



The Effect of Top-Level Structures in Developing Reading Comprehension of ESL Learners at AMU Girls High School

Asfia Khanam¹, Anam Shams² & Shagufta Imtiaz³
Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh

Abstract

This paper explains how reading becomes more effective when learners make use of top-level structures to develop their reading skills and comprehension level. In the current study, top-level structures were used as an organizer to support learners in improving their reading skills and comprehension level. The study looks after the effects of top-level structures in developing a skill of organization while reading and comprehending. The ESL (English as a Second Language) learners were given an expository unseen passage; they were asked to comprehend that passage and then were asked to answer the related questions. Questions were patterned in such a way that they ask to describe a certain aspect of the passage, to sequence the ideas according to the passage, and to give causes for the aspects discussed in the passage. Such a practice affects the reading and comprehension ability of the learners and this study attempts to examine all these effects. This study was conducted on school level learners of 9th grade. The study used two point rating scale questionnaires so that the learners of school level can easily answer in 'Yes' or 'No'. The description of some top-level structures was tabulated. This study follows a comparative analysis of the collected data in a pre-test and post-test format. All the statistical analysis of this paper has been done through the SPSS software, MS Word & MS Excel of Windows version 7. Results showed a statistical difference in a hasty manner.

Keywords: Reading comprehension; Top-level structures; Reading skills; ESL (English as a Second Language).

1. Introduction

The introduction begins with defining what is reading comprehension? Reading comprehension is the process of extracting and constructing meaning through the written text. In simple words, reading comprehension is the act of understanding what we are reading, as children learn to read they are able to decode the meaning of the text with the help of cues. If they want to become fluent readers, they must comprehend what they read. In order to help them, teachers should teach some reading comprehension strategies to students, which are easy for them to use. Reading comprehension is the process that occurs before, during and after reading. There are two important elements that make up the process of reading comprehension:

1. Vocabulary knowledge
2. Text comprehension

If a reader wants to understand a written text, he must be able to comprehend the vocabulary that is used in the piece of writing. Now, the question arises that why reading comprehension is so important? The answer is without reading comprehension; reading is nothing more than tracking symbols with your eye and sounding them. Top-level structures play an important role in this study. Now, an important question which comes to our mind is what are top-level structures? Top-level structures are mental patterns of thinking that we all used to respond to what we see, hear or read. Top-level structures develop day by day in ourselves through our everyday experiences which help us to understand what is appropriate or effective use of language in which situation (Turner, 1992). Top-level structures are one form of text structure. It is very helpful for every learner to understand how texts are structured so that they can easily understand and recall whatever they read or hear. The main aim of teachers using top-level structures in the classroom is to help readers through discussion and reading so that readers become aware of how texts are organized and also to increase their comprehension and understanding level. There are some advantages or benefits of using top-level structures such as:

1. Top-level structures enhanced the knowledge and use of the English language.
2. It helps readers to create meanings according to the situations and contexts.
3. If a reader has a proper knowledge of the top-level structure, he can easily recognize how writers' structure ideas in the whole text.
4. Integrating the teaching of top-level structures into the study of content specific subjects, or general reading program facilitates student comprehension of not only course material, but of required tasks and activities.

There are five main top-level structures which mostly occur in the texts:

1. Description
2. Causation
3. Sequencing
4. Comparison/Contrasting
5. Problem/Solution

Given below are the explanations of only three top-level structures which are used in this study and those are:

1.1 Description

Description means defining something, or explanation or representation of something in words. It may be the description of a person, thing or any event. The description is an additional narration that translates images, visual information and written text into spoken words or in written form, so that people who are blind or visually challenged can also access, enjoy and learn from works of popular, cultural, or educational importance.

1.2 Causation

Causation is the capacity of one thing to influence another. It is something that produces an effect or result, of something that happened. Causation is the reason for an action.

1.3 Sequencing

Sequencing means putting something in order, for example, beginning, middle and end. Sequencing events in a story are a comprehension strategy for reading. It is one of many skills that contribute students' ability to comprehend what they read.

These top-level structures include signal words which can help readers to construct an internal representation of the text. The instructional table of Top-level structures which was provided to learners for guidance is attached in the appendix of the paper.

2. Literature Review

Many researches have been conducted on top-level structures. Some recent works were taken into account by many researchers and linguists. One of the popular works done by **Peter Bodycott** (1997) is "**Using Top-Level Structures to Enhance Reader Comprehension of Context Area Texts.**" This paper defines how top-level structures can be used in the primary classroom to develop the readers' ability to comprehend and organize information retrieved from content area texts. This paper concludes by stating the benefits of using top-level structures in content area reading for teachers and in turn pupils. Another research which includes top-level structures was done by **P. M. Raymond** in 1993 in Second Language Institute, University of Ottawa and the topic of research was "**The Effects of Structure Strategy Training on the Recall of Expository Prose for University Students Reading French as a Second Language.**" This study was designed to answer the very important question i.e. Can French as a Second Language reading is facilitated by teaching some organizational patterns of discourse? In this paper, five top-level structures were selected due to their occurrence in prose and those top-level structures are:

1. Description
2. Collection
3. Causation
4. Problem/Solution and
5. Comparison

In this paper, author examined the effects of strategic training in several organizational patterns on the reading recall of university level Anglophones reading well-structured expository texts in French. There was a comparative study between two groups, i.e. control group and an experimental group. According to the tables shown in the journal, the result of this study was positive. Changes can be easily seen in the learners' performances after using top-level structures.

In 1987, **Meyer** in his paper "**Following the author's top-level organization: An important skill for Reading Comprehension**" shows the importance of utilizing top-level structures in text to improve reading comprehension. On the top-level structures, many researches have been conducted and some programs have been developed to teach these skills. Meyer's earlier research examined the effects of structure in text on what people remember from it. His findings point out the importance of top-level structures in prose in influencing that what and how much a learner learned from reading. Here, in this article, Meyer looks at the top-level structures as a strategy in a writer's organizational pattern. **Bartlett** (2003) tried to find the answers of four questions in his paper "**Valuing the Situation: A Referential Outcome for top-level structures**", with this study that provoked his mind plans for claiming to be an educator. And the four questions are:

1. Can non-strategists be taught to be strategic?
2. Do those who use the strategy naturally know what they are on to?
3. At what age might the strategy be acquired?

4. Are there implications for notions of intelligence and learning potential?

As a result of this study, Bartlett believes in a student centered classroom. He said that if education is problem-based, then we should change our educational system. So, the use of top-level structure seems a sensible way to begin.

3. Objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To make a comparison among learner's comprehension level before and after the use of top-level structures.
2. To study the comprehension level of learners after introducing them to the top-level structures.
3. To study the writing ability of the learners after using the top-level structures.
4. To study the relevance of using top-level structures.

4. Research Hypotheses

For this study the following hypotheses have been formulated:

1. There will be no statistical difference between the reading of learners before and after using the top-level structures.
2. There will be no statistical difference between the comprehension level of learners before and after the teaching them about the top-level structures.
3. There will be no statistical difference in the answers of learners before and after using the top-level structures.

5. Methodology

5.1 Subjects

Subjects were 40 in strength and all were Indian students. They were a heterogeneous group of girls. In the classroom, all were the participants and of 14 mean age. They were ESL learners of AMU Girls High School and were studying English language from the very first day of their school. All the books of their course were in English except the books of Urdu, Hindi and Theology. So, that's why this study is valid.

5.2 Procedure

This experiment was conducted in two settings. In the first setting, researcher, distributed the same passage to the students and asked them to read the passage and gave them 30 minutes for reading. The researcher asked students to answer the questions that were given at the end of the passage and gave them another 30 minutes of time. When 30 minutes were over, the researcher collected the sheets from all students and provided them questionnaire consisting 24 questions. Some questions were very general about reading comprehension and others were related to the passage. 15 minutes were given for filling the questionnaire. On the other day, in the second setting, researcher properly taught learners about the top-level structures and how to use them in reading comprehension and took about 1 hour for explanation. The researcher makes use of blackboard in order to explain them through examples and also draw the table of top-level structures such as description, causation and sequencing. The researcher explains each structure one by one through lecture method. After the instructions, the researcher distributed the same passage to the learners and asked them to read it again within 30 minutes. After 30 minutes, the researcher asked learners to stop reading and start answering the questions with the help of the table provided at the end of the page and gave them another 30 minutes. The questions contain three top-level structures which are description, causation and sequencing. As time passed, the researcher collected all the sheets and distributed them another questionnaire which contains 20 questions. From those 20 questions, 10 general questions were same as in questionnaire one. The other questions were different and contain questions about the top-level structures. Time provided for filling questionnaire was 15 minutes. Both the questionnaires contain two point rating scale, so learners of 9th standard can easily answer 'Yes' or 'No' type questions.

5.3 Material

Same text was used in both the settings in order to make comparison between reading comprehension of learners before teaching and after teaching the top-level structures. Two questionnaires were used in these two classes. In the first questionnaire, there were 24 questions. Some were general and others were related to the passage and top-level structures. In the second questionnaire, which were used on the second day, there were 20 questions, 10 were same as in questionnaire one and other were related to the top-level structures. Writing rubric was also used in this study, which was used by the researcher to evaluate the performances of the learners. It was self created and adapted.

5.4 Time

In the first class, 10 minutes were for introduction, 5 minutes for distribution of the sheets, 30 minutes were given for reading the whole passage, another 30 minutes were given for answering the questions, 15 minutes were

given for filling the questionnaire, and the last 5 minutes were for collecting all the sheets from the students. So, the total time that consumes in the first setting is 1 hour and 35 minutes. One period was about 45 minutes long, so first class took 2 periods and 5 minutes. In the second class, 1 hour was given for instructions about the top-level structures and distributing the text, 30 minutes were given for reading the passage; another 30 minutes for answering the questions, 15 minutes for filling the questionnaire and the last 5 minutes were for collecting the sheets. So, total time taken in the second setting was 2 hours and 5 minutes, which means second class took 2 periods and 35 minutes.

6. Results and Findings

TABLE: 1 CROSS TABULATION OF LEARNER RESPONSES OF THE FIRST AND SECOND CLASS (FOR N=40)

Q. No.	Yes		No	
	Before	After	Before	After
CQ1	33	33	7	7
CQ2	26	31	13	9
CQ3	29	19	10	19
CQ4	29	20	11	19
CQ5	26	32	14	8
CQ6	28	30	12	10
CQ7	27	27	13	13
CQ8	25	27	15	13
CQ9	27	25	13	15
CQ10	23	23	17	16

Questions

Q7/Q4. When you don't understand a word did you try on guessing its meaning from its context?

Q10/Q6. When you read do you try to visualize its meaning?

Q11/Q7. While reading do you predict what will happen next?

Q12/Q9. When you read did you relate the passage to your own life?

Q14/Q5. Are you able to understand the main idea of the passage while reading?

Q17/Q2. Were you able to understand the questions which were given at the end of the passage?

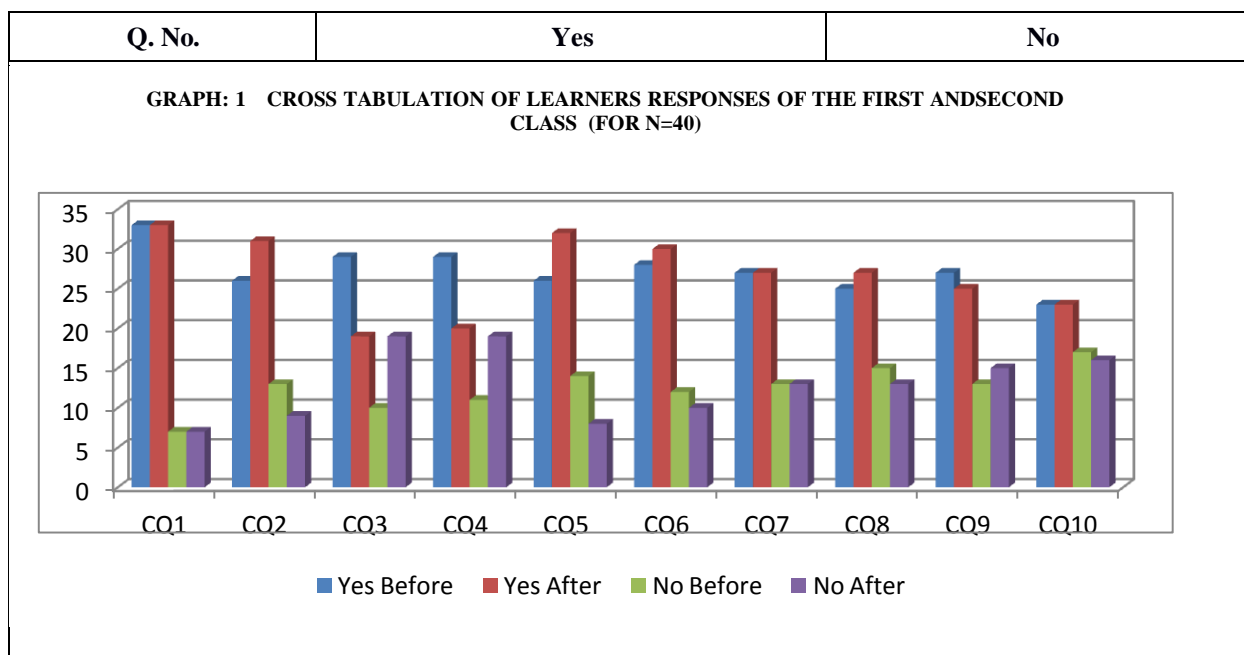
Q18/Q3. Were you able to answer those questions confidently?

Q20/Q8. Did you ask yourself questions while reading the passage?

Q23/Q13. Do you understand more when someone else is reading the passage?

Q24/Q14. Do you feel the need that your teacher explains you the passage?

Table-1 shows the cross tabulation of learners' responses of the first and second class. Each class has 40 students. These questions compare the performance of students and also check whether any improvement takes place in the learner's reading comprehension level. These questions, check the performance of students before using top-level structures and after using top-level structures. These comparative questions, test the reading comprehension level of students. As shown in the above table, CQ1 indicates Q7 of questionnaire one and Q4 of questionnaire two. Likewise, CQ2 indicates Q10 of questionnaire one and Q6 of questionnaire two and so on. These all are comparative questions which compares the performances of the learners before and after using top-level structures.



As graph-1 shows according to students' own opinion, there is no difference in their performance in CQ1 and CQ7 but other questions shows improvement in their performances. So, this shows positive results.

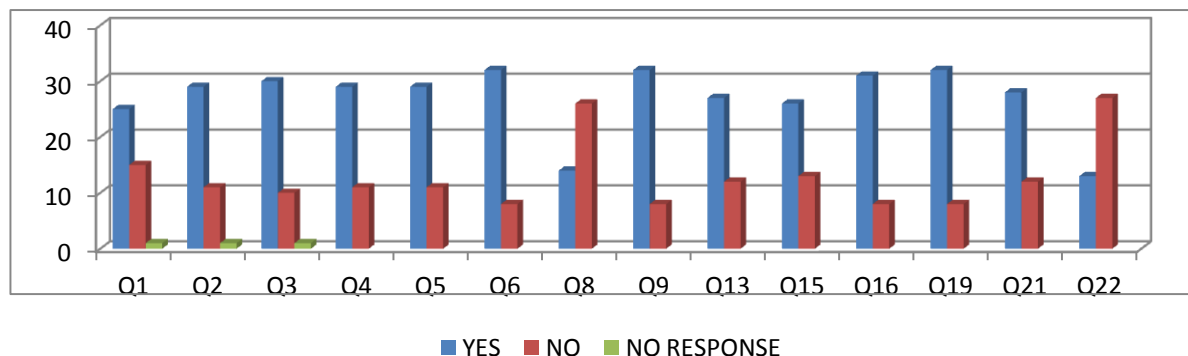
TABLE: 2.1 READING COMPREHENSION BEFORE THE USE OF TOP-LEVEL STRUCTURES (FOR N= 40)

	Statistics													
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q8	Q9	Q13	Q15	Q16	Q19	Q21	Q22
Mean	1.38	1.28	1.25	1.28	1.28	1.20	1.65	1.20	1.28	1.30	1.18	1.20	1.30	1.68
Std. Error of Mean	.078	.071	.069	.071	.071	.064	.076	.064	.080	.082	.071	.064	.073	.075
Std. Deviation	.490	.452	.439	.452	.452	.405	.483	.405	.506	.516	.446	.405	.464	.474

Questions	Mean	Indicates
1. Are you a keen reader?	1.38	Yes
2. Do you hesitate while reading ?	1.28	Yes
3. While reading on your own do you take more time in comprehending a passage?	1.25	Yes
4. Do you like to be tested on reading comprehension?	1.28	Yes
5. When you come across reading a new text do you face problems in comprehending it?	1.28	Yes
6. Do you use the title to figure out what the passage is about?	1.20	Yes
8. If you find any written text difficult to understand do you give up reading it any further?	1.65	No
9. Do you make use of dictionary while reading?	1.20	Yes
13. Do you easily become distracted while reading?	1.28	Yes
15. Do you prefer reading word by word?	1.30	Yes
16. When you read do you read it by connecting its sentences to its entire meaning?	1.18	Yes
19. Did you find this passage interesting?	1.20	Yes
21. Did you prepare in advance for reading test?	1.30	Yes
22. Do you apply any kind of reading strategy whenever you read to comprehend?	1.68	No

Table-2.1 shows the responses of reading comprehension of learners before using top-level structures in reading. This table shows the mean, standard error of the mean and standard deviation of questions. In this questionnaire, the researcher use two point likert scale where 1 stands for "Yes" and 2 for "No", as shown above the mean of Q1 is 1.38. It is more towards 1, so it indicates yes response. And from the table above, we can see that the majority of responses are towards yes and only Q8 and Q22 are showing a negative response.

**GRAPH: 2.1 READING COMPREHENSION BEFORE THE USE OF TOP-LEVEL STRUCTURES
(FOR N=40)**



Graph-2.1 shows students own responses on reading comprehension before using top-level structures. These questions, test reading comprehension level of learners before they use top-level structures and also test their reading ability, for e.g., what type of readers they are, did they like to be tested on reading comprehension and prepare themselves before the test, did they become distracted easily, did they prefer reading word by word. These all are very general questions and mostly according to them majority of responses are positive. But in Q13, Q15 and Q16 some students did not give any response.

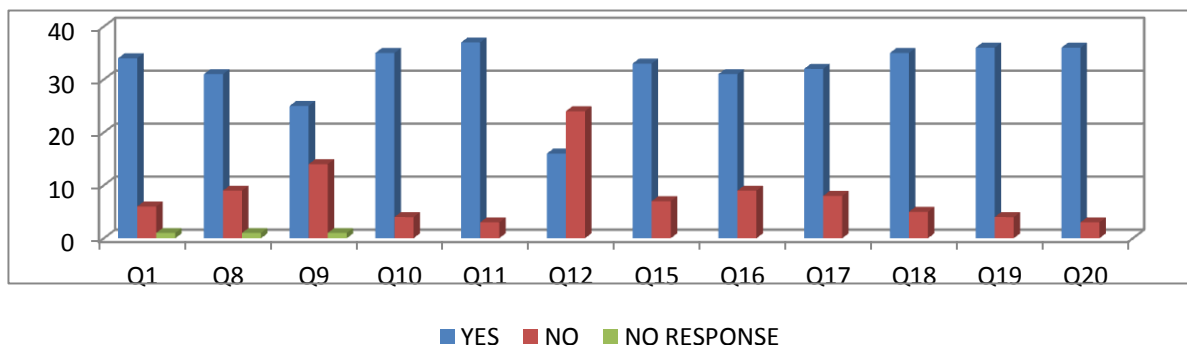
**TABLE: 3.1 READING COMPREHENSION AFTER THE USE OF TOP-LEVEL STRUCTURES
(FOR N= 40)**

		Statistics											
		Q1	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q15	Q16	Q17	Q18	Q19	Q20
Mean		1.15	1.22	1.32	1.08	1.08	1.60	1.18	1.22	1.20	1.12	1.10	1.05
Std. Error of Mean		.057	.067	.083	.055	.042	.078	.061	.067	.064	.053	.048	.050
Std. Deviation		.362	.423	.526	.350	.267	.496	.385	.423	.405	.335	.304	.316

Questions	Mean	Indicate
Q1. Did you find it easier to comprehend the passage by applying top-level structures?	1.15	Yes
Q8. Were you asking yourself questions while reading the passage?	1.22	Yes
Q9. When you were reading the passage did you relate it to your own life?	1.32	Yes
Q10. Do you think that top-level structures would improve your reading comprehension level?	1.08	Yes
Q11. Does the meaning of the passage become clearer by applying top-level structures?	1.08	Yes
Q12. Was it difficult for you to apply the top-level structures while reading?	1.60	No
Q15. Did you find reading interesting while using top-level structures?	1.18	Yes
Q16. Did you read the whole passage again when you were answering sequence question?	1.22	Yes
Q17. Were you easily monitoring your comprehension?	1.20	Yes
Q18. Did you find this passage easier to understand than the first time?	1.12	Yes
Q19. Were you easily able to recall the passage while answering the questions?	1.10	Yes
Q20. Were you feeling more comfortable in answering the question this time when you apply top-level structures?	1.05	Yes

Table-3.1 shows the responses of reading comprehension of learners after using top-level structures in reading. This table shows the mean, standard error of the mean and standard deviation of questions. In this questionnaire, the researcher use two point likert scale where 1 stands for "Yes" and 2 for "No", as shown above the mean of Q1 is 1.15. It is more towards 1, so it indicates yes response. And from the table above, we can see that the majority of responses are towards us and only Q12 is showing a negative response.

GRAPH: 3.1 READING COMPREHENSION AFTER THE USE OF TOP-LEVEL STRUCTURES (FOR N=40)



Graph-3.1 shows students own responses on reading comprehension after the use of top-level structures. These questions, test reading comprehension level of learners after the use of top-level structures and also test how they find top-level structures. Did they feel some kind of improvement among themselves while reading with the help of top-level structures? According to the learners, their responses are positive, but in Q9, Q10 and Q20 some students did not give any response. When we compare table 2.1 and table 3.1, marginal improvement was seen in the performances of the learners. So, we can say that top-level structures proved to be helpful in improving the reading comprehension level of ESL (English as a Second Language) learners.

TABLE: 4.1 COMPARED RESULTS

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	TOTAL1	13.08	40	1.859	.294
	TOTAL2	13.12	40	1.937	.306

TABLE: 4.2

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	TOTAL1 & TOTAL2	40	.104	.523

TABLE: 4.3

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	TOTAL1 - TOTAL2	-.050	2.541	.402	-.863	.763	-.124	39	.902

Table 4.1 shows the total mean of the pre and the post stage. Mean of first class, i.e. before using top-level structures is 13.08 and the mean of the second class, i.e. after using top-level structures is 13.12. Calculated mean, clearly shows the improvement in the performances of the learners after using top-level structures. Table 5.1 shows the minor correlation between both the classes. Table 4.3 shows the level of minor significance, but if we take the time period in which this study was carried out then the least significance is a positive sign. Learners' found the top-level structures effective and if such top-level structures are implemented for longer durations than its significance level will be raised to give a positive impact.

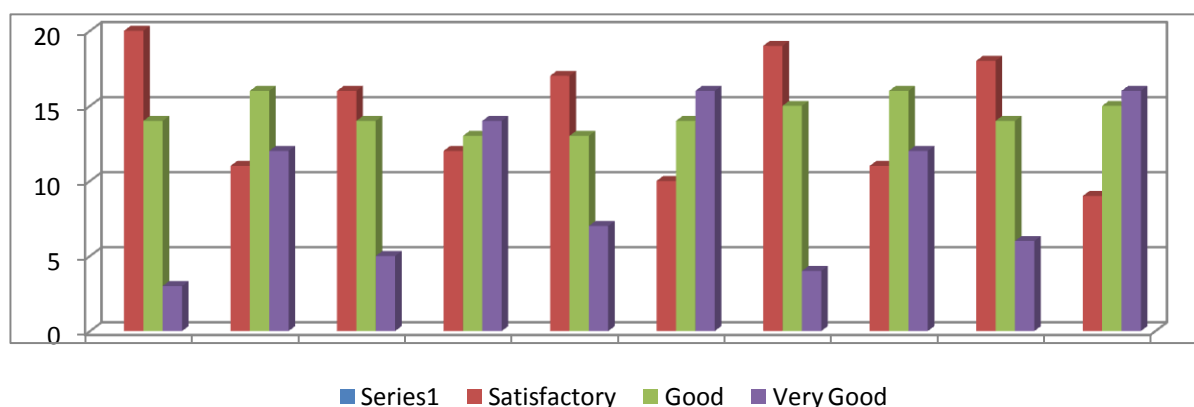
TABLE: 5.1 SCORING AND EVALUATION OF WRITING (FOR N=40)

Statistics

	READING		DEVELOPMENT		ORGANIZATION		LANGUAGE		TOTAL RESULT						
	MEAN		IMPROVEMENT	MEAN	IMPROVEMENT	MEAN	IMPROVEMENT	MEAN	IMPROVEMENT	MEAN	IMPROVEMENT				
	PRE	POST										PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Mean	2.42	2.98	.55	2.48	3.00	.58	2.60	3.15	.55	2.52	2.98	.45	2.60	3.18	.58
Std. Error of Mean	.118	.131	.087	.139	.139	.087	.138	.127	.080	.119	.131	.080	.128	.123	.079
Std. Deviation	.747	.832	.552	.877	.877	.549	.871	.802	.504	.751	.832	.504	.810	.781	.501

Table-5.1 represents the scoring and evaluation of the learners' writings of before and after using top-level structures. This evaluation is done on the part of the evaluator that is the researcher's perspective of learners' performance in their pre and post stage. The researcher used a scoring and evaluation sheet of four point rating scale to score the writings of learners. The scoring was done according to that scale where score 1 means **bad**, 2 means **satisfactory**, 3 means **good**, and 4 meant a **very good** performance. Researcher evaluated both the stages of the pre and post class applying the same four-point rating scale. The marking sheets that was used for evaluation, evaluated the performances under four criteria of **reading, development, organization** and **language**. The scoring was done keeping in mind the all these four criteria in learners' performances, i.e., how far their writings are fulfilling these criteria. The change of the scores and performance was recorded in this manner and if we look at the scores of both pre and post, an improvement is noticed. Learners took more interest in the second class because in that class they apply top-level structures while reading. They become more active in the class. There is a big difference in their performances. They improved a lot. With the help of top-level structures, they answered the questions more confidently and correctly as compared to that of first class. Table 5.1 shows the calculated mean of the learners' scores of both the stages and the improvement that it made in the post stage. Although the improvement is very marginal, but this study is of short time period, such an improvement is also countable.

GRAPH TABLE: 5.1 SCORING AND EVALUATION OF WRITING (FOR N=40)



Graph-5.1 shows the responses of the learners before using and after using top-level structures. It shows the results as per researcher's perspective. This graph shows improvement in learners' performance after using top-level structures. Results are mostly satisfactory and good.

7. Conclusion

The analyzed result of this study statistically shows the relevance of top-level structures on reading comprehension. It shows that how reading becomes more effective when learners use top-level structures to develop their reading comprehension. This was a comparative study carried out in two classes of with and without top-level structures. In the first setting, the class was conducted without using top-level structures. It was conducted through traditional method of teaching reading comprehension. The researchers instructed and gave them a text to read and comprehend. Based on the comprehension of the passage, learners were asked to answer the questions which followed. It was a teacher-centered class. The second setting was the experimental class. It was conducted by using top-level structures. The researchers explained and made them aware of the top-level structures. After that, the same text was distributed to the learners and researchers asked them to read the text again and answer the following questions by applying top-level structures with the help of the table provided.

Post that, a comparative study was made between the two classes. The results show comparative study of the two settings of the controlled class and the experimental class where the top-level structures were applied. The statistical comparison shows a small yet significant difference between both the settings of with and without the top-level structure. The calculated data of the second class display an improvement in the performance of the learners and hence it can be stated that the use of the top-level structures proved to be of help in improving the reading comprehension level of the ESL (English as a Second Language) learners. In the second setting, the learners were found to participate more actively. They showed more interest and were motivated to read the passage and answering the questions. The use of top-level structures improved the reading comprehension level of the learners to some extent. The researchers observation of the second class was this time the learners were more active in comprehending the passage and putting together its meaning. The performances of the learners were better than the first setting which was without the use of top-level structures. The learners comprehended the passage quickly and answered well in the second setting.

As per the opinion of learners as well as the researchers, the results show positive effects of top-level structures, supporting the idea that using the top-level structures as an organizer in reading and writing improves the comprehension capacity of the learners. It shows that if readers make use of top-level structures while reading, it will be very helpful for them to understand the text easily.

This study was done within a short period (within two classes, i.e. in a pre and post stage). This is why, the difference in the results of the two classes was not very significant, but this little improvement is also a positive sign that top-level structures are effective in nature and they should be used for the comprehension ability of the learners.

There are other researches also supporting the top-level structures as effective in nature. Their results go with the current study. In 1997, **Peter Boycott** conducted research on "*Using top-level structures to Enhance Reader Comprehension of Context Area Texts.*" Boycott defines how we can use top-level structures can be used in the primary classroom to develop the readers' ability to comprehend and organize information retrieved from context area texts.

Research done by **P. M. Raymond** in 1993 was "*The Effects of Structure Strategy Training on the Recall of Expository Prose for University Students Reading French as a Second Language.*" This study was designed to answer the very important question i.e. Can French as a Second Language reading be facilitated by teaching some organizational patterns of discourse?

Research by **Bonnie J. F. Meyer** (1987) "*Following the Authors top-level organization: An Important skill for Reading Comprehension.*" This paper shows the importance of using top-level structures in text for reading comprehension.

Fourth and the last research which is mentioned here is of **Brendan Bartlett** (2003) "*Valuing the Situation: A Referential Outcome for top-level structures.*" In this paper, Bartlett suggested that if we want to get success in academic and want to get both intentions and skill together then we need top-level structures.

8. Suggestions and Further Implications

Although, my study took place in a short time period, but positive and marginal changes were seen in the results. If the study had been a longitudinal one, then improvement could have been on a large scale. In future studies, a longitudinal research could be done using *top-level structures* with different difficulty levels and readers of different age groups. Researchers can make use of some interesting activities which motivate learners to participate in it.

The current study was conducted on girl students of ninth standard. For the future study a heterogeneous group of girls and boys can be taken on the same level or of some different level. The study could also take into account the EFL/ESL (English as a Foreign Language/ English as a Second Language) learners.

Acknowledgement

Authors thank the Chairman, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, for providing necessary research facilities. The University Grants Commission, New Delhi is gratefully acknowledged for financial support in the form of a research fellowship to AK and AS.

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*Appendix***Instructional table of Top-level structures**

Description	For example, which was one, this particular, for instance, specifically, such as, attributes to, that is, namely, properties of, characteristics are, qualities are, marks of, in describing.
Causation	As a result, because, since, for the purpose of, caused, led to, consequent, thus, in order to, this is why, if/then, the reason, so, therefore.
Sequencing	And, in addition, also, include, moreover, besides, first, second, third, fourth, etc., subsequent, furthermore, at the same moment, before, after, soon, more recently, afterwards, later, earlier, finally, lastly, following, to begin, to start with.

Author Note

Asfia Khanam is a Research Scholar at the department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh. She specializes in English Language Teaching. Her research topic is related to “Reading and Recall of the Expository and Descriptive Text.” This paper is a quantitative attempt to analyze the importance and use of the Top-Level Structures in building up the ability to develop and produce reading and comprehension skills in ESL learners.

Anam Shams is a Research Scholar at the department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh. She did her masters in ELT from AMU. Her area of interest falls under “Writing in Second Language.”

Dr. Shagufta Imtiaz is a Professor at the department of English, Aligarh Muslim University. She received her doctoral degree from AMU, Aligarh. Her areas of specialization are English Language Teaching (ELT) and Literature. Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Dr. Shagufta Imtiaz.