. It focuses on the two main categories of

compensation language learning strategies (CLLSs) as outlined by Oxford (1990). The aim is to examine which strategies learners use when learning English as a second language and how these strategies can be taught (Dornyei, 1995) to improve English proficiency in Malawi.

By focusing on compensation strategies, this study aims to contribute valuable insights to the academic discourse on CLLSs, particularly in the context of written comprehension in secondary education. Most teachers of English and learners admit that written comprehension is a problematic area in language teaching and learning respectively. These compensation strategies can help learners overcome difficulties and improve their overall language performance, according to Oxford (1990). By examining the effectiveness of these strategies in enhancing language skills, teachers can better understand the challenges learners face and develop more targeted compensation strategy instruction (CSI).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Compensation strategies are one of the six types of learning strategies identified by Oxford (1990), which are categorised into two main groups: direct strategies (comprising compensation, memory, and cognitive strategies) and indirect strategies (including metacognitive, social, and affective strategies). Compensation strategies specifically address gaps in learners' knowledge by helping them guess intelligently in listening and reading, and overcome limitations in speaking and writing skills.

Compensation language learning strategies are essential tools that help learners overcome gaps in their linguistic knowledge and achieve their communicative goals. These strategies act as a bridge between learners' current linguistic abilities in the target language (TL) and the demands of effective communication (Taheri & Davoudi, 2016; Koivula, 2022). Research by Gul Peker and Erdemir

(2021) supports the notion that compensation strategies can be both taught and learned. However, their findings also suggest that less experienced teachers struggle to effectively implement compensation strategies despite receiving training, in contrast to more experienced teachers. This highlights the need for extensive practice, thorough training, and experience to master compensation strategy instruction (CSI).

The importance of Compensation Language Learning Strategies (CLLSs) is multifaceted, encompassing the activation of prior knowledge, fostering self-directed learning, and enhancing strategic competence. As Oxford (1990) notes, these strategies help bridge the gap between what learners already know and new linguistic information, empowering them to take charge of their learning journey. The use of LLSs, especially compensation strategies, plays a critical role in improving learners' performance both within and outside formal educational settings. Dornyei (1995) and Gul Peker et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of teachers incorporating Compensation Strategy Instruction (CSI) to effectively integrate CLLSs into language education, thereby optimising language acquisition. Oxford's (1990) assertion that mastering a new language involves developing listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills highlights the need for strategic training. Such training equips learners with the ability to select appropriate compensation strategies that align with their communicative goals, ultimately fostering Communicative Competence (CC).

Oxford's insights suggest that teachers must thoroughly understand CSIs to guide learners in bridging language gaps through the effective use of compensation strategies, particularly in written comprehension. Teachers of English use CSI to train learners in the effective use of CLLSs, thus improving their comprehension skills and overall performance in English. It is essential that teachers explicitly teach learners the most beneficial compensation strategies for understanding written texts. By doing so, teachers ensure that learners are not only prepared for examination scenarios but also competent in applying these strategies in real-life

situations, where English language proficiency is required.

Compensation strategies fall within the broader framework of communicative competence, which includes grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies, as outlined by Canale and Swain (1980). Grammatical competence involves mastery of lexical items, morphology, syntax, and phonology. Sociolinguistic competence pertains to the appropriate use of language in social contexts, both in speech and writing. Discourse competence refers to the ability to construct meaning in texts by employing lexical and grammatical knowledge. Strategic competence involves using verbal and non-verbal techniques to sustain communication when facing difficulties.

Oxford (1990) also recognised non-verbal strategies like mime and gestures as potential compensation strategies. However, their relevance to written comprehension is limited, and they were not included in this study. Instead, the focus of this study is on strategies that directly enhance learners' ability to comprehend and produce written language, thereby increasing their confidence and effectiveness in using the target language. Shi (2018) highlights that integrating various Language Learning Strategies (LLSs)—including compensation, memory, and social strategies—can significantly boost learners' confidence and proficiency. However, this study concentrates solely on compensation strategies, acknowledging that language learning involves the use of multiple strategies.

Receptive skills like listening and reading provide the foundation for comprehension by requiring learners to guess intelligently using linguistic and non-linguistic clues to grasp the essence of the target language (Oxford, 1990). This intelligent guessing involves using linguistic cues, such as titles and keywords, and non-linguistic cues, such as pictures and diagrams, to activate prior knowledge and construct meaning from the text. Meanwhile, productive skills such as speaking and writing help learners overcome limitations by using various compensation strategies to express themselves and communicate effectively.

Researchers such as Rubin (1975), Stern (1975), and Oxford (1990) have emphasised the importance of compensation strategies, suggesting that teachers can significantly improve learners' performance by focusing on techniques used by successful learners, particularly in reading comprehension, to enhance communicative competence.

In Malawi, previous research by Ngwira (2011), Mmela (2006), Kamlongera (2010), Chisamba (2014), and Chataika, Kamchedzera & Semphere (2017) focused on general teaching strategies in various primary and secondary schools but did not address the six key language learning strategies identified by scholars. These studies lacked specific attention to compensation learning strategies (CLLSs), creating a gap that this current study seeks to fill. This issue is not unique to Malawi; studies by Gul Peker et al. (2021) and Syafryadin et al. (2020) similarly found that learners often use circumlocution or synonyms when encountering unfamiliar words.

In the context of Malawi, where English is not the first language for many, the ability to compensate for skill gaps is invaluable. Compensation strategies

ensure that learners can continue advancing in their language acquisition, leading to improved educational outcomes and greater proficiency in English. This aligns with Malawi's educational goals, which emphasise effective learning and performance excellence.

Pearson and Dole's (1987) model for strategy training in first language (L1), learners provide a structured approach that includes explicit instruction and teacher modelling of strategies. This model enhances learners' understanding and application of learning strategies, fostering self-efficacy. The model outlines a seven-step sequence that begins with explaining the benefits of a strategy and demonstrating its use. Learners then practice and apply these strategies in new contexts, reinforcing their ability to independently adapt and implement them. Shi's (2018) research also supports this scaffolded approach, highlighting the critical role of teacher guidance in helping English language learners become proficient in using compensation strategies. Based on Pearson and Dole's (1987) model, the sequence for training learners to use a learning strategy includes seven steps.

Table 1: Pearson and Dole's (1987) Model

| |
|---|
| 1. Initial modeling of the strategy including explanations on how and importance of using a particular compensation strategy. |
| 2. Initial modeling of the compensation strategy by the teacher. |
| 3. Definitions of each type of compensation strategy and explanations by the teacher. |
| 4. Provide guided practice with the strategy. |
| 5. Consolidation whereby teachers would help learners if they fail to identify the strategy and decide when it might be used and why. |
| 6. The teacher lets learners have independent practice with the strategy. |
| 7. Lastly, allow learners apply the strategy to new tasks. |

Source: Pearson and Dole (1987)

The significance of strategy training in language learning cannot be overstated. It provides learners, particularly those who have struggled in traditional learning environments, with a toolkit of compensation strategies. The checklist in this study had the following compensation strategies: guessing intelligently with linguistic and non-linguistic clues, switching to the mother tongue, seeking help from teachers or peers, avoiding communication partially or entirely, selecting the topic, using circumlocution, synonyms, or antonyms, re-reading the text, coining

new words, dividing the text into sections, and literal or back translation (Oxford, 1990; Dornyei, 1995; Tarone, 1988).

These strategies are essential for developing the four fundamental language skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Research by Zohreh and Sharareh (2018) underscores the importance of Language Learning Strategies (LLSs) in offering learners the necessary scaffolding to effectively process input and produce output. By employing strategies like switching to their mother tongue or

seeking help from teachers or knowledgeable peers, learners can consciously apply compensation strategies to achieve proficiency in the target language. However, it is important to recognise that the choice of LLSs is highly individualised, shaped by factors such as the learner's proficiency level, learning context, and personal language goals beyond the acquisition of core language skills.

Theoretical Framework

The current study on communicative competence (CC) in language learning addresses a crucial area, particularly in contexts where English is not the first language. Originally introduced by Dell Hymes (1972) and later expanded upon by Canale and Swain (1980), the concept of communicative competence provides a theoretical framework for understanding how learners use Compensation Language Learning Strategies (CLLSs) to enhance both language comprehension and production. This framework emphasises the importance of not only grammatical knowledge but also the ability to apply language in real-life situations, as highlighted by Zambrana (2020).

Oxford's (1990, p. 47) theory of compensation strategies supports this notion by proposing that learners can still communicate effectively in a new language despite having gaps in their linguistic knowledge. Savignon (2018) further aligns with Hymes' theory of language competence, arguing that the purpose of language study should be guided by the learner's ability to communicate. Savignon asserts that language development must be evaluated through practical use, reinforcing the idea that communicative competence is key to language mastery.

The present study adopts communicative competence as its guiding theoretical framework because learners of English as a second or third language, particularly in Malawi, face significant difficulties that require strategic competence. The use of CLLSs is critical for Malawian learners, as it helps bridge the linguistic gaps that often hinder effective communication in English. By focusing on the importance of compensation strategies, the study emphasises their role in overcoming these difficulties and facilitating language acquisition.

Choosing communicative competence as the central theory underscores the importance of grammatical, strategic, discourse, and sociolinguistic competencies in language learning, particularly for non-native English speakers. The ultimate goal is to help learners achieve full communicative competence, ensuring that their language study goes beyond theoretical knowledge to include practical, real-world application—particularly in the area of written comprehension.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach within a constructivist philosophical paradigm. Qualitative research is designed to explore and understand the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2014). The constructivist paradigm influenced the researcher to use the case study design to directly access and interpret the study which enabled the researcher to investigate compensation strategies which learners used to overcome challenges in written comprehension. Similarly, this paradigm shaped the researcher to use open-ended questions to generate data through semi-structured interviews, observations and document reviews (journals) and finally thematic analysis was employed. However, a common critique of qualitative research is its inherent subjectivity, as it often relies on personal interpretations and conclusions based on subjective claims. In this study, participants' responses were influenced by their personal beliefs and the compensation strategies they used to achieve their goals of learning English through written comprehension.

To address the issue of subjectivity, the researcher used various data generation methods, such as interviews, observations, and document analysis, to increase the validity and reliability of the findings. The research was conducted in a classroom environment, the natural setting for teaching and learning, where the researcher observed how teachers and learners utilized compensation strategies in written comprehension.

Research Design

This study adopted a case study design, which is particularly valuable in qualitative research when an

in-depth investigation is needed (Creswell, 2009). A case study allows researchers to explore the complexities and nuances of behaviours, processes, or events that might not be captured in broader surveys or experimental studies.

The richness of data obtained from multiple methods, such as observations, interviews, and document analysis, provides a holistic understanding of how learners apply compensation strategies to learn the target language and achieve self-efficacy. This approach allows the researcher to directly observe what happens in real school settings, offering insights that can inform teaching practices and support learner development (Silverman, 2006).

Sampling and Population

The study used purposive sampling to select participants, focusing on twelve Form Three learners and three teachers of English who had a deep understanding of Compensation Language Learning Strategies (CLLSs). According to the qualitative case study research design, a small sample size was appropriate for this study. Purposive sampling enables the researcher to target specific characteristics within a population, making it well-suited for the case study design. The direct engagement with educational practices in secondary schools offers a real-world perspective on the application of CLLSs, as highlighted by Silverman (2006).

Selection of Schools and Participants

Schools in the Central West Education Division (CWED) of Lilongwe District, Malawi, were selected for this study, with an emphasis on urban Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs). This selection was based on strategic criteria, ensuring that the schools chosen had sufficient resources and qualified teachers to provide a strong research framework. The focus on urban schools highlights the disparities in resources between urban and rural schools, which can significantly affect the effectiveness of strategies like CLLSs in improving written comprehension skills.

This study's approach sheds light on the educational landscape in Malawi, offering insights into how compensation strategies can be effectively used to

achieve successful learning outcomes. The choice of schools ensures that the data collected is rich and relevant to the research questions.

Teacher and Learner Participation

The dual approach of involving both teachers and learners in the study offers a comprehensive view of the language learning process. Teachers serve as key informants, providing context and depth, while the learners' use of compensation strategies presents a practical perspective on language acquisition. By observing both groups, the study captures the practical application of theoretical strategies in real-world settings.

Data Generation Methods

The methodology employed in this study reflects a thorough and well-rounded approach to data generation, emphasising both ethical considerations and methodological rigour. A range of data collection methods, including observations, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, were used to gain a comprehensive understanding of learners' use of compensation strategies in English language learning. There were three FGD groups, one from each school, composed of four learners (two boys and two girls). The researcher asked the same question to each one of them and was allowed to clarify or add points to a certain answer which others had already answered and were thematically analysed based on the specific research question being addressed. Participant observation was also done, where the researcher remained a passive observer (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011), allowing for unobtrusive data collection, and capturing the natural dynamics within the classroom. The strategic use of checklists and field notes, aligned with the research objectives, highlights the meticulous planning that ensured the relevance and richness of the collected data.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Punch (2009) and Creswell (2014), was used to interpret the qualitative data. This method involved identifying patterns and themes that emerged from the data and aligning them with participants' perspectives and the overarching research questions. Organising the data into specific

themes provided a clear, structured explanation of the findings.

To manage the potential challenge of data overload, the researcher employed multiple data generation methods. This not only facilitated data management but also strengthened the research's validity by minimising biases and enhancing the credibility of the results.

Pilot Study

The pilot study served as a vital preparatory phase, allowing the researcher to refine both data generation tools and procedures. This preliminary stage not only tested the effectiveness of the instruments but also ensured that participants understood the questions, which was crucial for the validity of the data. Insights gained during this phase enabled the researcher to make necessary adjustments, thereby improving the reliability and relevance of the main study's findings. Furthermore, the pilot study allowed the researcher to gain proficiency in using the tools and to anticipate potential challenges that could arise during the full study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are essential to safeguarding participants' rights and well-being throughout the research process. Robson (2011) underscores the importance of adhering to moral principles,

particularly when dealing with human subjects. In this study, the researcher addressed ethical concerns by maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, obtaining informed consent, and securing permission to conduct research in the selected schools. To protect privacy, participants were assigned codes instead of real names, and names were dissociated from responses.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study of compensation strategies in language learning is crucial, especially in contexts where English is not the first language. In Malawi, where learners are acquiring English as a second language, compensation strategies can significantly enhance comprehension and performance. The referenced researchers such as Oxford (1990), Dornyei (1995) and Tarone (1988), have provided frameworks that categorise compensation strategies which can be employed to overcome linguistic deficiencies. By utilising a checklist based on their theories, teachers in Malawi can swiftly identify and implement the most effective strategies for their learners. This approach not only aids in the immediate improvement of written comprehension but also equips learners with the tools to independently navigate the use of several types of compensation strategies that would enable them to foster long-term language acquisition and proficiency.

Table 2: Data Generation Checklist

| Guessing intelligently in listening and reading | | Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing |
|---|---|--|
| Using non-linguistic clues | Using linguistic clues | |
| 1. Picture 2. Knowledge of the situation or context 3. Cultural experiences 4. Title or topic of passage 5. forms of address and social or personal relationship 6. Association with place or interlocutor 7. text structure or general world knowledge | 1. Use of knowledge of the TL 2. Use of affixes (prefixes, infixes and suffixes) on unfamiliar words 3. Use of word order | 1. Switching to mother tongue 2. Getting help from teacher or peers 3. Avoiding communication partially or totally 4. Selecting the topic 5. Circumlocution or synonyms or antonyms 6. Adjusting or simplifying or approximating the message 7. Re-reading the text 8. Coining words 9. Dividing the text into sections 10. Literal or back translation |

Source: (Oxford 1990; Dornyei 1995; Tarone 1988)

Teachers' Use of Compensation Strategies in Written Comprehension

Previous research suggests that teaching strategies are most effective when learners comprehend their purpose, application, and adaptability to new contexts (Oxford, 1990). In this study, observations and interviews with three teachers revealed that they often encouraged students to make educated guesses or use non-linguistic clues—such as the title of the passage or contextual cues—before reading. However, the teachers did not explicitly teach compensation strategies during the reading process, indicating a gap in strategy instruction. This finding highlights the need for more explicit and structured teaching of compensation strategies in schools. Research has shown that teachers acquire compensation strategy instruction knowledge through pre-service and ongoing professional development, which positively impacts their effectiveness (Harris & Sass, 2008).

In this study, teachers implicitly guided learners to use compensation strategies to overcome language limitations, such as switching to the mother tongue, asking for help from teachers or peers, avoiding communication, using synonyms or antonyms, re-reading the text, or translating text back and forth. However, the lack of explicit instruction resulted in learners not fully understanding when, how, or why to use these strategies. This observation aligns with findings from Gao (2018), Abdelati (2019), and others, who emphasise that explicit compensation strategy training can significantly enhance learners' speaking and writing abilities. Furthermore, recent studies by Li et al. (2022) show that learners who receive explicit instruction in reading strategies demonstrate notable improvements in comprehension.

During in-depth interviews (IDIs), the three teachers responded to the research question on compensation strategy instruction with the following:

T1: *"I encourage them to re-read sentences or text, find the main points, and summarise in their own words."*

T2: *"I ask them to guess from context and use their own words."*

T3: *"I instruct learners to re-read, use synonyms, and guess from context."*

These responses reveal that the teachers primarily mentioned re-reading, guessing, and using synonyms but did not teach learners how to apply these strategies in context. This lack of explicit instruction hindered students' understanding of difficult words, grammar, and text comprehension, preventing them from fully benefiting from the compensation strategies. As a result, learners missed opportunities to expand their vocabulary and improve their written comprehension.

The findings suggest that both teachers and learners faced challenges in using CSIs and Compensation Language Learning Strategies (CLLSs) due to a gap between instruction and application. This aligns with Alghonaim's (2020) findings, which stress the importance of explicit instruction in compensation strategies to engage learners in effective comprehension.

Teachers' Lack of Knowledge in Compensation Strategy Instruction

The study revealed a significant gap in the teachers' understanding of Compensation Language Learning Strategies (CLLSs) and their ability to impart these strategies to learners effectively. Teachers T1, T2, and T3 admitted to being unfamiliar with the term "compensation strategy" and acknowledged not receiving formal training in Compensation Strategy Instruction (CSI). As a result, their teaching methods lacked explicit modelling or instruction in these strategies, which are essential for improving learners' comprehension skills.

Instead, the teachers relied on informal methods, such as passing down knowledge from their predecessors or using their own experiences, which proved insufficient for teaching CLLSs effectively. This reliance on informal practices underscores the need for structured professional development programs to equip teachers with the necessary skills to teach CLLSs meaningfully and effectively.

Professional Development and Teacher Training Needs

The findings underscore a significant disconnection between the teaching of CLLSs and their practical

application in Malawian classrooms. Teachers T1, T2, and T3 demonstrated a lack of knowledge and pedagogical skills to effectively impart these strategies. Their reliance on unstructured "simulation knowledge" rather than formal CSI training resulted in superficial instruction, where learners were encouraged to use strategies such as re-reading or guessing from context without understanding how to apply them meaningfully.

To address this gap, the study suggests implementing comprehensive professional development programs focused on CSI. Such initiatives would equip teachers with the theoretical knowledge and practical skills necessary to teach CLLSs effectively, leading to improved reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and overall academic performance.

In-service training for teachers is a critical component of educational development, particularly in Malawi, where English comprehension and the use of CLLSs are essential for learners' success. Research suggests that effective in-service training equips teachers with the necessary skills to teach CLLSs, which are vital for helping learners navigate the complexities of language learning and compensate for their limitations in English proficiency (Gul Peker et al., 2021). The significance of such training is reinforced by the fact that learners often acquire CLLSs directly from their teachers of English. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the effectiveness of Compensation Strategy Instruction (CSI) training for teachers in Malawi, particularly in relation to written comprehension skills; a need for further research and development of in-service training programs tailored to these specific educational needs.

Additionally, the lack of data on learners' knowledge of compensation strategies in Africa, particularly in Malawi, represents an area for potential investigation and curriculum development. The literature emphasises that learners acquire CLLSs from their teachers of English (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Cohen, 2011; Yaman, 2013; Manara, 2020). As the educational landscape evolves, it is imperative that in-service teacher training programs remain responsive to the changing demands of

language education. This will ensure that teachers are well-prepared to foster a learning environment in which learners can effectively use CLLSs and improve their language performance.

Learners' Use of Compensation Learning Strategies

The use of Compensation Language Learning Strategies (CLLSs) in language acquisition is essential, but what truly matters is how effectively they are taught and applied to achieve desired outcomes. This section addresses the second research question: *"In what ways are compensation learning strategies used in written comprehension to improve learners' performance?"* The responses were drawn from IDIs, FGDs, classroom observations, and learners' journal entries.

In this study, all learner participants demonstrated some use of CLLSs in written comprehension, such as intelligent guessing using linguistic and non-linguistic cues. Nevertheless, the ways in which these strategies were employed were crucial for ensuring comprehension and improving performance. The researcher observed that while learners reported using compensation strategies during interviews, they had learned these strategies without any explicit modelling from their teachers. This lack of guidance made it challenging for learners to apply the strategies effectively, particularly in major language skills such as reading and writing.

While some learners reported using CLLSs, such as L10's response: *"I use general understanding of the story to express myself when I encounter difficult words,"* and L8's comment: *"I ask my teacher or peers to help me,"* these strategies were not taught in a systematic way. The disconnection between learners' reported strategies and their lack of knowledge on how to apply compensation strategies effectively suggests that learners were acquiring CLLSs implicitly rather than through structured instruction. This gap further emphasises the need for explicit compensation strategy instruction during reading comprehension activities.

The findings contrast with studies by Farrokh and Sharifi (2019), which highlight the effectiveness of linguistic cues like prefixes, suffixes, and word order

in vocabulary acquisition. In the current study, the absence of exercises focused on practising CLLSs contributed to a vocabulary gap, hindering learners' ability to comprehend the text fully.

The findings also indicated that both teachers and learners engaged with CSI and CLLSs respectively to some extent, enabling learners to navigate limitations in written comprehension. However, for these strategies to enhance learners' performance in a second language context, their proper use is vital.

For example, some learners explained their approach:

"I use knowledge of culture." (L3)

"I use knowledge of a picture." (L8)

"I use the meaning of the topic of the passage." (L10)

Teacher interviews and classroom observations confirmed that learners primarily relied on guessing based on cultural, pictorial, and topical cues as their primary CLLS. Both teachers and learners frequently used compensation strategies in written comprehension, aligning with studies by Shakarami et al. (2017) in Australia and Manda (2022) in Indonesia, which also reported the prominent use of intelligent guessing among teachers and students. However, out of the eleven types of CLLSs identified in this study, only one—intelligent guessing—was actively employed. This highlights the need for broader use of strategies to enhance comprehension skills, emphasising the importance of fostering critical thinking and problem-solving abilities in learners.

The study sheds light on a key aspect of language acquisition: the effective use of compensation strategies to improve written comprehension. While prior research by Tajeddin et al. (2010), Hashim, Yunus, and Hashim (2018), and Manda (2022) has shown that learners use compensation strategies to overcome language limitations, the current study reveals a gap in how these strategies are taught. Though compensation strategies—such as re-reading, simplifying meanings, and guessing from context—are crucial for improving comprehension, teachers often introduce these strategies without adequately demonstrating their application. As a

result, learners were able to name strategies but struggled to apply them effectively.

The findings suggest that teachers could significantly enhance learner outcomes by modelling compensation strategies. The study emphasises the need for teachers to not only introduce but also actively demonstrate the use of various CLLSs, empowering learners to better comprehend English texts.

For example, some learners described their use of mother-tongue switching as follows:

"I think of a word or sentence in vernacular and ask a friend to give the meaning in English." (L2)

"I interpret it in Chichewa when speaking but not writing." (L6)

"We sometimes think or discuss in vernacular but write answers in English." (L7) (School C, FGD)

The researcher observed that many learners were aware of using their native language as a compensatory learning strategy, switching to their mother tongue for comprehension. Nevertheless, this strategy often resulted in direct, word-for-word translations, which were not effective in improving comprehension, particularly given the diversity of linguistic backgrounds among learners. The findings suggest that learners had a limited understanding of how to navigate difficulties in speaking and writing using compensation strategies during written comprehension tasks. To enhance language proficiency, it is crucial to develop compensation strategies that go beyond mere translation, fostering a deeper grasp of the instructional language and promoting stronger communication skills across linguistic contexts.

In this study, intelligent guessing was the most commonly employed strategy, used by 75% of learners (nine out of twelve), although it was often used incorrectly, leading to the selection of unsuitable words. For example, one learner mentioned using synonyms or antonyms based on the passage:

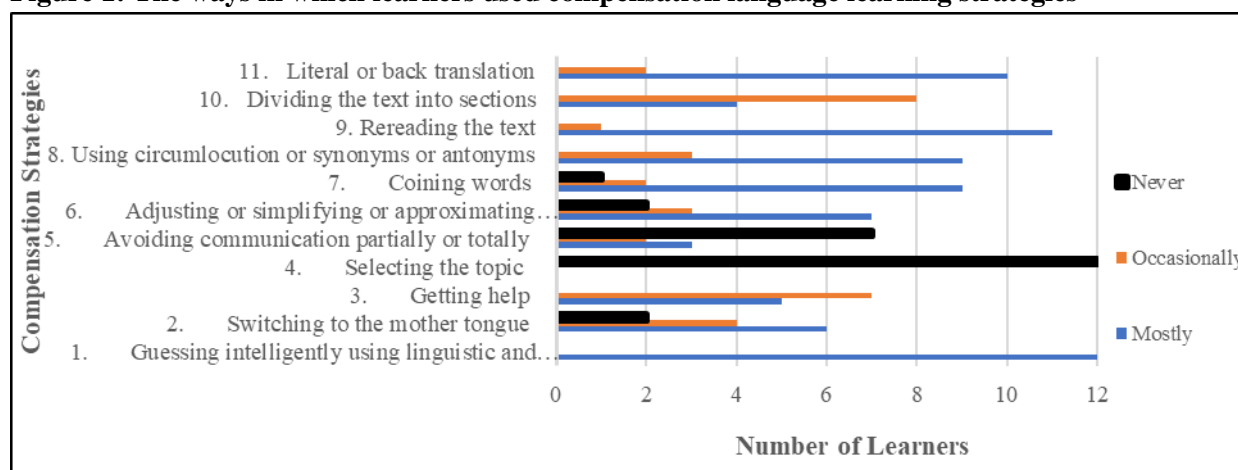
"I explain the concept based on the passage or use similar or opposite words." (L1)

Despite claims of using re-reading as a strategy for comprehension, the majority of learners (91.7%, or 11 out of 12) reported no significant improvement in understanding or accuracy in answering questions. This discrepancy highlights a gap in the effective application of CLLSs necessary for improving written comprehension. Furthermore, learners never

used selecting the topic because, in Malawi, teachers choose the passage for them to learn comprehension from.

The findings point to the need for teachers to facilitate a deeper understanding of these strategies and ensure their correct usage. Only then, can learners improve their proficiency in written comprehension and develop stronger language skills.

Figure 1: The ways in which learners used compensation language learning strategies



Source: Researcher's data generation (2021)

The study of Compensation Language Learning Strategies (CLLSs) in the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) reveals a complex array of techniques learners use to overcome language acquisition challenges. Research from Malawi offers a fascinating contrast to Yang, Zang, and Xy's (2021) findings, highlighting differences in the use of strategies such as re-reading across cultural contexts. This divergence underscores the adaptive nature of language acquisition, where strategies like guessing word meanings from context, as discussed by Hui, Yong, Yi, Xuan, and Hashim (2022), are crucial for enhancing reading comprehension. The moderate use of switching to the mother tongue, as observed in Koivula's (2022) study with Finnish learners, further illustrates the varied approaches to overcoming linguistic barriers. Nine strategies in this study were not used as expected, except guessing intelligently which the three teachers guided and explicitly taught the learners.

In the present study, learners provided insights into their use of CLLSs when faced with difficult words:

"I just leave it." L5.

"I just keep quiet when I encounter a problem with difficult words or expressions." L7.

"I ask my fellow students or teacher." L8.

Five other learners (L1, L2, L4, L10, and L12) responded just like L8 but what mattered most was that the peers should be knowledgeable ones. Nevertheless, the strategy of avoiding communication, consistent with Syafryadin et al.'s (2020) research, raises concerns about its efficacy. Avoiding engagement with challenging language elements may hinder learners' ability to fully understand and respond to material.

The findings show that learners had limited knowledge of how to use CLLSs effectively. They often failed to explain how strategies were employed in written comprehension, resulting in low-performance improvement. Some learners resorted to their mother tongue, particularly in group tasks, which aligns with Mansor's (2017) findings linking mother tongue use with language proficiency even

though the three teachers were discouraging them. In the present study, the three teachers discouraged learners from switching to their mother tongue, which contrasts with Taheri and Davoudi (2016), who found that learners often use literal translations or mother-tongue switching to convey a meaning when faced with linguistic limitations. The reliance on the mother tongue in collaborative settings underscores its role as a scaffold for comprehension and task completion, echoing Mansor's (2017) findings.

Despite this, the overall use of these strategies was rare and ineffective, leading to poor performance in speaking and writing tasks. For instance, 8 out of 12 learners, 66.7% reported dividing texts into sections, while the remaining four did not use this strategy at all.

The findings of the present study reveal a significant gap in both the learners' effective use of CLLSs and the teachers' implementation of CSI in written comprehension. The lack of formal training for teachers in compensation strategies has led to suboptimal implementation, affecting learners' ability to utilise CLLSs effectively and hence strategies were not employed as expected. The reliance on peer or teacher assistance, which is unavailable during examinations, exacerbates the issue. The findings suggest an urgent need for educational interventions that focus on building both teachers' and learners' capacity in using CSI and CLLSs, fostering self-efficacy among learners, and encouraging the autonomous use of language learning strategies.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The research underscores the importance of strategy-based instruction in language learning, which supports learners in accessing, organising, and synthesising new information while promoting higher-order thinking. This study revealed that while the three teachers instructed learners to use strategies like intelligent guessing, they missed opportunities to provide proper training to enhance written comprehension. According to the data generation checklist and observations, learners implicitly used strategies such as switching to the mother tongue, avoiding communication, selecting the topic, circumlocution, adjusting or simplifying messages,

re-reading, coining words, dividing texts into sections, and literal or back translation. The learners failed to explicitly explain during IDIs, and FGDs and according to the researcher's observation in the classroom how they actually used CLLSs except in guessing intelligently strategy because they were actually taught. This aligns with Teng (2023), who advocates for integrating strategy-based instruction into regular language classes, and Shi (2018), who highlights the need for scaffolding strategy instruction for ESL learners.

The implication is that effective use of compensation strategies requires both teacher training in CSI and learner practice of CLLSs. This could be achieved through teachers' continuous modelling during teacher training programs or in-service courses, ensuring that learners can apply these strategies during written comprehension lessons to improve their performance. Such training would enable teachers to integrate these strategies into their daily instruction, particularly during written comprehension lessons, ultimately leading to improved learner outcomes in Malawi. This approach would benefit learners' immediate comprehension abilities and equip them with lifelong skills to approach language learning with greater confidence and competence.

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