

Reading Comprehension Challenges Confronted by Saudi EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study is based on action research carried out in King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. The purpose of this study is to identify the major reading comprehension problems confronted by Saudi EFL learners. Some major problems include limited vocabulary, less exposure to target language, unrelated and monotonous reading material, increasing anxiety due to lack of understanding and poor teaching strategies. The research is conducted among the first year Business Administration, Chemistry, Computer Science and Mathematics majors of King Khalid University, studying Intensive English Program (Blended Course) as university requirement for 12 hours a week for 12 weeks. 84 non- English major students and 9 EFL teachers participated in this research. The study proposes some recommendations which might be beneficial for the teachers, moderators and policy makers.

Keywords: reading comprehension challenges, exposure to English, Saudi EFL learners, reading skill, teaching strategies

Introduction

English was first introduced in the elementary level in Saudi Arabia in 2005. Prior to this it was taught only in intermediate and secondary levels. (Alamri, 2008; Al-Qahtani, 2010). Recently, English has been introduced in the primary level. The Ministry of Education has taken considerable measures to upgrade the level of teaching and learning English, yet enhancement is still required. Reading is considered as the most essential skills among the four language skills (Krashen & Brown, 2007). Reading can touch the soul of the reader. People read to learn, to gather information, to enjoy and to connect with other people's thoughts and ideas. Thus, reading comprehension is not an exception. In fact, identifying or understanding specific word or information does not define reading comprehension rather it helps readers to relate to the text by building a bridge between the readers and the messages that has been conveyed through the text. (Kintsch, 1998).

Statement of the Problem

The Saudi EFL learners are not adequately efficient in all four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Khan et al., 2019; Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020; Shahbaz & Khan, 2017). However, reading can be termed as the most challenging skill for the EFL learners. Lack of understanding, limited vocabulary, poor grammatical skill, inability to comprehend new vocabulary and meaning are some of the major factors for which the learners struggle. A considerable number of studies have diagnosed similar problems such as Jdetawy, 2011; Nation, 2003; Al-Abdan,1993. In addition, learner's inability to spell correctly escalates their reading comprehension challenges (Dewanti, 2020). Several studies have been conducted on the issue, but the problem still largely prevails.

Purpose of the Study

1. To diagnose the reading comprehension problems confronted by the Saudi EFL learners.
2. To identify the major causes of these problems.

Methodology

Participants

A total of 84 students of King Khalid University of the departments of Business Administration, Chemistry, Computer Science and Mathematics of Sciences and Arts College of Sarat Abidah, around 6 EFL teachers teaching in different colleges of King Khalid University, 3 EFL teachers teaching in the schools of Sarat Abidah, Khamis and Abha participated in this study. The students were studying Intensive English Program (Blended Learning Course) as university requirement for 12 hours a week for 12 weeks. The enthusiastic students willingly participated and discussed their problems about their failure to comprehend reading texts. The learners even discussed possible solutions from their own point of views with the researcher. Teachers were interviewed and accordingly suggested possible and practical remedies.

Data Collection System

Questionnaires, semi-structured interviews with teachers, discussions, face to face and online classroom observations and the researcher's own experience were the main research tools for collecting data.

90 questionnaires were distributed, and 84 responses were returned. The questionnaire for the learners contained close-ended questions. It was thoughtfully designed to identify the challenges faced by the learners. The questionnaire was verified by experts and colleagues. The questionnaire consisted of 14 items.

The teachers were interviewed directly by the researcher.

The objectives of the survey required for the action research were explained in the appendices.

Data Analysis

Collected data were sorted and analyzed. The researchers own experience of more than a decade also contributed to the analysis of the data.

Results

Questionnaire for EFL learners

Linguistic Challenges faced by learners:

Psychological challenges faced by the learners

Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
6. I always think that I will not be able to understand the entire text.	(N=20) 23.80 %	(N=13) 15.47 %	(N=3) 3.4 %	(N=35) 41.66 %	(N=13) 15.47 %

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. I find it difficult to figure out the meanings of the words of reading text.	(N=64) 76.19 %	(N=11) 13.09 %	(N=5) 5.9 %	(N=3) 3.5 %	(N=1) 1.19 %
2. I completely fail to understand the meaning of the text.	(N=12) 14.28 %	(N=25) 29.7 %	(N=7) 8.33 %	(N=14) 16.66 %	(N=26) 30.95 %
3. I fail to guess the meaning of a new or unfamiliar word.	(N=35) 41.66 %	(N=16) 19.04 %	(N=9) 10.71 %	(N=11) 13.09 %	(N=13) 15.47 %
4. I can identify the main idea/ supporting ideas of the text.	(N=4) 4.85 %	(N=3) 3.57 %	(N=5) 5.95 %	(N=33) 39.28 %	(N=39) 46.42 %
5. I want to translate the meaning from English to Arabic while doing a reading comprehension.	(N=67) 79.76%	(N=11) 13.09%	(N=0) 0%	(N=4) 4.76%	(N=2) 2.38%

7. I become frustrated when I fail to identify the meaning of a new word.	(N=61) 72.61 %	(N=12) 14.28 %	(N=7) 8.5 %	(N=2) 2.3 %	(N=2) 2.3 %
8. I get stressed as I find the allocated time is not sufficient to identify the meaning.	(N=69) 82.14 %	(N=13) 15.78 %	(N=0) 0 %	(N=1) 1.19 %	(N=1) 1.19 %
9. I get anxious if the reading comprehension is given from outside the textbook during exam.	(N=72) 85.71 %	(N=10) 11.90 %	(N=0) 0 %	(N=1) 1.19 %	(N=1) 1.19 %

Challenges faced due to ineffective learning and teaching strategy

Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
10. My English teacher uses English as a medium of instruction in the classroom.	(N=4) 4.7 %	(N=12) 14.28 %	(N=35) 41.66 %	(N=10) 11.90 %	(N=23) 27.38 %
11. I know how to scan / skim a text.	(N=3) 3.57%	(N=2) 2.38 %	(N=12) 14.28 %	(N=12) 14.28 %	(N=55) 65.47 %
12. I can identify the key	(N=6) 7.14 %	(N=3) 3.57 %	(N=29) 34.52 %	(N=14) 16.66 %	(N=32) 38.09 %

words while scanning a text.					
13. The reading comprehensions included in my textbooks are interesting and familiar.	(N=11) 13.09 %	(N=9) 10.71 %	(N=11) 13.09 %	(N=37) 44.04 %	(N=16) 19.04 %
14. I memorize answers of reading texts to pass the exam.	(N=49) 58.33 %	(N=24) 28.57 %	(N=3) 3.57 %	(N=4) 4.76 %	(N=4) 4.7 %

Open ended questions for teachers

1. What are the major reading comprehension challenges faced by Saudi EFL learners?
2. What are the possible causes?

Analysis

Item 1: I find it difficult to figure out the meanings of the words of reading text.

In item 1, 76.19% of the participants strongly agree that it is difficult for them to identify the meaning of the words of reading comprehension. 13.09% of the participants agrees, 5.9% remains undecided, 3.5% disagrees and 1.19% strongly disagrees. The percentages indicate clearly that the majority of the learners face challenges to understand the meaning of the text due to having limited vocabulary.

Item 2: I completely fail to understand the meaning of the text.

In item 2, 14.28% strongly agrees and 29.7% agrees that they completely fail to understand the meaning of the text. 8.33% of the learners cannot decide. 16.66 % disagrees and 30.95% strongly disagrees. The percentages suggest that learners do possess some skills to understand the text as a whole.

Item 3: I fail to guess the meaning of a new or unfamiliar word.

In item 3, 41.66 % strongly agrees and 29.7% agrees that new vocabularies are difficult for learners to identify and understand. The percentages show that maximum learners do not have the ability to predict the meaning.

Item 4: I can identify the main idea/ supporting ideas of the text.

In item 4, 39.38% disagrees and 46.42% strongly disagrees, which highlight the fact that the learners do not have adequate ability or training to identify main idea / supporting ideas from given texts.

Item 5: I want to translate the meaning from English to Arabic while doing a reading comprehension.

In item 5, Maximum (79.76% strongly agrees and 13.09% agrees) learners want to translate the text from English to Arabic in order to comprehend the meaning.

Item 6: I always think that I will not be able to understand the entire text.

In item 6, the percentages indicate that majority of the learners do not lack the confidence to accomplish the task. 41.66% of the learners disagrees while 15.47% strongly disagrees.

Item 7: I become frustrated when I fail to identify the meaning of a new word.

In item 7, majority (72.61% strongly agrees and 14.28% agrees) accepted that they get frustrated when they fail to identify new vocabulary.

Item 8: I get stressed as I find the allocated time is not sufficient to identify the meaning.

In item 8, 82.14% of the participants strongly agree that they find the allocated time insufficient for them to accomplish their reading tasks and therefore get stressed.

Item 9: I get anxious if the reading comprehension is given from outside the textbook.

In item 9, 85.71 % of the learners strongly agree that if the reading texts are given from outside the textbook during exams, they suffer from anxiety.

Item 10: My English teacher uses English as a medium of instruction in the classroom.

In item 10, 4.7 % strongly agrees, 41.66% remains undecided while 27.38% strongly disagrees. The percentages suggest that teachers use both English and Arabic as mediums of instruction in EFL classrooms.

Item 11: I know how to scan / skim a text.

In item 11, only 3.75% strongly agrees and 2.38% agrees that they can skim and scan reading texts. Thus, highlighting the fact that majority lacks the skills of skimming and scanning.

Item 12: I can identify the key words while scanning a text.

In item 12, 7.14% strongly agrees while 16.66 % disagrees and 38.09% strongly disagrees. The percentages emphasize the need of proper training.

Item 13: The reading comprehensions included in my text books are interesting and familiar.

In item 13, 13.09% remains undecided, 44.04% disagrees and 19.04% strongly disagrees. Therefore, the percentages suggest that the materials used for teaching reading comprehension are not interesting enough to attract the Saudi EFL learners.

Item 14: I memorize answers of reading texts to pass the exam.

In item 14, 58.33% strongly agrees and 28.57% agrees which specify that fact that most of the learners learn the answers by heart instead of understanding.

Observation of the teachers

6 EFL teachers teaching in university and 3 EFL teachers teaching in schools were interviewed by the researcher. The teachers thoroughly discussed the issues related to poor reading skills of the learners. Nearly all of the teachers identified “lack of vocabulary”, “limited exposure to English”, “poor grammatical skills”, “learners’ unwillingness to learn the target language”, “ineffective teaching strategy” and “learners’ anxiety” as the common major factors. One teacher highlighted the fact that many of her learners failed to identify all the English alphabets. Another suggested that the learners must be trained to identify the sounds of English alphabets which will enable them to pronounce and spell correctly. In addition, the learners need to develop reading habits. Moreover, some teachers emphasized for adequate teacher training to teach reading skills. Incompetent teachers demotivate the learners to a great extent. At the same time some teachers suggested that the teaching materials should relate the students to their day to day lives and must be interesting.

Observation of the researcher

The researcher has been teaching English in Saudi Arabia for more than a decade which in fact enables her to identify the most challenging reading comprehension problems confronted by the Saudi EFL learners. She has become familiar with the Saudi culture and can understand their beliefs and attitude towards learning English. She finds that the learners are enthusiastic to learn the international language and understand the importance of learning this foreign language. However, poor teaching and learning strategies, unfamiliar and unattractive teaching materials demotivate the learners to learn the target language. Some learners suffer from anxiety when they fail to identify the meaning of new vocabularies. Due to having limited vocabulary the learners fail to comprehend the meaning of the texts. Resultantly, they keep losing their interests. Moreover, the learning materials fail to draw the attention of the learners of digital age. In addition, day to exposure of the target language is extremely limited for the learners. The learners who are appreciated to learn English at home tend to show better performance in reading skills. In the schools, the learners try to memorize the answers of the reading texts without understanding. In exams, reading texts are mostly selected from textbooks which have been previously solved in the classrooms. Therefore, the learners pass not by understanding but by memorizing. As a result, the aim of teaching reading skills remains unaccomplished even in the institutions. Furthermore, from

the beginning of primary level, the learners are never introduced with the sounds of the English alphabets which affects their ability to pronounce and spell correctly.

Findings

Lack of exposure to target language

Due to the predominance of mother tongue, the Saudi EFL learners fail to get enough exposure to English in their day to day life. The young learners are rarely introduced to read English story books during their early age. In addition, even in EFL classrooms the teachers repeatedly switch to Arabic to give instructions. (Al-Nofaie,2010)

Limited vocabulary

Most of the learners suffer due to insufficient vocabulary. From the beginning of primary level, learners are not trained properly to learn vocabulary. Lack of vocabulary prevents them from comprehending the meaning of the given texts. (e.g., Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Nezami, 2012; Alkhalaf, 2012; Iqbal et al., 2015).

Unrelated teaching material

Selected textbooks are not sufficient enough to meet the requirements of the learners. The study materials should be relatable to the learners' day to day life. (Rahman, 2013). Boring textbooks demotivate the learners and therefore they keep losing their interests.

Anxiety due to lack of understanding and insufficient time

Learners face anxiety when they fail to extract the meaning from the text. (Qarqez & Ab-Rashid, 2017). During exams, due to possessing poor reading skills the learners feel stressed as they struggle to complete the given task within the allotted time. As a result, the learners suffer from frustration.

Poor teaching strategies

Poor and outdated teaching styles of the teachers are widely responsible for the reading challenges faced by the learners. While discussing the issues related to reading comprehension, many of the learners highlighted that fact that they lost interest in reading due to their teachers inadequate teaching strategies. In service training is a must to ensure updated teaching strategy. (Khan, 2011)

Recommendations

1. Introduce English alphabet along with alphabet sounds from the beginning of primary level.
2. Teach vocabulary using updated and effective strategies.
3. Only English should be the medium of instructions in EFL classrooms.

4. Parents, institutions and the nation as a whole should ensure greater exposure to English in everyday life.
5. While designing or selecting teaching materials the learners' interests should be prioritized.
6. Learners should never be allowed to memorize reading comprehension answers.
7. Learners should be trained properly to tackle reading comprehension challenges.
8. Teachers should ensure friendly atmosphere in reading comprehension classes in order to deal with the anxiety of the learners.
9. Learners should be encouraged to develop reading habits both in English and Arabic.
10. English should not be considered as a subject required to pass only.

Conclusion

Several studies have been conducted on reading comprehension issue. However, the problems still exist. Teachers, parents, moderators, and policy makers should work together to guarantee effective, up to date learning to the learners.

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Acknowledgement

The author expresses her sincere appreciation to the Deanship of Scientific Research at King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia, for offering support for the current article.

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