THE SOURCES OF READING COMPREHENSION DIFFICULTIES AMONG SAUDI EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Arab students confront several reading difficulties such as lack of vocabulary and useful reading strategies. These difficulties make them unable to fully comprehend an English text. This paper discusses the sources of EFL reading comprehension difficulties faced by students at a university in Saudi Arabia. Data were collected from questionnaires which had been distributed to 250 students at Umm Al-Qura University. The questionnaire consists of only one part, asking students about the causes and factors that led them to struggle with reading. The responses reveal that the students mainly felt their reading difficulties related to several factors such as the lack of support from their parents, teachers and society, their reading textbooks which the students found uninteresting, and the classroom environment. The findings also suggest that most Saudi university students have little interest in reading in English. It is hoped that the findings of this research will inform Saudi education policymakers, teachers, parents and text books designers to enhance Saudi students’ reading level by taking account the reasons behind their reading difficulties.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, reading, reading difficulty, reading comprehension, Saudi

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Reading is the most complex skill of the four English skills for those in the Arab world, and it requires continuous practice. It is a cognitive process by which a reader decodes marks on a page with the purpose of deriving meaning from written material. It requires activating prior (given) knowledge or experience to understand the (new) written material. It requires using useful reading strategies such as context clues to discover the meaning of unfamiliar words. However, reading difficulties in English exist in all countries included UK and USA, not only in the Arab world. Arab students struggle with many reading difficulties mainly because they do not practice English in their daily lives, only at university. Their poor use of working memory leads them to be unable to follow meaning in English texts proficiently. However, the low level of background knowledge also affects their reading comprehension. When a student
has low prior knowledge or experience about the topic of the text he/she is reading, his/her reading comprehension as a result will be poor (Kintsch, 2013). Moreover, activating prior knowledge while reading is important as it increases reading comprehension and memory about the written material (Priebe, Keenan, & Miller, 2012).

1.1 READING COMPREHENSION DIFFICULTIES

Reading is a complex process involving the interaction between the reader and the text (Pearson & Fielding, 1991). Readers have to use their prior knowledge or experience while reading as a way to get meaning out of the written material. The purpose of reading differs from one reader to another, but almost all readers read to get information about what is written. Grabe and Stoller (2011) state that "the most fundamental requirement for fluent reading comprehension is rapid and automatic word recognition (or lexical access – the calling up of the meaning of a word as it is recognized)” (p. 15). Moreover, reading without comprehension means nothing; a reader needs to understand the written material in order to get information and so increases his/her own vocabulary and experience about what is written.

Arab readers struggle with many unknown English words while reading, which leads them to not effectively comprehend written material in English. When confronted by unfamiliar words, EFL readers usually pause repeatedly to check the meaning and the pronunciation of these words. Frequent interruptions lead them to have poor comprehension of what is written since they will not be able to associate the text ideas with each other or remember them (Laufer & Hill, 2000). Thus, a reader should have knowledge or enough lexical knowledge about what he/she is reading to activate the prior knowledge that is the basis upon which new knowledge can be based, allowing the reader to read more easily and fluently to acquire information. A number of studies have concerned the relationship between lexical knowledge and reading comprehension in the Arab context. For example, Mebarki (2011) studied the factors that play an important role in EFL students reading performance in Algeria. He found that the lack of lexical knowledge is the main reason behind the students' poor comprehension. Different reading difficulties have been studied since the beginning of 1960s, which have mainly focused on decoding difficulties, the inability to activate prior knowledge, being dyslexic or the lack of lexical knowledge (e.g. Qrqez & Rashid, 2017; Alkhawaldeh, 2012).

Understanding a text is more than decoding words and phrases; it requires interaction between the reader and the text to understand written material. The reader is an active participant in this process, but the meaning the reader constructs in his/her mind varies according to their context and experience and the skills available to them. Skillful reader uses useful reading strategies activating prior knowledge to understand the writers' ideas when reading a text. Grabe and Stoller (2011) describe the importance of activating background knowledge and how it helps readers to comprehend the text, as shown below.

Background knowledge (whether understood as linked networks of reconstructed knowledge, instances of memory, schema theory or mental models) plays a supporting role and helps the reader anticipate the discourse organization of the text as well as disambiguate word-level and clausal meanings as new information is incorporated into the text (p. 21).
Thus, there are different reasons leading to not effectively being able to comprehend a text such as lack of vocabulary knowledge or inability to activate the prior knowledge which helps readers to interact dynamically with the text.

Previous studies have investigated the contexts that play an important role in increasing reading difficulties such as lack of interest, ineffective teaching and lack of support from parents or society (e.g Lerner, 2000). Murray and Johnson (1996) declared that the classroom environment and the methods teachers use play an important role in learning. They said “the language we use with our students, the book we select, and how we invite participation all send a message about who should participate, how often, and what the result should look like” (p. 324). Thus, the classroom environment or teaching methods may support or frustrate students; it depends on the teachers' strategies in teaching and the atmosphere of the classroom. In addition, lack of interest in reading leads students to have reading difficulties because they cannot interact effectively with the text if they have no interest in reading. Thus, motivation is required in learning to read because readers who are interested can interact more with the text compared with those who have little interest in reading. There are several studies which have found motivation or lack of motivation has a huge effect on learning any language, not just English (Brown, 2007; Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009).

Moreover, the lack of support or encouragement from parents in particular or society in general can lead students to have little interest in learning to read in English. According to Paananen, Aro, Kultti-Lavikainen, and Ahonen (2009), the home environment can affect students' reading ability either positively or negatively. Parents should monitor their children and follow up their homework studies as a daily routine. School teachers and parents should work along the same lines and put emphasis on the importance of reading for pleasure. However, while the sources of reading difficulties can differ, they can all lead students to not interact with the text and have poor reading skills as a result.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire, consisting of nine statements based on the interview/TAP responses and class observation, was designed as a research tool to gather data from 250 students who are studying at Umm Al-Qura University during their first academic year, 2018-2019. In addition to a demographic profile, the questionnaire consists of a single section asking the students about the reasons for their reading difficulties. The questionnaire was validated by a group of professionals from the English department at Umm Al-Qura University. In order to construct the questionnaire items, a number of studies related to reading comprehension difficulties and causes were reviewed (e.g., Al-Roomy, 2013; El-Safory, 2011; Shang, 2011). The questionnaire followed a four-point Likert scale. The students expressed their views about the causes of their reading difficulties by marking "strongly agree", "agree", "disagree" or "strongly disagree". The researchers translated the questionnaire statements into Arabic and the translation was reviewed by two lecturers in the English department in the same university.

The 250 participants in this study, were all 19-21 years old, all male and all in their first year in the university. The participants of the current research were all male because the education system in Saudi Arabia is segregated by sex. 300 were invited to participate in the current study. 36 students declared that they did not have any reading difficulties and 14 students did not participate in the current study due to their personal circumstances. Thus, a total of 250 students participated in the study. They were informed about the purpose of the
research and that they would remain anonymous. They took about 10-20 minutes to fill in the questionnaire at the end of their classes, after which we collected the questionnaires from them for analysis.

3.0 FINDINGS

The questionnaire was administered to the 250 students who had reading difficulties (they were self-selected as having reading difficulties) in the preparatory year program at Umm Al-Qura University. Table 1 below shows the reasons the participants gave for their reading difficulties.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Students who have reading difficulties do not read enough to improve their reading skills.</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) A lack of vocabulary could be one of the reasons for your reading difficulties.</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Teachers could contribute to your reading difficulties because of the methods they use for teaching.</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) The school/ university environment could also be one of the causes of your reading difficulties.</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) A student who is a poor reader at school level is more likely to be a poor reader at university level.</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) The Reading textbooks used may be one of the factors leading to your reading difficulties if they don’t interest you.</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Lack of support from your teachers, parents and the society could be part of the reason why you struggle with reading.</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8) The difference between your mother tongue and English could contribute to your reading difficulties.</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9) A lack of interest in reading in English led you to struggle with reading.</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For Item 1, the responses of the participants show that 37% of them strongly agree, 30% agree, making 67% overall agreement as shown in Table 1 above. Reading comprehension skills can be improved over time if learners read on a daily basis, which is essential for learners to become proficient readers. Thus, 2/3 of the respondents appear aware that the key to overcoming reading difficulties is to read more texts (especially those texts of personal interest as the responses to question 6, which blame textbooks for poor motivation).

For Item 2, the responses of the participants show that 49% of them strongly agreed, 26% agreed, making 75% overall agreement and 11% disagreed, 14% strongly disagreed.
making overall disagreement 25%, as shown in Table 1 above. ¾ of the respondents were aware that poor vocabulary knowledge impedes learners’ ability to read and comprehend texts and that those with better vocabulary knowledge will be able to read and comprehend texts better. It was clear to ¾ students that there is a relationship between having vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension – good vocabulary knowledge helps readers to decode words correctly, an essential to reading well.

For Item 3, the responses of the participants show that 29% of them strongly agreed, 19% agree, making 48% overall agreement and 27% disagreed, and 24% strongly disagreed, making 52% overall disagreement, as shown in Table 1 above. It seems that just over half the students did not give the teachers’ responsibility for their poor reading ability. Teachers can help students to improve their comprehension and their vocabulary knowledge by, for instance, encouraging them to read critically to construct meaning from the text, but their input depends on the students’ parents’ and other members or society, of which the students appear aware from their responses to questions 4 and 7.

For Item 4, the responses of the participants show that 46% of them strongly agree, 33% agree making a total of 79% in agreement, while 12% disagreed and 9% strongly disagreed making a total of 19% as shown in Table 1. The students’ strong agreement about the effect the learning environment could have on developing reading skills suggests a cry for help, that they feel a lack of support or awareness of their needs. The reading environment can facilitate learning to read in English more easily, especially if educators at all levels prioritise student needs over abstract institutional organizational dictates.

For Item 5, the responses of the participants show that 22% of them strongly agreed, 24% agreed making a total of 46% in agreement, while 31% disagreed and, 23% strongly disagreed making a total of 54% as shown in Table 1, so more disagreed than agreed with this statement. While, school teachers should pay strong attention to developing basic reading skills in English at school, less than half the students thought their reading difficulties at school level curtailed their reading development at university level.

For Item 6, the responses of the participants show that 42% of them strongly agreed, 31% agreed, making a total of 73% agreement, while 14% disagreed and 12% strongly disagreed as shown in Table 1. Reading textbooks can be one of the factors lead to reading difficulties if they are complicated, long, with many unfamiliar words. Thus, teachers within their remit, or better, the ministry of education (which has the authority to select the textbooks schools and universities have to use) should choose reading textbooks carefully. Reading appropriate textbooks in terms of subject matter and level can help students to learn or construct new knowledge that they never come across before; on the other hand, poorly chosen texts can frustrate students and cause them to stop reading, as appears to be suggested here by the students’ responses.

For Item 7, the responses of the participants show that 38% of them strongly agreed, 29% agreed, making a total of 67% agreement, while 18% disagreed and 16% strongly disagreed (34% overall disagreement) as shown in Table 1. This response suggests that 2/3 of the students felt a lack of support or encouragements from their parents, teachers and society, which impacted on their ability to develop their reading skills. Their responses imply that supporting students can increase their confidence and perhaps lessen the fear of making reading mistakes. It may be that uneducated parents are unaware of the importance of reading in English for their children’s future and a so do not support their children’s reading efforts.
For Item 8, the responses of the participants show that 50% of them strongly agreed and 28% agreed making 78% agreement while only 8% disagreed and 14% prefer strongly disagrees as shown in Table 1. More than ¼ of the students believed their difficulties in reading English texts were because of the effect of their mother tongue. For instance, English is written and read from left to right but Arabic is written and read from right to left which may contribute to the students’ reading difficulties. If the students transfer the strategies they used in reading Arabic texts to reading English texts, this could lead them to having phonological difficulties; for instance, Arabic requires reading all the letters in a word, but English has many silent letters that are not pronounced.

For Item 9, the responses of the participants show that 46% of them strongly agreed, 22% agreed (total of 68% agreement), while 18% disagreed and 14% strongly disagreed making 32% disagreement in total as shown in Table 1. More than ¾ of the students believe their difficulties in reading English texts were because of the effect of their mother tongue. Teachers may have a hard job motivating them, but should try giving their students different reading activities that might help them improve their reading abilities and create interest and pleasure while reading. However, given the syllabus, available textbooks and other resources and time constraints, it may be difficult for students to respond adequately to motivate their students.

Overall, Item 4 shows the highest level of agreement among the participants, at 79% (attributing reading difficulties to the school/university environment), followed by Item 8 (mother-tongue differences to English) at 78% and Item 2 (lack of vocabulary) at 75%. There was 73% agreement with Item 6 (uninteresting reading textbooks), while Item 1 (students do not read enough) and Item 7 (lack of support from parents, teachers and society in general) both had a 67% overall agreement level.

Only two items, Item 5 (a poor reader at school is likely to be a more reader at university) with an agreement level of 46%, and Item 3, (teachers and teaching methods could contribute to the problem) at 48%, had a more balanced distribution of opinion. Item 5 suggests just over half the students (54%) believed reading improvement was possible post-school and only about half (52%, Item 3) blamed their teachers and teaching methods for poor reading development although 79% blamed the general school/university environment. However, two thirds of the students agreed that students do not read enough and three quarters of them agreed they lacked sufficient vocabulary, both areas that the students themselves can take charge of and be responsible for. The external factors like the school/university environment (4), choice of textbooks (6) and lack of support from parents, teachers and society in general (7) need to be considered as a priority by policy makers and educators as well as society in general for improvements to be made. As to Item 8 (differences between English and Arabic), these differences could be tackled and discussed within the classroom as part of the teaching methodology remit.

4.0 DISCUSSION

As it is clear from the students' responses, all of those who completed the questionnaire struggled with reading difficulties. These difficulties have various reasons, according to the respondents. In general, the questionnaire responses showed 2/3 agreement and above with all the items except Item 3 concerning the teachers and teaching methods as a source of students'
reading difficulties in English, which 52% disagreed with. Lack of practice, lack of interest, lack of vocabulary knowledge, the environment of study in school and university, the reading textbooks, the lack of support from parents, teachers and the society, and the effect of their mother tongue and to a lesser extent, teaching methods, all seemed to agree contributed to their reading difficulties.

The respondents (37% strongly agree and 30% agree) claiming that that students who do not practice reading have more reading difficulties than those who read continually concur with Lerner and Johns’ (2012) view that students with reading difficulties do not practice enough to improve their reading. Almost half of the participants (49 strongly agree and 26 agree) strongly attributed their reading difficulties to their lack of vocabulary knowledge. Hirsch (2003) claimed that increasing the students' vocabulary knowledge can improve their reading comprehension, as being knowledgeable about words helps students to have a deeper level of comprehension of their reading. Only about half of the students (29% strongly agree and 19 agree) attributed their reading difficulties to ineffective teaching, so it was not the most prominent concern of the students. However, Pinto and Tall (2002) point out that students should be engaged within the classroom environment – 79% students did not feel this – in order to understand their reading textbooks, which 73% were not motivated by, clearly have implications for teaching materials and classroom resources. Effective teachers can help their students have deeper comprehension of the written material by using suitable reading strategies and being patient, especially with those having more reading difficulties. However, teachers need a range of classroom support, from technology to wider choices of texts, graded to suit different students’ needs, interests and levels.

The school or university class environment and resources can greatly influence students' reading positively or negatively. Antilla (2013, p. 34) found that "proficient readers move through the reading process successfully because they have mastered these skills, while the struggling readers haven't determined how to do that yet". So while less than half (22% strongly agreed and 24% agreed) that those with reading difficulties at school are likely to continue having them, their other responses regarding vocabulary deficits (75%) and lack of practice (67%) suggest an awareness of the need to develop basic skill Almost 3/4 of the students strongly agreed (42 %) and agreed (31%) the reading textbooks present reading difficulties. If the language of the textbooks is familiar or easy to understand the students’ comprehension may be better than with a text way above their level or outside their experience. Willis (2008, p. 128) declared that the texts in reading books should be "text-appropriate background knowledge". Thus, students can use their background or prior knowledge to facilitate their reading comprehension.

Moreover, the majority of students agreed that the lack of support they received from their parents, teachers and society could be part of the reasons why they struggled with reading, (strongly agree 38% and agree 29 %), causing perhaps, feelings of isolation and low confidence, which can be deeply demotivating. Motivation plays a very important role in helping students improve their reading skills and overcome their reading difficulties. The school/home environment complement each other; so if teachers and parents work along the same lines, this could help the students read with deeper comprehension (Baker, 2003) and more satisfaction.

Over 3/4 of the students (strongly agree 50 % and agree 28%) declared that their reading difficulties could be attributed to the difference between their mother tongue (Arabic) and English. This may be partly because they read Arabic from right to left while English from left
to right or because the sentences' word order in Arabic is Verb-Subject-Object while it is Subject-Verb-Object in English (Alsamadani, 2009). Abisamra (2003) claims that Arabic speaking students commit several errors while reading or writing in English because they depend deeply on their mother tongue for rules and procedures. However, 2/3 of the students (strongly agreed 46 % and agreed 22%) claimed to struggle with reading because they had little or no interest in reading in English, either intrinsically or extrinsically. Hidi and Renniger (2006) claim that personal interest originates from an intrinsic desire to understand particular topics. Even though teachers and parents try to motivate the students to read, without any intrinsic interest in English for its own sake or extrinsic interest in its usefulness for getting a better job and/or higher salary, students will not perceive any benefit from reading. Motivation is also linked to home and society’s views of the importance or relevance of reading in English for the students. If their support is not in place, then the student, teacher and classroom resources have a very hard job on their own.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This research suggests that reading in English is one of the biggest difficulties Arabic-speaking students encounter, which leads them to make a lot of reading errors and results in poor comprehension, which negatively impacts on their interest in reading. Moreover, various studies have likewise suggested a negative relationship between students’ reading difficulty and their comprehension level. The students attributed their reading difficulties to several causes as mentioned in earlier sections of this paper. It is hoped that the findings of this research will inform Saudi education policymakers, teachers, parents and text books designers to enhance Saudi students reading level by taking account of the reasons behind their reading difficulties. As a general contribution, the findings of the current research questionnaire may be useful for second language teachers to obtain insights into the possible sources of their learners’ reading difficulties.

Future research can be carried out using different tools (like interviews) to compare and contrast the findings in order to construct a framework to cope with learners' reading difficulties. Using a different sample is also useful, for instance interviewing reading teachers to have a deeper understanding about the causes of students' reading difficulties from the teachers’ perspectives. More in-depth studies of the most frequent difficulties identified by the students, as outlined in the findings of the questionnaire, with more detailed questions is also another possible line of enquiry. Some experimental action studies of the students responses to different types of text based on level and topic might also help to develop a reading program that would motivate and thus benefit the students. A selection of online texts in a language learning laboratory for instance, with the time taken to read them recorded and the accuracy of responses to a few comprehension questions at the end could help identify suitable texts in terms of length, topic and level. Such an exercise could also help hone teachers’ material selection and question writing skills from the students’ responses to the various texts.

REFERENCES


