An Analysis of Processing EFL Reading Comprehension at a Junior High School

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Abstract: This paper identified the way of teaching and learning EFL reading comprehension at a junior high school. 49 participants were involved in a research which was conducted by quantitative survey and face-to-face interview. The results revealed that irrelevant second language acquisition principles caused the poor performance in teaching and learning EFL readings. This study also attempted to explore and justify the teaching technique, guide, and instruction, especially how the relevant EFL reading principles should be inculcated while processing reading in the EFL class. Finally, the research concluded that the EFL reading comprehension was an integrated skill that could be taught and learnt in a much more effective way with some pedagogical suggestions.

Key Words: reading, EFL reading, reading comprehension, reading pedagogy

1   Introduction

Reading is a process between a reader and a text to construct meaning, which is the main input part when learning a language. More specifically, it is the comprehension skill for learning vocabulary and expression, acquiring syntactic structure, processing context meaning, and understanding pragmatics in different circumstances. Reading is the fundamental complement for writing texts as an output part of language learning. Therefore, effective reading is essential for the successful language learners.

Reading the texts written in English as a Foreign Language – *EFL reading* comprises many comprehensive syllabuses in the English course at secondary schools in many Asian countries. From the junior high schools to the senior high schools in China, the English language is one mandatory course with national examination, in which, the EFL reading comprehension tasks are dominated and assessed. Thus, to teach these students to become a successful reader is the primary goal in EFL class.

In fact, many students cannot understand the texts in the reading comprehension tasks and they usually guess answers to the questions. This is because reading is a complex process with abilities, strategies, thoughts, cognition, and knowledge. Many students have not become a proficient reader yet and they are struggling with the EFL reading comprehension tasks throughout learning and examination. However, the aim of this study is to analyse how reading comprehension is processed in EFL class at a junior high school in order to apply pedagogical principles appropriately.

1.1 Overview - Reading Comprehension

Gough and Tunmer proposed a model "The Simple View of Reading" in 1986, which stated reading is determined by two factors: decoding and linguistic comprehension. Decoding refers to efficient lexical recognition and word accuracy, whereas linguistic comprehension is about understanding of sentence and discourse meanings (Hoover & Gough, 1990). Either decoding or linguistic comprehension is not sufficient to support reading individually. Therefore reading comprehension is the sum of decoding and linguistic comprehension (decoding + linguistics comprehension). In addition, Dreyer and Katz (1996) concluded both decoding and linguistic comprehension as a product (decoding * linguistic comprehension) of reading comprehension.

Reading was often considered as a static individual task in the past. It begins decoding words and phrases, and then finds out the meanings of the texts. In this circumstance, reading helps the language learners to develop their decoding skills that concentrate on the development and practice of reading fluency. Machado (2010) argued that it is necessary to develop reading fluency from passive reading to active reading. Besides decoding and fluency, thinking in reading is also important since the readers need to interpret the meanings hidden in the context. Mikulecky (1990) considered reading as a consciously cognitive thinking process. Thus, the concept of reading comprehension has changed apparently and dramatically (Crain, 2011).

Reading is also a social work beyond understanding the meaning of texts. Researchers nowadays treat reading as a dynamic process, in which, readers simultaneously build up their own understandings when reading the written texts (Aebersold & Field, 1997; Alderson, 2000; Mikulecky, 2008). As long as language and culture are inter-related, readers unintentionally embed their own cultural contexts into cognition and thinking when comprehending texts. Hence, reading comprehension is a process and product through: (a) decoding, lexical knowledge and word recognition ability; (b) linguistic comprehension, knowledge and skill for comprehension; (c) interaction, socialisation with cultural context; and (d) interpretation, construction of meanings (Maria, 1990). This is a general overview of reading comprehension.

1.2 Reading Models

There are many reading models and generally they can be summarized into two: the process and componental models. The *process* models consider reading process as a cognitive task (Weir, Yang, & Jin, 2000) that describes how factors operate in actual reading process. By contrast, the *componential* models examine what facts involved in the reading process (Urquhart & Weir, 1998) and it focuses on reading ability rather than reading process. The objective of the componential model is to identify specific individual differences that influence reading performance and to justify the individual contributions to reading ability (Carr & Levy, 1990).

The process models include: (i) the top-down approach, (ii) the bottom-up approach, and (iii) the interactive approach. First, the top-down approach is concept driven by immersing the language

learners into a board frame with what they already known i.e. linguistic knowledge and background information to predict the meaning of context (Dubin & Bycina, 1991; Mikulecky, 2008). On the contrary, the bottom-up approach is data driven by the readers who initially process the language features to confirm or reject text information as reading taking place (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978; Mikulecky, 2008). The interactive approach, however, is a combination of the bottom-up and the top-down approaches throughout the reading process.

The interactive reading approach, also known as the schema theory, is defined as the readers' cognitive construction of meaning for text information in long term memory (Widdowson, 1983). In the same manner, Singhal (1998) suggested the formal schema, is the linguistic knowledge the language learners to process genre, rhetorical structure, and organization with different texts, and the content schema, is the readers' cultural and background knowledge, to predict and interact with text discourse and pragmatics (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Carrell, 1987; Cook, 1989). After all, the schema theory is applied in both L1 (the first language) and the second language L2's reading lesson. Schema is a systematic approach implemented in the EFL reading class in regard to the first language reading theory and research.

1.3 Reading Difficulties

Grabe (1991) raised most of views and methods of L2 readings are influenced by the theories on L1 readings and readers. Although L1 reading shares many features with the reading in L2 texts, the performance of L2 reading comprehension is significantly different from L1's. As a consequence, Mikulecky (2008) suggested the EFL teachers cannot simply assume that the good L1 readers are good at reading in L2 texts. To fill the gap between L1 and L2 readings, it is necessary to think about secondary literacy, i.e. readers L2's linguistic knowledge, interaction ability, process strategy, alternative cultural belief and interpretation, besides L1 literacy (Bernhardt, 2005). This is a way to overcome EFL reading difficulties.

Both children and adults may have reading difficulties in terms of decoding problem, or linguistic comprehension problem, or a combination of the two (Aaron, Joshi, & Williams, 1999; Nation, 2005; Nation & Snowling 1998; Snowling, 2000; Stanovich, 1986; Stanovich & Siegel, 1994). It is important to realize these problems associated with EFL reading. At first, to detect reading difficulties through an individual survey, and then to justify why these junior high school students struggle with EFL readings, is on the basis of the L2 reading principles. A face-to-face interview washes back the findings to ensure the reliability and validity of the observation. It eventually offers some pedagogical implications of effective techniques, guides and instructions in the proper EFL reading class.

2 Observation
2.1 Survey

The survey included three parts: pre-reading, the formative-driven questionnaire; the learning-focused session during reading; and the summative feedback post reading. 49 participants were randomly selected from the school where the study was conducted.

Table 1: The participant's information

	Male	Female
Grade 7	12	8
Grade 8	5	7
Grade 9	8	9
Total Number	25	24

2.2   Findings

Results in table 2 showed: 61% of the participants were worried before doing the EFL reading comprehension task; while 51% of them felt nervous to do so by themselves; and 49% agreed and 20% strongly agreed with that they did not have patience to read.

Table 2: Pre-reading the formative-driven questionnaire

Criteria	Specific Measures	1	2	3	4	5
Anxiety, Nervousness, & Endurance	I am worried about doing an EFL reading comprehension task.	14%	18%	6%	39%	22%
	I feel nervous to do the EFL reading comprehension tasks by myself.	18%	22%	8%	35%	16%
	I do not have patience to read and overcome the whole EFL reading comprehension task.	10%	16%	4%	49%	20%
Vocabulary Level & Confidence	I think I do not have enough amount of vocabulary to deal with EFL reading.	20%	24%	12%	22%	20%
	I am not sure about the topic and content of the proposed texts.	14%	18%	4%	27%	37%
	To be honest, I am not confident to do the comprehension task.	16%	29%	12%	22%	20%
Initial Instruction & Guide	My teacher provides some instructions, for example the genre and structure of the texts.	22%	47%	2%	24%	4%
	Before reading, my teacher introduces some difficult and useful words.	16%	37%	8%	20%	18%
	My teacher informs the main ideas briefly and gives me a direction for reading.	14%	53%	0%	22%	10%

(Participants were requested to choose one from: 1 - Strongly disagree; 2 - Disagree; 3 - Not sure or it depends; 4 - Agree; and 5 - Strongly agree, with the percentages in the table 2, 3 & 4.)

Vocabulary is important, but participants put different opinions on the item - "I think I do not have enough amount of vocabulary to deal with reading." 42% (22%+20%) of the participants consisted on they were confident to handle the reading comprehension tasks. However, the initial instruction and guide was not actively provided by the EFL teachers. It was very difficult for the

students to comprehend since the item "I am not sure the topic and content of the proposed texts" with 27% agreed and 37% strongly agreed by the participants.

Table 3: Learning-focused session while processing reading comprehension task

Criteria	Specific Measures	1	2	3	4	5
Decoding Skill	I am stopped by the unknown words while reading through the texts.	6%	16%	2%	39%	37%
	I guess wrong words causes incorrect answer.	12%	20%	6%	33%	29%
Comprehension Skill	I know single word, but I cannot understand the word in the sentence.	14%	18%	2%	31%	35%
	Usually, I cannot understand the context properly and fully.	18%	22%	4%	27%	22%
L2 Barrier & Culture Literacy	Reading in EFL is very different from reading in my first language	4%	14%	6%	55%	20%
	I am lack of L2 cultural context	8%	10%	14%	35%	33%
Instruction, Guide & Support	Teacher provides guide and support while reading is taking place.	22%	35%	14%	20%	8%
	Teacher provides necessary support & instruction when I need.	31%	31%	0%	18%	16%
	Teaching technique is interesting.	29%	49%	4%	12%	6%
Interactional Strategies	I am good at using strategies.	18%	22%	12%	24%	22%
	I can recall my previous learning and knowledge process reading.	14%	33%	2%	31%	20%
	Too many new items to learn and I am very tired to read the whole texts.	12%	14%	2%	24%	43%

The results indicated that either decoding skill or comprehension was extremely poor. Vocabulary was still a barrier while comprehending the text. It implied a single word was not difficult to memory, but to put it into the text, students cannot understand the phrases or sentences. Therefore nearly half participants cannot understand the context properly and fully. Three students who did not rate this item informed that they cannot interpret meaning and sometimes they had multiple meanings for one sentence.

On the other hand, the students were struggling with L2 literacy that is due to 68% of them agreed "lack of L2 culture knowledge". L2 was challenging, as 55% agreed and 20% strongly agreed with "Reading in EFL is very different from reading in my first language." This raised an issue: whether the learner's proficiency level and the reding texts were matched or not in this junior high school.

The EFL teachers in that school had a misunderstanding of reading comprehension, so the instruction and guide were not well supported by the EFL teacher during reading. Two students said that their teacher told them reading is an individual task and sample answer and analysis would be provided after students accomplished it.

In addition, these participants had a positive attitude on using interactional strategies and recalling previous learning and knowledge to comprehend reading, but they were too tired to learn so many new items through reading the whole text. The findings did imply that the difficulty level of text is out of the EFL learner's control.

Table 4: Summative-driven results after processing reading comprehension task

Criteria	Specific Measures	1	2	3	4	5
Reflection of the reading comprehension process	I am keen to reflect the learning in terms of vocabulary, syntax, discourse, and culture contexts.	20%	39%	8%	18%	14%
	My teacher will help me to compare with model answer for reflection.	0%	14%	6%	41%	39%
Instructional feedback	I need more feedback with detailed explanation from my teacher.	6%	8%	14%	35%	33%
	My teacher analyses the texts again.	12%	22%	0%	37%	29%
From reading to writing	I always pay attention on the items and knowledge that I made mistakes.	18%	39%	24%	10%	8%
	I am going to write something about the reading as an output for further learning.	24%	27%	18%	18%	12%

Table 4 summarized the reflection of reading comprehension: 59% the students were not keen to review the learning/reading in terms of vocabulary, syntax, discourse, and culture contexts. Very surprisingly, 80% of them respond "My teacher will help me to compare with model answer for reflection." It seems that student relied on teacher's reflection rather than themselves.

68% students required of explicit feedback and detailed explanation for the read text. Nonetheless, two students said even the teacher provided feedback that was not their expectation. This was another concern that the EFL teacher should adjust the teaching session by offering instructional feedback or analysing the texts detailed, or doing the two together for their students.

Only 18% participants paid attention on their mistakes and noticed new learning items, whereas 57% totally ignored this point as they treated reading as a task for answering the comprehension questions, and the rest 24% were not sure. The students confused with reading comprehension, unfortunately, neglecting the language resource through reading. Finally, 30% of the students were likely to write something after reading as an output for reflection. They were definitely good language learners.

2.3 Interview

These findings observed in the survey suggested: more or less, the EFL students had some comprehensive difficulties lined in decoding, interaction, interpretation, L2's culture context, instructional guides, or strategies. Such findings possibly inaccurate, an interview through asking

questions to the participants and washing back the similar items in survey was done. The detailed supplements of the observation were described and justified below.

First of all, many students have difficulties in comprehension tasks according to both survey and interview. Several root reasons were: anxiety before comprehending; lack of confidence and patience; weak decoding ability, poor linguistic and comprehensive skill, insufficient instructional guide and support; no progress monitoring and a little reflection for the comprehension; less-motivated learning environment and technique; L1 and L2 difference; weak L2 cultural knowledge and interpretation. A few students misunderstood that if they try to learn and memory all words from the texts book, then they simply thought that they can process the EFL reading comprehension tasks easily. However new words in real task appear on and on, which frustrated the students a lot.

Secondly, the instructional guide was not provided enough to these students since the teachers understood the principle of teaching reading. To some extends, they treated reading comprehension task as a testing tool, which is the tasks in the examinations. As a result, they did not guide and instruct how to comprehend in the reading task; instead they asked their students to do it independently. The students cannot get any support from their teacher or peers. This made reading very boring and difficult.

The third deep finding is about that the students usually cannot understand the context properly and fully. Despite of the decoding and comprehension ability, these students' social cultural interaction was very weak. This caused confusing in terms of multiple meanings by understanding. Many students in the interview responded that in some cases, the teacher's explanation was different from their understandings. They would like to hear different interpretations from their classmates too. They did not expect every answer from their teacher. However, they relied on their teacher a lot under the situation there was no peer learning.

Moreover, there were some additional difficulties: (iv) the students' proficiency level was not matched with the reading text and task, some student told that many teachers were very lazy and used the texts from internet directly; (v) their teachers explained the text in first language, so they always translated into L1 for comprehension, which caused slow speed in reading; (vi) topic was not interesting and did not relate to the learning in class and real life; (vii) lack of authentic materials for reading. It was very necessary to cultivate their interest and patience through these criteria above. So, the relevant pedagogical implications and suggestions will be discussed below.

3   Pedagogical Discussion and Conclusion

   3.1   EFL reading is not simply learning and reading in EFL, but also a process and product of the cognitive, interactive, interpretative, constructive, and developmental meaning of the EFL text.

The EFL reading comprehension task is mandatory assessed in junior high schools in China and many EFL teachers treat it as a final testing session. Apart from the testing, both the teachers and students should have a concept that the EFL reading is an entire comprehension task that needs practice and patience. In order to succeed in learning and comprehending, it can be instructed by a task-based learning model (Willis, 1996) with pre-reading, during reading and post reading focuses. Table 5 is a summary for the EFL teachers at the junior school for the strategic planning of EFL reading. The role of the teachers is monitoring their students to comprehend progress and always ready for supporting the students who needs help.

Table 5: Task-based reading guide for EFL learners

Task-based	Instruction and principle support	Focusing
Before Reading	Ensure the purpose of reading;	To reduce anxiety, to build up confidence, and to be clear with the reading goals
	Activate and recall cultural & background knowledge, and to make predictions of the topic and content;	
	Generate questions about the reading text and evaluate text structure, for example, cause-effect, or sequencing style.	
During Reading	Identify main ideas and create mental images by context;	To use strategies to overcome reading comprehension; learning & assessing is taking place
	Use text structure, L1 & L2 linguistic knowledge, discourse, culture content, previous learning as a framework for comprehension.	
	To use strategies to make inference and verify prediction;	
After Reading	Collect useful language items and knowledge;	Reflection and summarise learning
	Reflect the procedure and find out the failure causes;	
	Summarize what was learned to respond to reading purpose.	

3.2   Knowing each individual word in English does not mean understanding the whole EFL text, thus to diagnose the learners' comprehensive proficiency is a suitable way of dividing the big class into several small streams that focus on different comprehensive factors.

In accordance with the findings, the teachers have three major misunderstandings of teaching EFL reading comprehension task: (a) reading is an individual task which is engaged by the learners themselves; (b) teacher should not give support and guide to their learners; and (c) that the learners need to pass two main reading comprehension tasks the comprehension task and quiz task in the examination is enough. Such ideas make the learning exam-driven and the learning quality very poor.

Table 6: Principle suggestions to student difficulties with focusing factor and task type

Student proficiency level and difficulties	Focus factors	Supporting Tasks (Nation, 2009)
(1) Limited decoding &	Explicit instruction and support needed	Guided task

comprehension ability, very low reading fluency, and poor cultural background & discourse ability	Word recognition, vocabulary memory Decoding skill	
(2) Weak decoding ability, poor comprehension ability, very slow in reading fluency, poor cultural background & discourse ability	Word recognition, vocabulary memory Decoding and comprehension skill reading fluency practice	Guided task Shared task
(3) Average decoding and comprehension ability, low fluency level, poor cultural background & discourse ability	Comprehension strategies Reading fluency practice and development, Discourse analysis Cultural knowledge learning	Guided task Shared task Experience task Independent task
(4) good decoding and comprehension ability, average reading fluency, average cultural background & discourse ability	Comprehension strategies Reading fluency practice and development, Discourse analysis Culture learning, schema literacy	Shared task Experience task Independent task
(5) good decoding & comprehension skill, adequate cultural knowledge & discourse ability	Reading fluency development Cultural knowledge development Discourse analysis, schema literacy	Experience task Independent task

As a matter in fact, the EFL reading comprehensive task could be as interesting as the speaking activity through collaborative learning (Dillenbourg, 1999). To begin with a running dictation activity with one or two passages in pair work, then the teacher asks the students in pair to comprehend the whole text and answer the proposed questions together, after that, to recite or retell the content of the text to a different pair. This is an example of implementing reading comprehension task accompany with other skills in the EFL class. Group work through collaborative learning is also encouraged.

The teachers can divide their students into different proficiency groups in the light of the principle in table 6. The principle and instructional guide above clearly define the students' difficulties and proficiency level with relevant focus factors. Consequently, the teachers can organise different types of tasks for these students. For example, in category of the students with limited decoding and comprehension ability, very low reading fluency, and poor cultural background and discourse ability, thus they need explicit instruction and support, focus on word recognition, vocabulary memory, and develop decoding skill. It is not the time to develop their comprehension strategies, practice reading fluency, perform discourse analysis, learn cultural knowledge and engage schema literacy. Instead of, these students are better to be involved in guided task (Nation, 2009). Once they move to an upper proficiency level, they will be surely encouraged to engage a shared task with peer learning.

Guided task, shared task, experience task and independent task, are different tasks for different proficiency levels and different purposes of learning. The independent task is very challenging. The EFL teachers should pay different attentions and offer relevant instructional guide to the students in different groups/streams according to the categories in table 6 above.

3.3 EFL reading comprehension is not an individual activity, but an intentional task with teacher's guide and student's effort, therefore to provide effective instructions is a key for successful learning and comprehending.

Based on the model in table 5, the EFL teachers need to provide instructional guide in pre-reading, during reading and post reading, three stages. In each stage, the teachers monitor student progress toward comprehending progress and identify students who need additional support. For example, to provide instruction on the text structure, if it is a text with chronological order or sequencing step, then the text structure is usually sequenced by the key words first, second, next and last. These teachers are required to identify what kind of support the students need in relation to the text in advance. This is a standard of good teacher with good instructional support. Finally, the teachers are better to evaluate the outcomes of instruction and guide to what degrees. It improves the reading course's quality.

3.4 Developing learner autonomy through developing reading comprehension is simultaneously to become a successful reader in EFL class.

These participants have different problems in EFL reading comprehension tasks. The during reading session is an important part for learning and comprehending, in which, the students are strongly required to develop learner autonomy. Attentions should be paid on the comprehension factors: (1) selective learning of difficult words, which are written in a word handbook, (2) narrative meaning of the sentence by decoding and linguistic comprehensive skill, (3) focusing the cultural background, (4) memorising the read content in mind, (5) washing back of reflection for what is going right and what is going wrong. Good language learners always have good habit, attitude, and patience in learning. The learners should practice and be familiar with different types of text structure, such as stories, essays, newspapers, reports, and fictions. The EFL learners need to practice what they learnt already in order to practice reading fluency. Thus, autonomous EFL reading and learning (Ellis, 2003) becomes a successful reader in EFL class.

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