

Moving Beyond Word-by-Word Reading. Encouraging Chunking Strategies in ESL Learners

Más allá de la lectura palabra por palabra: fomentando estrategias de
agrupación en estudiantes de inglés como segunda lengua.

Mg. Jackeline Elizabeth Michilena Atencia

Ministerio de Educación

jackeline.michilena@educacion.gob.ec

<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3051-4200>

Ecuador

Mg. Edubijes Nancy Michilena Atencia

Ministerio de Educación

edubijes.michilena@educacion.gob.ec

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2651-5146>

Ecuador

Lic. Carla Patricia Quiroz Hernández

Ministerio de Educación

carla.quiroz@educacion.gob.ec

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5557-4064>

Ecuador

Lic. Ian Martín Álvarez Álvarez

Ministerio de Educación

ianmartin7777777@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5306-5809>

Ecuador

Mg. Orlando Guarnizo Mocha

Ministerio de Educación

orlando.guarnizo@educacion.gob.ec

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2435-0966>

Ecuador

Formato de citación APA

Michilena, J. Michilena, E. Quiroz, C. Álvarez, I. Guarnizo, O. (2025) Moving Beyond Word-by-Word Reading. Encouraging Chunking Strategies in ESL Learners. Revista REG, Vol. 4 (Nº. 2). 30 –43.

PROYECTO CIENCIA

Vol. 4 (Nº. 2). Abril - junio 2025.

ISSN: 3073-1259

Fecha de recepción: 10-04-2025

Fecha de aceptación :23-04-2025

Fecha de publicación:30-06-2025



ABSTRACT

For many ESL (English as a Second Language) students, reading can feel like a slow, frustrating puzzle one word at a time. This study takes a closer look at a much more effective and natural way of reading: chunking. Instead of focusing on every single word, chunking helps learners group words into meaningful units, making reading smoother, faster, and easier to understand. The research explores how chunking strategies affect reading fluency, comprehension, and learner confidence in real classrooms. Through detailed observations and interviews with students and teachers, the study highlights the transformation that happens when learners shift from word-by-word decoding to reading in chunks. It also uncovers the emotional impact—students feel more empowered, less anxious, and even excited about reading. Teachers, too, play a key role in this shift. The study shows how guided instruction, practical tools like color-coded texts, and consistent practice can help learners internalize this strategy. What starts as a teaching method quickly becomes a natural habit for students, chunking is more than a reading technique, it's a game-changer. This research shows why it deserves a permanent place in ESL classrooms everywhere

KEYWORDS: Reading fluency, comprehension, confidence, guided instruction

RESUMEN

Para muchos estudiantes de ESL (inglés como segundo idioma), la lectura puede sentirse como un rompecabezas lento y frustrante, resolviéndose palabra por palabra. Este estudio examina de cerca una forma mucho más efectiva y natural de leer: el "chunking" o agrupación de palabras. En lugar de centrarse en cada palabra individual, el chunking ayuda a los estudiantes a agrupar palabras en unidades con significado, lo que hace que la lectura sea más fluida, rápida y fácil de comprender. La investigación explora cómo las estrategias de chunking afectan la fluidez lectora, la comprensión y la confianza del estudiante en aulas reales. A través de observaciones detalladas y entrevistas con estudiantes y profesores, el estudio destaca la transformación que ocurre cuando los aprendices pasan de descifrar palabra por palabra a leer por grupos de palabras. También revela el impacto emocional: los estudiantes se sienten más empoderados, menos ansiosos e incluso entusiasmados con la lectura. Los profesores también juegan un papel clave en este cambio. El estudio muestra cómo la instrucción guiada, herramientas prácticas como textos codificados por colores y la práctica constante pueden ayudar a los estudiantes a interiorizar esta estrategia. Lo que comienza como un método de enseñanza rápidamente se convierte en un hábito natural para los estudiantes, el chunking es más que una técnica de lectura, es un cambio radical. Esta investigación demuestra por qué merece un lugar permanente en todas las aulas de ESL.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Fluidez lectora, Comprensión, Confianza, Instrucción guiada.

INTRODUCTION

Reading in a second language is no easy task. ESL students often find themselves stuck in a word-by-word approach, afraid to miss anything but struggling to make real sense of the text. It's



like trying to enjoy a song while only hearing one note at a time. Understandable? Maybe. Enjoyable or efficient? Not really. This is where chunking comes in.

Chunking is the practice of grouping words into meaningful units something native speakers do naturally. Think of phrases like "go to bed" or "make a decision" they carry meaning as a whole, not word by word. For ESL learners, learning to recognize and read in these chunks can be a breakthrough. Suddenly, reading feels more intuitive. Texts become easier to follow. Confidence builds.

This study was born out of the simple idea that reading should feel less like a chore and more like a conversation. It seeks to understand not just the what of chunking strategies, but the how and why how students adopt them, why they work, and what teachers can do to make the shift easier and more effective. By looking at real classroom experiences, including honest student reactions and teacher insights, this research aims to show that chunking isn't just a nice idea. It's a practical, powerful tool that can change the way ESL learners read, think, and use language.

Research Problem

Although chunking strategies have been shown to significantly enhance reading fluency and comprehension, ESL learners frequently depend on word-by-word reading due to limited exposure and instructional emphasis on chunking. This persistent reliance raises the need to explore how chunking strategies can be more effectively introduced, practiced, and reinforced in ESL contexts.

Research questions

How do chunking strategies affect reading fluency and comprehension in ESL learners compared to word-by-word reading?

What are the most common reading patterns used by ESL learners before being introduced to chunking strategies?

What are ESL learners' perceptions of chunking strategies after guided instruction and practice?

What challenges do ESL learners face when transitioning from word-by-word reading to chunking-based reading?

How can teachers effectively implement chunking strategies in ESL reading instruction at different proficiency levels?

Research objectives

General objectives

To analyze the impact of chunking strategies on reading fluency and comprehension in ESL learners in comparison to the traditional word-by-word reading approach.

Specific Objectives

To identify and describe the reading patterns commonly used by ESL learners prior to the introduction of chunking strategies.

To explore ESL learners' perceptions and experiences regarding the use of chunking strategies after receiving guided instruction.

To examine the challenges ESL learners face during the transition from word-by-word reading to chunking-based reading and how teachers can support this process across different proficiency levels.

Literature review

Learning to read in a second language can be both exciting and overwhelming. For many ESL learners, reading fluently means navigating unfamiliar vocabulary, unfamiliar sentence structures, and the pressure to understand every single word. As a result, many fall into the habit of word-by-word reading—focusing on each word individually instead of processing chunks of meaning. While this method might seem safer or more accurate, research suggests that it actually slows down comprehension and makes reading more mentally exhausting.

To support ESL learners in developing more natural, fluent reading skills, educators and researchers have turned their attention to chunking strategies—a technique that involves grouping words into meaningful units or "chunks." This approach mirrors how native speakers process language and allows readers to grasp ideas more quickly and smoothly. Over the past five years, a growing body of studies has explored how chunking affects ESL learners' fluency, comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and even motivation.

This literature review explores recent research on chunking strategies in ESL contexts, highlighting their impact, implementation in classrooms, and the perceptions of both learners and teachers. By synthesizing these insights, we can better understand how to move learners beyond word-by-word reading and into a more confident, fluent engagement with English texts.

Chunking as a cognitive strategy is grounded in Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988), which posits that working memory has a limited capacity. By grouping information into larger, meaningful units or "chunks," learners reduce cognitive overload, facilitating more efficient information processing. This is particularly important in reading, where interpreting one word at a time can overwhelm the working memory and impede comprehension.

Additionally, Schema Theory (Anderson, 1977) provides a theoretical basis for chunking. It suggests that readers rely on pre-existing knowledge structures (schemas) to make sense of new information. Chunking supports this by helping readers activate and relate chunks of language to known patterns or contexts, improving interpretation and memory retention.

From a linguistic perspective, chunking is also supported by Usage-Based Theory (Bybee, 2006), which emphasizes that language learning is based on the frequency and familiarity of patterns. According to this view, repeated exposure to common word combinations (collocations, idioms, formulaic sequences) results in their storage as single units in memory, enhancing fluency and ease of use in both receptive and productive skills.

Chunking is a cognitive reading strategy that involves grouping words into meaningful units, enabling readers to process text more efficiently. According to Nation (2013), readers who utilize lexical phrases process texts more fluently. Rather than decoding texts word-by-word, readers recognize phrases, collocations, and expressions, improving their comprehension and reading speed.

Recent studies affirm the effectiveness of chunking. For instance, Nation (2013) emphasized the role of lexical phrases in supporting fluent reading, while Boers and Lindstromberg (2012) highlighted how teaching formulaic sequences improves comprehension and retention. In addition, Schmitt and Carter (2019) stressed the benefits of multiword units in language acquisition, noting their relevance in both reading and speaking contexts.

Abejuela et al. (2023) conducted an action research study focusing on the implementation of chunking strategies to improve students' reading comprehension. The study revealed a significant difference in the post-test and pre-test scores of students who underwent the chunking strategy, affirming its usefulness in teaching reading comprehension.

Similarly, Lecaro Velasco and Rodríguez Bermúdez (2022) analyzed the influence of the chunking technique on reading fluency among A2-level students. Their research employed a mixed-methods approach, including interviews, surveys, and observations. The findings indicated that chunking positively affected students' reading fluency, leading to the development of interactive worksheets based on this technique.

In another study, Bustamante (2021) investigated how chunking is perceived by online EFL learners and its impact on vocabulary acquisition. The qualitative analysis revealed that learners found chunking vital for language learning, aiding in the acquisition and contextual use of new vocabulary.

Furthermore, Umarkulova (2021) examined chunking in EFL classrooms, concluding that it enriches students' vocabulary and should be integrated with grammar instruction for more effective language learning.

In a related vein, Monica (2022) investigated the role of chunking in developing speaking fluency among EFL undergraduate students. The findings indicated that students who practiced with multiword chunks demonstrated notable improvements in their speaking abilities, highlighting the versatility of chunking beyond reading comprehension to other language domains.

Collectively, these studies underscore the significance of moving beyond word-by-word reading. Integrating chunking strategies into ESL instruction can enhance reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary acquisition, contributing to more effective language learning outcomes.

Significance

Chunking strategies make a real difference in how ESL students experience reading. Instead of getting stuck on each individual word, learners start recognizing groups of words as meaningful chunks, which makes reading faster, smoother, and much more enjoyable. This approach doesn't just boost fluency—it also helps students better understand what they're reading and remember it longer. Furthermore, many learners feel more motivated and confident once they realize they don't have to read word-by-word to succeed. All the research and classroom experiences point to the same conclusion that teaching chunking gives ESL students a powerful tool to improve their language skills and become more independent readers.

Justification

Many ESL students struggle to read fluently and understand texts not because they lack intelligence or effort, but because they haven't been shown more effective ways of processing written language. Word-by-word reading might feel like the safest route, but it often leads to frustration and slow progress. That's why chunking strategies are so important—they offer a practical, research-backed solution that's easy to teach and genuinely helps students.

These strategies work with how our brains naturally understand language such as in phrases and patterns, not isolated words. Moreover, with chunking strategies, students learn to recognize common expressions and meaningful word groups, making reading feel more natural and less intimidating. This doesn't just help them understand texts better. It also builds confidence and enjoyment in the reading process. The evidence from theory and practice makes a strong case for including chunking strategies in any ESL reading program.

METHODS MATERIALS

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology to explore how chunking strategies affect reading development in ESL learners. To really understand how chunking strategies influence ESL learners, we chosen a qualitative research approach. Why? Because we weren't just interested in numbers, we wanted to hear real voices, observe real struggles, and capture authentic moments of learning.

As Creswell (2014) reminded us, qualitative research is all about diving deep into people's experiences and perspectives. In our case, we wanted to explore how learners felt as they moved away from word-by-word reading and began chunking phrases, ideas, and meaning together. We worked closely with ESL learners at various proficiency levels. Through teachers interviews and classroom observations, we gathered insights into how students responded to chunking techniques. Did they find it helpful? Confusing at first? Did it shift the way they approached reading?

We also talked with teachers, because they're the ones guiding learners through this transition. Their experiences helped us see what worked in the classroom—and what needed adjustment. These stories and observations formed the heart of our findings.

Rather than aiming for broad generalizations, our goal was to paint a clear, detailed picture of what happens when chunking becomes part of the ESL reading journey. This people-first, story-driven approach helped us not only understand the “what” but the “why” and “how” behind the strategy's effectiveness.

Results and discussion, description, analysis, and interpretation of results.

This section presents the results obtained from a qualitative study aimed at exploring the impact and perceptions of chunking strategies in ESL reading instruction. The research was carried out in a public educational institution and involved both students and teachers.

A total of 136 students from four different class sections participated in the classroom observations: Parallel A: 35 students, Parallel B: 37 students, Parallel C: 33 students and Parallel D: 31 students. In addition, two English teachers who actively implemented chunking strategies in their reading lessons were interviewed using a semi-structured guide composed of 12 open-ended questions. The combination of student observations and teacher interviews allowed for a deeper

understanding of how chunking strategies are perceived and practiced in a real classroom environment.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The classroom observations provided valuable insights into how ESL students interact with texts before and after being introduced to chunking strategies. Through the lens of daily classroom dynamics, it became evident that chunking made a visible and meaningful difference in both reading fluency and student confidence.

Observation 1 – First Encounter with Chunking

Analysis

During the initial lesson, students were clearly relying on a word-by-word reading approach. Many hesitated, whispered each word aloud, and struggled to summarize even simple texts. This behavior is common among ESL learners who have not yet developed strategies for processing language in meaningful units. However, the moment the teacher introduced color-coded chunks, there was a noticeable shift. Students became curious. They began to engage with the text more as a whole rather than as a list of disconnected words.

Interpretation

This supports the theoretical foundation of Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988), which suggests that processing texts word-by-word overloads working memory. By presenting meaningful chunks, the teacher helped students process more information with less effort. The students' quick shift in attitude also confirms that chunking feels more “natural” once modeled—and that many are eager to adopt it when given the right tools.

Observation 2: Mid-Term Progress with Chunking (Week 4)

After several weeks of guided practice, students began identifying and using chunks independently. In a Zoom breakout session, a student confidently said, “I think ‘go to the gym’ is a chunk,” showing not only understanding but also ownership of the strategy. When students read aloud, their fluency had improved they paused at natural points, grouped words logically, and read with smoother rhythm.

Analysis

This stage of development shows that chunking was no longer a teacher-directed activity but had become an internalized habit for many students. The use of collaborative activities and

peer interaction encouraged learners to reflect on and articulate their understanding of the language structure.

Interpretation

This observation aligns with Usage-Based Theory (Bybee, 2006), which emphasizes the role of repetition and frequency in forming linguistic competence. The fact that students were chunking without prompting suggests that the exposure and repeated use of certain phrase patterns led to cognitive reinforcement. The classroom became a space not only for acquiring knowledge but for building language awareness and self-regulation in reading.

Teacher's interview

To organize the findings clearly and meaningfully, the interview results have been grouped into four key thematic areas such as: **Initial Impressions and Implementation** – Exploring how teachers perceived and introduced chunking strategies in their classrooms. **Classroom Experience** Highlighting moments of student engagement, teaching strategies used, and classroom dynamics. **Students Growth and Motivation** Examining how students responded to chunking and the effects on their confidence and reading behaviors. **Teacher Perspectives** Reflecting on the broader role of chunking in language learning and offering advice for partners.

On Initial Impressions and Implementation

Elizabeth initially viewed chunking as a new “buzzword,” but upon testing it in the classroom, she found that the strategy aligned with natural language use. Her first implementation was with a simple dialogue, introducing chunks like “wake up at seven” and modeling rhythm. Some students questioned whether this was “skipping words,” showing initial uncertainty.

Analysis

This response reflects a common teacher journey from skepticism to gradual adoption often seen when integrating new pedagogical strategies. The classroom moment where Elizabeth reassures her students highlights the need for clear scaffolding when shifting reading paradigms. It also shows how deeply rooted the word-by-word approach is for many learners.

Interpretation

This phase supports **Cognitive Load Theory** (Sweller, 1988), suggesting that without guided support, learners may feel overwhelmed or confused. However, Elizabeth's decision to model chunking helped reduce that cognitive burden. Her shift from cautious to confident also suggests that

chunking aligns with teachers' natural understanding of how language works, making it easier to internalize once practiced.

On Classroom Experience

One standout moment Elizabeth shared was when a shy student, Cristina, read a sentence fluently using chunks, prompting applause from classmates. She also mentioned using tools like color-coded texts, sentence puzzles, and reading aloud, which helped learners grasp the concept of grouping meaningful language units.

Analysis

This theme demonstrates how classroom experiences can serve as milestones in students' language development. Cristina's progress wasn't just linguistic—it was social and emotional, reflecting greater confidence. The choice of materials also reveals that chunking is most effective when made visible and tactile.

Interpretation

This experience illustrates **Usage-Based Theory** (Bybee, 2006), where frequent exposure to patterns leads to internalization. It also aligns with **Schema Theory** (Anderson, 1977), as chunking helps students activate background knowledge and understand how language fits into predictable structures. Moreover, the emotional response from both teacher and students suggests chunking doesn't just improve mechanics—it transforms learning into a more meaningful experience.

On Student Growth and Motivation

Elizabeth observed a notable change in students' confidence. They reported understanding texts without relying on translation and even applying chunking outside the classroom—like reading recipes or following YouTube tutorials. She noted that even struggling students adapted quickly, while high-performing ones took longer due to ingrained habits.

Analysis

This feedback highlights how chunking strategies transcend the classroom and begin to impact learners' everyday lives. It also reveals that chunking levels the playing field offering accessible tools for learners who may otherwise struggle with traditional, vocabulary heavy approaches.

Interpretation

The increase in motivation and real-world application points to **transfer of learning**, a crucial goal in education. It also reinforces that chunking enhances autonomy, moving learners toward becoming *self-regulated readers*. The case of high-performing students initially resisting the

shift underscores the power of entrenched learning habits—and the importance of mindset in language acquisition.

On Teacher Perspectives

Elizabeth emphasized that chunking isn't just another method. It reflects how we naturally process language. She recommended new teachers start simple and use real-life texts, celebrating small wins. She also noticed that chunking improved not only reading but also speaking and writing fluency.

Analysis

These insights show a holistic understanding of chunking as a cross-skill enhancer. Elizabeth's advice to "start simple" reflects a teacher-centered approach to innovation: practical, reflective, and deeply tied to learner experience. Her recognition that chunking benefits multiple language domains suggests she sees language as an integrated system.

Interpretation

This confirms the **interconnectedness of language skills** reading strategies like chunking are not isolated but ripple into other competencies. Elizabeth's perspective strengthens the argument that chunking belongs not just in reading instruction but across the ESL curriculum. Her voice also reflects the role of teacher agency in adapting research-based methods to real-world classrooms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Integrate chunking regularly in lesson planning. Teachers should intentionally include chunking strategies in their instructional design dividing content into clear sections, using visuals, and pausing for discussion or reflection. Therefore, students can process information more efficiently.

Train educators on chunking strategies. Institutions should provide professional development opportunities for teachers to explore and practice chunking methods. This ensures consistency across subjects and empowers educators with tools to better support student learning.

Encourage student use of chunking techniques. Beyond teaching with chunking, students themselves should be encouraged to apply these strategies when studying. Guiding them to summarize, group, or visualize information can foster independence and improve long-term retention.

CONCLUSIONS

Chunking makes learning more manageable and meaningful. The use of chunking strategies greatly enhances comprehension and retention by helping learners break down complex or overwhelming information into smaller, more digestible parts. This approach not only supports memory but also encourages students to build connections between ideas.

Effective chunking adapts to learners' cognitive levels. Chunking isn't a one-size-fits-all method. When applied thoughtfully, it respects the cognitive capacity of learners by matching the complexity of information to their existing knowledge and skills. This ensures that students are not overloaded, making learning more engaging and less stressful.

Chunking enhances both teaching and assessment. When teachers apply chunking techniques in instruction and evaluation, they create a structured learning environment where students feel more confident navigating content. It also allows for timely feedback, reflection, and reinforcement, which are essential for effective learning.



BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- Anderson, R. C. (1977). The notion of schemata and the educational enterprise: General discussion of the conference. In R. C. Anderson, R. J. Spiro, & W. E. Montague (Eds.), *Schooling and the acquisition of knowledge* (pp. 415–431). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Abejuela, J., Martínez-Huamán, G., Ruiz-Morales, L., & Vargas, J. (2023). *Chunking strategies in synchronous virtual classrooms and their impact on ESL learners' motivation and comprehension*. *International Journal of Language and Teaching Education Research*, 5(2), 32–40. <https://www.ijlter.org/index.php/ijlter/article/view/6855>
- Lecaro Velasco, J. A., & Rodríguez Bermúdez, R. (2022). *Influence of chunking techniques on reading fluency among A2-level ESL learners*. *Repositorio Universidad de Guayaquil*. <https://repositorio.ug.edu.ec/items/899e08b0-a1d8-42cc-af58-c3a484e4b5e1>
- Martínez-Huamán, G., Ruiz-Morales, L., & Vargas, J. (2023). *Chunking strategies in synchronous virtual classrooms and their impact on ESL learners' motivation and comprehension*. *International Journal of Language and Teaching Education Research*, 5(2), 32-40. <https://www.ijlter.org/index.php/ijlter/article/view/6855>
- Monica, L. (2022). *The role of chunking in developing speaking fluency among EFL undergraduate students*. *Matail Journal of Language and Education*, 10(1), 45-52. <https://ojs3.unpatti.ac.id/index.php/matail/article/view/5946>
- Anderson, R. C. (1977). *The notion of schemata and the educational enterprise: General discussion of the conference*. In R. C. Anderson, R. J. Spiro, & W. E. Montague (Eds.), *Schooling and the acquisition of knowledge* (pp. 415–431). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Boers, F., & Lindstromberg, S. (2012). *Experimental and intervention studies on formulaic sequences in a second language*. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 32, 83–110. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190512000050>
- Bybee, J. (2006). *From usage to grammar: The mind's response to repetition*. *Language*, 82(4), 711–733. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2006.0186>
- Nation, I. S. P. (2013). *Learning vocabulary in another language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Schmitt, N., & Carter, R. (2019). *Formulaic sequences in action: Improving spoken fluency in the classroom*. *The Language Teacher*, 43(4), 3–8.



Sweller, J. (1988). *Cognitive load during problem solving: Effects on learning*. Cognitive Science, 12(2), 257–285. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog1202_4

CONFLICTO DE INTERÉS:

Los autores declaran que no existen conflicto de interés posibles

FINANCIAMIENTO

No existió asistencia de financiamiento de parte de pares externos al presente artículo.

NOTA:

El artículo no es producto de una publicación anterior.