Investigating Reading Comprehension Strategies Employed by EFL Students

Dr. Hanan Mohammud Freaha- Assistant Professor of English

Community College- Najran University- Saudi Arabia

Abstract

Reading strategies are basic to comprehension and knowledge. This study is undertaken to investigate the reading strategies that are commonly utilized by EFL learners at the faculty of languages and translation in Najran University when dealing with written texts. The study followed a descriptive empirical design and forty-four students responded to a questionnaire. Data were coded and analyzed using percentages. It is found that most of the subjects have adopted the reading comprehension cognitive procedures. These include relating illustrations and titles to topics, scanning for specific information, words recognition, discussions and summarizing texts.

Keywords: reading comprehension- cognitive strategies- EFL students

1. Introduction

For second/foreign language learners, reading comprehension is priority as it is an essential source for enriching the other language skills, precisely, speaking and writing. However, some students do not spontaneously participate or fully exploit the post-reading stage during which they could integrate the basic language skills. In addition to that, learners might exert time and efforts on word recognition neglecting the best workable procedures that thoroughly lead to comprehending a written discourse. It is well known among methodologists and practitioners that utilizing explicit strategies with direct instructions would raise learners' awareness of the reading comprehension cognitive strategies that noted to promote the target language understanding and learning.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

* To shed some light on the definitions and types of the effective reading comprehension strategies.

* To investigate the reading comprehension strategies that are commonly utilized by EFL female undergraduate students at the faculty of Languages & Translation in Najran University

*To highlight which reading comprehension strategies should be developed by giving more explicit instructions to enhance understanding written texts and facilitate learning.

1.2 Hypotheses of the Study

H1 The majority of the undergraduate female students at the faculty of Languages & Translation- Najran University are aware of the reading comprehension cognitive strategies.

H2 Deficiencies in comprehending written passages can be attributed to EFL students' insufficient knowledge about employing the reading procedure.

2. Reviewing the Relevant Literature

In the following section of the study the researcher is going to present the definitions of reading comprehension, the efficient strategies of reading and the previous studies.

2.1 Theoretical Background

Reading is the process of perceiving a written discourse to understand its components. This happens either silently- silent reading- to comprehend a written text, or orally- loud reading which can take places without comprehension. Then, following readers' purposes in reading, reading comprehension is classified into four categories. First, literal comprehension in which a reader can understand and remember information explicitly articulated in a text. Second, inferential comprehension- a reader should find information that is not clearly placed. Third, critical or evaluative comprehension in which a reader contrast his/her own knowledge with information in a text. Finally, appreciative comprehension to gain, for instance, an emotional value. (Richards & Schmidt 2002 p.443)

It is worthwhile to remember that research on second language reading methodology came to existence after Goodman's work (1970), that is to say specialists and practitioners started to handle questions and issues related to reading education. They differentiated between bottom-up and top-down processes which have been the 'cornerstone' of the reading pedagogy. In the bottom-up process, a learner should recognize the linguistic constituents of a discourse such as words, phrases, sentences and discourse markers. Then, readers' linguistic processing with knowledge of the language order these parts and extract meaning. Since the readers guess and infer meaning from the whole text, decide what to keep or not to retain- this complementary method is termed top-down. At the beginning, reading methodologists advocate coping with reading during the bottom-up process, that is to teach lexemes, structures and discourse markers first. Then, meaning could be processed from combination of these parts. Recent researches on teaching reading have introduced using

both bottom-up and top-down processes and termed them interactive reading for the two are essential in successful performances. (Brown 2007, p.357-358; Harmer 2013, p. 270, Rhalmi 2018).

To put it forth, meaning construction, decision taking, and writer's message inferring are all related to what is known as schema (plural schemata). Schemata theory implies that a reading text might not provide meaning by itself unless a reader has information, experience, culture and background knowledge. Typically, Clarke and Silberstein (1977, cited in Brown 2007, p. 359) explained schemata theory as follows:

>...*" reading is only incidentally visual. More information is contributed*

>*by the reader than by the print on the page. That is, readers understand*

>*what they read because they were able to take the stimulus beyond its*

>*graphic representation and assign it membership to an appropriate*

>*group of concepts already stored in their memories. . .   Skill in reading*

>*depends on the efficient interaction between linguistic knowledge and*

>*knowledge of the world."*

2.2 Strategies of Reading Comprehension

Strategies are learning techniques and activities that promote learning. Oxford (1990 c.f. Omer 2014 p. 7) classified various strategies used by second language learners as follow: 1- "Cognitive strategies" used by learners such as note-taking, summarizing, paraphrasing, predicting, analyzing and using context clues. 2- "Memory Strategies" these help students to remember information. 3- "Compensation strategies" as in guessing while reading, or predicting. 4-"Meta-cognitive strategies" that involve students' ability to plan, arrange, assess their own learning and correct errors. 5-"Affective strategies" which include self-encouraging and reducing anxiety. 6-"Social strategies" that refer to cooperating with peers for correction and feedback

Brown (ibid p. 366-370) highlights effective and appropriate reading comprehension strategies for second language learners to enhance their performance. These strategies can be summed up in the following points.

- It is necessary to identify the purpose in a reading text. When the goal is clearly recognized, it can be easy to get rid of distracting information. Instructors make sure that students know the purpose when reading something.

- Learners can improve fluency by employing effective silent reading procedure. Silent reading techniques imply that learners do not need to spend much time on pronouncing every word. Instead of, it is preferred to process more than one word together as in phrases. Additionally, learners skip over a word which is not essential to understanding,

- Learners skim the reading passage to get the main idea. Skimming is a quick reading over a whole text to get the general meaning or the gist. It helps learners find out the main topic and the supporting or developing ideas.

- Scanning strategy is used when students are looking for particular information in a text such as a name, specific date, definition or supporting idea. Readers scan a passage to get specified information without reading all its parts.

- Learners are often encouraged to guess the meaning of an unknown word from the context in which it occurs, infer implied meaning or message, find out grammatical relationships as pronoun reference and discourse markers. To recognize a word, readers are also directed to analyze its prefixes, suffixes and root.

In addition to the above-mentioned reading comprehension strategies, educators and practitioners advocate the SQ3R procedure. It is graded steps that learners are encouraged to employ for efficient reading. The SQ3R has five structures: survey, question, read, recite and review. In survey students skim the reading text to get the main ideas. Then, readers formulate questions around e.g. the topic sentences. After that, students read the passage trying to answer the composed questions. In recite, the acquired information is reprocessed through spoken or written discourse. Finally, the students review and assess their responses if it is easy to get them, otherwise, they should repeat the aforementioned steps.

On the other hand, Mikulecky and Jeffries (2005, p.179) regard certain points such as translating words into student's mother-tongue and writing them beside the English words, pronouncing every word, pointing to words with a pen or finger, or moving lips while reading would hinder reading faster and prevent understanding better. Definitely, students should be explicitly instructed to avoid the aforementioned bad reading habits.

2.3 Previous Studies

Various empirical studies have been conducted worldwide to find out the most efficient and successful strategies that can help learners in comprehending reading texts. However,

to make this study more beneficial the researcher has limited the previous investigations to reading comprehension in EFL field.

Fan et al (2009) investigated the effect of explicitly teaching reading comprehension strategies and its application by EFL students. Data were collected through questionnaires, reading tasks and tests. The findings of the research indicated that he participants attained higher scores in the post-test after they have been subjected to four-month training, and certain strategies increased their repetitions just after the training such as 'word recognition', 'understanding the purpose of a text' and 'evaluating the reading text'. Thus, the regular and explicit reading instructions was essential for both: the good readers increased their awareness about the reading strategies, and the struggling readers could learn how better the reading strategies were used when coping with the reading comprehension tasks and tests. Then, instructors should choose reading texts that are a bit above the readers' level of English profiency to let the learners utilize more reading strategies in order to cope with the challenging texts. In addition, through explicit instruction and training students can become critical readers since they focus attention on the meaning of texts.

Similar to the aforementioned study is Fan's (2009) which discussed the impact of collaborative reading strategies on Taiwanese students' comprehension performance. The subjects were university students with intermediate levels of English. The researcher followed pre/post tests and control group designs. The findings of the study showed that strategies such as finding the main and supporting ideas, prediction, inference and vocabulary recognition were greatly improved. The researcher suggested that to maintain successful reading comprehension strategies, strategies should be practiced for a long time e.g. through a whole semester by both the teacher and students.

Another study was conducted by Uribe-Enciso (2015) presented that teaching explicitly reading comprehension strategies to EFL students and assessing their performance in the reading tasks and tests. Pre/while/post study designs were adopted and data was obtained through questionnaires, reading tasks and tests. Then, it was found out that reading English texts comprehension was enhanced by the continuous, constant and direct teaching of the reading strategies.

The three above-mentioned empirical studies agree that reading texts comprehension should be promoted through systematic and explicit training for a long period.

 On the other hand, some studies investigated problems encountered by EFL learners in reading passages comprehension. Among these difficulties, some are due to the lack of vocabulary knowledge, vocabulary size and background knowledge. Accordingly, Chou

(2011), Anjomshoa and Zamanian (2014) and Baleghizadeh and Golbin (2010) found that students who possess appropriate vocabulary repertoire performed better when tested comprehending reading texts and reading strategies. Baleghizadeh and Golbin precisely mentioned that vocabulary size over one thousand is recommended and can influence, largely, reading passages comprehension. High correlations were obtained in their researches between vocabulary size and text comprehension. They concluded that vocabulary size and vocabulary knowledge should be given priority in EFL classes; and that are regarded as the main issue in the reading process and language learning, and then, attention directed to the reading strategies and background knowledge.

The present study appreciates the findings of these previous investigations and their contributions to facilitate learning the target language. Accordingly, it is oriented to endeavor portraying which reading strategies are commonly utilized; and which reading strategies should be developed to stimulate interest and enhance academic achievement by the female undergraduate students at the college of languages and translation / Najran University.

3 Methodology of the Research

The third part of this investigation is devoted to its methodology. It comprises the participants, tools of data collection and the statistical measurements for data presentation and analysis.

3.1 Sample of the Study

The respondents of this research were 44 undergraduates students of English, in semester three at the Faculty of Languages and Translation, Najran University, Saudi Arabia during the years 2019. Their ages are approximately between 19- 23, and they were all fresh female students. This sample is homogeneous, that is to say, Arabic is their mother tongue.

3.2 Instruments

A questionnaire was administered to the subjects. It consisted of 14 statements. This tool maintained validity and reliability. That is to say, all the questionnaire items are largely focused on and covered the activities that are common in the three stages: pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading of a reading class. Furthermore, a common scale to measure person's reaction to something is the Likert scale which is graded as 1. Agree 2. Strongly agree 3. Not sure. 4. Disagree 5. Strongly disagree. Thus, the questionnaire employed both content and construction validity. It is worth mentioning that the investigator has used tables and percentage values to display, analyze and interpret the gathered information.

4. Data presentation and Analysis

This part of the study is indicating how to display and analyze the data obtained via the one-time questionnaire. To attain the aforementioned study objectives, the researcher has adopted an assessment based on summating the categories 'strongly agree' and 'agree' on one side; similarly 'not sure', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' on the other, then, followed by comments either in favor of or against support for the research hypotheses. The researcher has regarded the three categories: not sure, disagree and strongly disagree results of lack of knowledge and application.

Chart 4-1. Pre-reading activities:

No	Statements	Agree %	Disagree %
1	I connect the title and photos to the reading text	86	11
2	I provide my opinion about the topic of reading	75	25
3	I scan the text for identifying key words definitions if available	73	27
4	I scan the text to find the topic sentence in each paragraph	77	21

The statistical analysis above indicates that most of the subjects follow the warm-up to prepare for understanding the text. That is to say, 86% relate the title and illustrations to the reading, 75% look for the background knowledge about the topic. Similarly, 73% and 77% of the sample scan the text for words definitions and topic sentences respectively. On the other hand, the minority either disagree with employing the understanding techniques before reading or not sure about using them. This is a positive support for the researcher hypotheses.

Chart 4-2. While reading activities:

No	Statements	Agree %	Disagree %
5	I guess the unknown words from the context	68	28
6	I analyze affixes of words if available to get meanings	71	22
7	I skip over unimportant words	52	37
8	I use a dictionary to find the meanings of important words	64	30
9	I use a dictionary to find the meaning of every new word	73	25

According to the table (4-2), the respondents, to some extent, utilize comprehension strategies during the reading class. The item (9) using a dictionary to get all the new vocabulary scored the highest 73%, beside, skipping over unimportant words is the lowest 52%. Attention should be drawn to these strategies, as they are not in line with successful reading comprehension. There is another group of the learners ranging from (22% to37%) are either against or not sure about utilizing the focus strategies. Besides, a few participants left the options null (did not provide any answer). These analyses are in favor of the study suppositions.

Chart 4-3. Post-reading activities:

No	Statements	Agree %	Disagree %
10	I reread when I don't understand	61	23
11	I do the exercises to consolidate comprehension	64	32
12	I skim the text to recall the important points	64	28
13	I take part in discussing the important points in the class	61	32
14	I summarize the main ideas	73	28

As indicated in the above chart, only 61% of the participators reread texts to foster meaning and contribute in discussions. Similarly, 64% do the attached tasks and skim the passages to remember the essential information. Summary making has the highest scores. In contrast, approximately the third of study subjects disagree with all these post-reading activities and a few of them did not provide answers to the questions. Hence, these remarks validate the aforementioned study assumptions.

5. Conclusion

This part of the study is confined to the summary of what is mentioned in the previous sections. To investigate the reading comprehension strategies employed by EFL learners at the faculty of languages and Translation in Najran university, the researcher has adopted a descriptive empirical study design. At the beginning, she has provided the defining concepts, the relevant previous studies and set the background contexts. Then, a questionnaire was distributed to forty-four students, and data were coded and displayed in charts and percentages.

The findings are pointing out that all the common cognitive reading comprehension strategies are utilized by these participators when coping with the written discourse. Nonetheless, their responses are a bit low ranging from 52% to 86% indicating that a considerable number of students lack either knowledge on practice or both according to their response 'disagree' and

'not sure'. Procedures such as relating the title and illustrations to topics, scanning for key statements, using a dictionary to get meaning while reading and making summary have the highest scores. On the contrary, the item- neglecting unimportant words is not well activated (only 52%), and which is required to aid reading faster. In sequence, the lowest performance is shown in the post-reading phase; though reading is a notorious source for handling the other productive skills, namely, speaking and writing and which represent the backbone of the target language learning. The research suppositions were validated.

Of course, provoking such limitations is not, however, intended to introduce learning experiences negatively. It is just an endeavor to let both the learners and practitioners be aware of these inadequacies, and then, they provide the more beneficial remedies that can lead to extra satisfying performance.

It is recommended to carry out an experimental research in these contexts about the metacognitive strategies of reading.

References

-Anjomshoa,L & Zamanian,M (2014). The Effect of Vocabulary Knowledge on Reading Comprehension of Iranian EFL Learners in Kerman Azad University, International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature Vol.2, Issue 5

-Baleghizadeh,S & Golbin,M (2010). The Effect of Vocabulary Size on Reading Comprehension of Iranian EFL Learners- LiBRI. Linguistic and Literary Broad Research and Innovation Volume 1, Issue 2.

-Brown, H (2007).TEACHING by PRINCIPLES – An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy – Pearson Education, Inc. Third Edition.

-Chou,P (2011). The Effects of Vocabulary Knowledge and Background Knowledge on Reading Comprehension of Taiwanese EFL Students. Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching 2011, Vol. 8, No. 1, Centre for Language Studies- Singapore

-Fan,Y (2009). Implementing Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) in an EFL Context in Taiwan, PHD dissertation- University of Leicesters

-Harmer, J (2013). The Practice of English Language Teaching- Fourth Edition, Pearson Education Limited.

-Lai, Y; Tung,Y & Luo,S (2008). Theory of Reading Strategies and its Application by EFL Learners: Reflections on Two Case Studies, https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org

-Mikulecky, B and Jeffries, L (2005) – Reading Power: *Reading for Pleasure *Comprehension Skills *Thinking Skills *Reading Faster- Third Edition Pearson Education, Inc.

-Omer, A (2014) An Investigation into the Reading Strategies of ESP Students in the College of Medical Sciences at Umm Al-Qura University- Umm Al-Qurma University Journal of Languages and Literatures Volume No 13

-Rhalmi, M (2018). How to teach reading skills- from theory to practice, www.myenglishpages.com/blog/how-to-teach-reading-skills

- Richards,J & Schmidt,R (2002). Longman Dictionary of LANGUAGE TEACHING AND

APPLIED LINGUISTICS, Pearson Education Limited- Third Edition

-Uribe-Enciso,O (2015). Improving efl students' performance in reading comprehension through explicit instruction instrategies, Rastros Rostros / Vol. 17, No. 31