The Place of Reading Comprehension in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract
The present study aims to show the importance of ESL reading ability in acquiring English as a second language. The study involves 92 college students (males and females) from the Department of English at Nizwa College of Applied Sciences. They represent two groups, the Foundation year students and the first year English majors. A number of tests were used to measure students' overall proficiency in English as well as their reading ability (i.e., the ability to contribute to the main idea of the text, scanning, skimming, to derive word meanings from context, to use a dictionary to find meanings, definitions, to identify prefixes, antonyms and synonyms). Students' ability to read was correlated to their proficiency level in the second language. It was found in the study that good readers were better users of the dictionary, derived meanings of words from the context and contributed to the main idea of the text better than poor readers did. Good readers were found to be high achievers in the second language.
Keywords: reading comprehension, scanning, skimming, SLA

1. Introduction:

Reading is the most complex activity that involves orthographic, phonological, syntactic and semantic processing; i.e., bottom-up processing, background knowledge and top-down processing (Adams and Collins, 1985, Wagner, Schatschneider, and Phythian-Sence, 2009). Reading has been the focus of varied and versatile research, e.g., the acquisition of vocabulary in terms of frequency and saliency (Brown, 1993), Coady 1997, Zimmerman, 1997), reading processes, strategies, the nature of reading difficulties and abilities in second language learning (Alderson, 1984), the role of metacognitive awareness in second language reading or the way in which learners organize their learning, (Carrell, 1989), and the role of L1 as compared to L2 in reading at different proficiency levels. (Carrell, 1991, Wade-Woolley, 1999).

The fact that reading in a second language is a difficult task for most second language learners had been well established in the literature [5]. This skill is generally considered to be of a highly individual nature; that is, no two readers approach or process a written text in exactly the same way. Nevertheless, there are general factors that have an impact on reading comprehension. Much work has been done to increase our understanding of the influences of factors such as strategy choices and background knowledge on second language reading comprehension. (Grabe and Stoller, 2002)

The present study aims to establish the significance of reading ability in SLA. It also attempts to address the issue of the role of reading comprehension in improving the proficiency level in the L2. It tests the level of English reading proficiency of college students and examines the differences in performance among students according to their level of proficiency. The study is based on the assumption that reading is central to learning. In this respect Anderson (1999, p.1) contends that:

> Reading is an essential skill for English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) students; and for many, reading is the most important skill to master. With strengthened reading skills, ESL/EFL readers will make greater progress and attain greater development in all academic areas.

It is expected to establish in the present study that the sooner the students learn to read and write in English, the greater the opportunity they will have to improve their proficiency in English and perform satisfactorily on the major English courses. We need to perceive these students as capable students who want to meet and exceed the high expectations teachers hold for them. They are already competent in one language and the challenge is to find ways of enhancing their acquisition levels of English in order for them to use it in their major study, i.e., English.

2. The Sub-Skills of Reading Comprehension:

In order to understand the reading ability and explore how it is acquired, it is essential that we determine the nature of such ability. According to Grabe and Stoller, (2002, p. 19), reading comprehension abilities are "quite complex and they vary in numerous ways depending on tasks, motivations, goals and language abilities". However, they [9] divide the underlying processes that are activated as we read into two parts; i.e., lower-level processes and higher-level processes. The lower-level processes are lexical access (word recognition), syntactic parsing, semantic proposition formation and working memory activation. These processes represent the more

automatic linguistic processes and are typically viewed as skills orientated. The higher-level processes include text model of comprehension, situation model of reader interpretation, background knowledge use and inferencing and executive control processes. They generally represent comprehension processes that make use of the reader's background knowledge and inferencing skills. However, lower-level processes are not in any way easier than higher-level processes.

In his attempt to explain what it means to be able to read, Alderson (2000) maintains that discussions of understanding levels merge into a discussion of a reader's ability to understand at certain levels. Learners may comprehend the words but not the meaning of a sentence. This skill is related to microprocesses which have to do local, phrase-by-phrase understanding. At a higher level, learners may comprehend sentences but not the organisation of the text. This skill is related to macroprocesses which have to do with global understanding.

In the light of the literature relevant to reading comprehension, the present study aims to

- investigate what proficient readers seem to be able to do, i.e., to identify the particular abilities that enable students to read (what they must learn).
- establish the relationship between the ability to read and levels of proficiency.
- set some guidelines for identifying good readers.

Therefore, the study attempts to measure the students' reading sub-skills of:

- Using a dictionary to look up meanings of words, vocabulary, and using a dictionary to identify synonyms and antonyms.
- Finding the meanings of vocabulary, synonyms and antonyms from the context.
- Skimming and scanning.
- Contributing to the main idea and the use of inference. The ability to make inferences is defined as the ability to answer a question relating to meanings not directly stated in the text. (Alderson, 2000, p.9).
- Reading comprehension of a number of passages of various lengths.

3. The Present Study

3. 1. Subjects:

The sample of the study consists of 92 Arabic-speaking college students (males and females) who are studying at the Department of English at Nizwa College of Education. They represent two groups, the Foundation year and the First year students. They have common characteristics, e.g., first language, age, number of years of studying English and learning background.

3. 2. Materials:

In order to collect the necessary data for the study, the subjects were given the following tests (students were given clear instructions on how to complete these tests).

Seven tests of varying length were administered to the sample of the study. The multiple-choice format was used in these tests. The test items were intended to test various reading micro skills, such as using a dictionary, deducing meaning from context, skimming and scanning, understanding main ideas and drawing inferences.

1. Using a dictionary to look up meanings, vocabulary, and definitions. (30 items)
2. Using a dictionary to look up the meanings of prefixes, synonyms and antonyms. (20 items)
3. Deriving the meanings of vocabulary from the context. (30 items)
4. Deriving the meanings of synonyms and antonyms from the context. (20 items)
5. Skimming and Scanning (15 items)
6. Contributing to the main idea of the text and using inference. (25 items)
7. Reading Comprehension: consisting of 5 reading passages followed by a total number of fifty items to be answered by the respondents. (50 items).

The students' level of proficiency was measured by their performance on the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in the first semester of the academic year 2010/2011. An average score was calculated for each student, which represented a student's proficiency level.

3. 3.Methodology:

A quasi-experimental design was implemented to investigate the hypothesis that good readers are likely to be high achievers in the second language. The dependent variable is proficiency in English and the independent variables are reading comprehension and the reading sub-skills measured by the students' performance on the assessment instruments (six reading sub-skills tests and one reading comprehension test).

3. 3.1. Reliability and Validity:

According to Williams (1998), reliability means consistency of evaluation. The item-total score reliability was used to determine item reliability for each one of the seven tests (Bachman, 1990). This was achieved by using the product moment correlation between marks for an item and the corresponding total marks gained by the

subjects on all other items in the test. Co-efficient values of 0.8153, 0.8671, 0.8231, 0.8797, 0.8541, 0.8181, and 0.8621 were obtained for the seven tests respectively (i.e., using a dictionary to look up the meanings of vocabulary, using a dictionary to look up the meanings of synonyms and antonyms, finding the meanings of vocabulary from context, finding the meanings of synonyms and antonyms from context, skimming and scanning, contributing to the main idea and reading comprehension). In the light of the correlation coefficients, the tests can be considered reliable tests of reading skills.

According to Weir (1997), the content validity of a test can be further investigated by a scrutiny of the test content by experts. This will enhance the probability that in the final test the required operations are being tested. Therefore, the tests were given to a four jurors (language specialists) at the Department of English, Nizwa College of Education to judge the content validity of the tests.

3. 3. 2 Hypothesis:

It was hypothesized in the study that good readers are likely to be high achievers in the second language.

3. 3. 3. Statistical Procedures:

The study used a number of statistical procedures and tests in the analysis of the data:

1. Correlations: they were used to establish the relationship between the different variables of the study.
2. ANOVA: it was used to examine the degree of variation in students' reading comprehension sub skills and their level of proficiency.
3. Step-wise Multiple Regression: this procedure was used to determine the variables (i.e., reading sub-skills) that contribute to the students' level of proficiency. (Bachman, 2004)

4. Results and Discussion:

The performance of the students is analyzed in terms of the reading sub-skills and their relation to the dependent variable, proficiency in English. The various tests were correlated with each other and the correlation co-efficients for these tests are given in Table 1 below. The magnitude of the correlation values can be seen from the table below which shows that there is a strong positive relation among all the study variables which are shown to be strongly related to reading ability. Nearly all these correlations attained a high level of significance; i.e., (p=<0.0001).

Table 1 Correlation Matrix of the Study Variables

Correlations

		USING	GUESS	MAIN	YNONYN	KIMSCAN	READ	PROFIC
USING	Pearson Correl	1	.479*	.329*	.297*	.398*	.500*	.281*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.002	.005	.000	.000	.008
	N	88	88	88	88	88	88	88
GUESS	Pearson Correl	.479*	1	.476*	.393*	.252*	.531*	.477*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000	.000	.018	.000	.000
	N	88	88	88	88	88	88	88
MAIN	Pearson Correl	.329*	.476*	1	.221*	.231*	.525*	.322*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.000	.	.039	.030	.000	.002
	N	88	88	88	88	88	88	88
SYNONY	Pearson Correl	.297*	.393*	.221*	1	.246*	.374*	.417*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005	.000	.039	.	.021	.000	.000
	N	88	88	88	88	88	88	88
SKIMSCA	Pearson Correl	.398*	.252*	.231*	.246*	1	.311*	.304*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.018	.030	.021	.	.003	.004
	N	88	88	88	88	88	88	88
READ	Pearson Correl	.500*	.531*	.525*	.374*	.311*	1	.518*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.003	.	.000
	N	88	88	88	88	88	88	88
PROFIC	Pearson Correl	.281*	.477*	.322*	.417*	.304*	.518*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.008	.000	.002	.000	.004	.000	.
	N	88	88	88	88	88	88	88

**.Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*.Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The results also reveal a wide range of abilities within the two groups. Table 2 below shows the range

of variability in students' performance on the various measures of the reading ability. Statistically significant variations in students' performance can be seen in their skills to use a dictionary (vocabulary and synonyms and antonyms), deriving the meaning of words from context, contributing to the main idea of the text and the use of inference, and reading comprehension. The two skills of deducing the meaning of synonyms and antonyms and skimming and scanning did not show significant variations.

Table 2 Analysis of Variance of the Six Variables

ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
USING	Between Groups	299.728	1	299.728	14.194	.000
	Within Groups	1815.988	86	21.116		
	Total	2115.716	87			
GUESS	Between Groups	240.982	1	240.982	21.082	.000
	Within Groups	983.018	86	11.430		
	Total	1224.000	87			
MAIN	Between Groups	72.803	1	72.803	17.070	.000
	Within Groups	366.788	86	4.265		
	Total	439.591	87			
SYNONYM	Between Groups	3.607	1	3.607	.523	.471
	Within Groups	592.836	86	6.893		
	Total	596.443	87			
SKIMSCAN	Between Groups	3.503	1	3.503	1.226	.271
	Within Groups	245.770	86	2.858		
	Total	249.273	87			
READ	Between Groups	993.201	1	993.201	38.118	.000
	Within Groups	2240.788	86	26.056		
	Total	3233.989	87			

4. 1. Predicting Reading Ability:

It was attempted in the study to predict students' reading ability from a number of variables (i.e., using a dictionary, deriving the meaning from context, deriving the meaning of synonyms and antonyms from context, contributing to the main idea and skimming and scanning). The step wise regression was used to decide the predictive power of the study variables in relation to the independent variable (reading ability).

Uchikoshi (2013) reported that his results showed that English vocabulary and English word decoding, as measured with real and nonsense words, played significant roles in English reading comprehension. In particular, the study results highlighted the crucial role of English vocabulary in the development of L2 English literacy skills.

Table 3 below gives the step-wise regression summary of the independent variables in their prediction of the criterion variable.

Table 3 Summary Table of Multiple Regression Analysis

Step No	Variables Entering	Multiple R	R Square	R2 Change	F	Level of Significance
1	Deriving the Meaning	.531	.281	.274	33.774	.0001
2	Contributing to Main Idea	.615	.378	.363	25.787	.0001
3	Using a Dictionary	.660	.436	.416	21.615	.0001

4. 1. 1. Deducing Meaning from Context:

The above table shows that the variable "Deriving the Meaning of Words from Context", which had a correlation co-efficient of .531 (p=<0.0001) with the criterion variable Reading Ability, was entered in the first step of the multiple regression equation. The multiple R-value was .531, which was highly significant (p<0.0001). Therefore, this variable was expected to attain a high predictive power. It accounts for 27.4% of the variability in students' reading comprehension levels. This indicates that those students who are good at deducing the meaning of words from the context are good readers in the second language. The strategy of deriving the meaning of words from the context is a valuable tool that enables students overcome the problem of unfamiliar words. Experience has shown that SL learners react in many different ways to newly introduced words since such words cause panic, put the students off and make them give up reading in the target language. According to Birch (2002), lack of vocabulary remains one of the major obstacles for ESL/EFL readers who should be taught how to

use a number of word identification strategies (e.g., look up a word in a dictionary, keep a vocabulary journal, look for similarities between words in English and their native language, and look for cognates). Some teachers, however, advocate the strategy of "skip the word you don't know". Such teachers tend to accept the idea of skipping unknown words in pursuit of comprehension.

4. 1. 2. Contributing to the Main Idea:

The skill of contributing to the main idea and the use of inference was the second variable that was entered in the prediction equation. It has a strong positive relationship with the overall reading proficiency of students. It attained a correlation co-efficient of .525, ($p<0.0001$) with the criterion variable Reading Ability. The second predictor variable of reading ability "Contributing to the Main Idea and Use of Inference" accounts for 8.9% of the variability in the students' reading comprehension. This indicates that this is an essential skill for L2 readers. This means that good L2 readers must be skillful in identifying the main idea of the text.

Davis (1968), cited in Alderson (2000), defines eight sub skills. They are: recalling word meanings, drawing inferences about the meaning of a word in context, finding answers to questions answered explicitly or in paraphrase, weaving together ideas in the content, drawing inferences from the content, recognizing a writer's purpose, attitude, tune and mood, identifying a writer's technique, following the structure of a passage. According to Moreillon (2007:76) "Readers who make predictions and inferences before, during, and after they read are actively engaged in the meaning-making process.".

Grabe (1991) proposes the following six component elements in the fluent reading process. They are automatic recognition skills, vocabulary and structural knowledge, formal discourse structure knowledge, content/world background knowledge, synthesis and evaluation skills/strategies, metacognitive knowledge and skills monitoring

Munby (1968), on the other hand, distinguishes many reading microskills, the most relevant microskills are: deducing the meaning and use of unfamiliar lexical items, understanding information when not explicitly stated, understanding the communicative value of sentences, distinguishing the main idea from supporting details, using basic reference skills, skimming and scanning to locate specifically required information.

Anderson (1999) pointed out the importance of learners' ability to identify the main idea as one of the most important reading skills that a learner can develop. Its importance stems from the fact that this skill is needed and can be applied to the majority of reading contexts. Equally important is the fact that by identifying the main idea comprehension can be facilitated, i.e., where the L2 reader can organize the information presented and distinguish main ideas from supporting ideas and details.

4. 1. 3. Using a Dictionary:

The third predictor variable of reading ability was "Using a Dictionary to find meanings of Words". It had a correlation co-efficient of .500 ($p=<0.0001$) with the criterion variable Reading Ability. This variable accounts for 5.3% of the variance in the students' reading ability. It is shown here that this skill plays an important role in students' reading ability. In other words, students who can use the dictionary properly can achieve better on a reading comprehension measure. In the light of the above result it can be recommended that the skill of using a dictionary by learners of English should not be overlooked as a mechanical or tedious task. Rather it should be developed by encouraging learners to use the dictionary more often as a reliable source of knowledge on the target language.

So far, the results of the study have shown three variables only as predictors of reading ability. The remaining two variables (i.e., deriving meaning of synonyms and antonyms from context and skimming and scanning) were not entered in the prediction equation and therefore failed to have any predictive power concerning reading ability. This may be due to the lack of training on the part of learners to use an important skill such as skimming and scanning. Moreover, the exercise of skimming and scanning seemed to be difficult for the learners who participated in the study. However, the variable of deriving meaning of synonyms and antonyms from context appeared to have predictive power concerning students' ESL proficiency. In line with the results of the present study, Anderson (1999) maintained that understanding main ideas, making inferences, predicting outcomes and guessing vocabulary from context are all reading skills that readers of English typically need to develop.

4. 2. Predicting ESL Proficiency:

It was also attempted in the study to predict students' ESL proficiency from a number of variables. Six variables were used in the prediction equation which include reading ability, using a dictionary, deriving meanings of words from context, deriving meanings of synonyms and antonyms from context, contributing to main idea of text and use of inference, skimming and scanning.

Table 4 Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis

Step No	Variables Entering	Multiple R	R Square	R2 Change	F	Level of Significance
1	Reading Ability	.518	.268	.260	31.545	.0001
2	Synonyms and Antonyms	.571	.326	.310	20.582	.0001
3	Deducing the Meaning	.600	.360	.338	15.778	.0001

4. 2. 1. Reading Ability:

The above table shows that Reading Ability, which had a correlation co-efficient of .518 with the criterion variable ESL Proficiency, was entered in the first step of the multiple regression equation. The multiple R-value was .518, which was highly significant (p<0.0001). This variable was expected to attain a high predictive power. It accounts for 26% of the variability in students' proficiency levels. This signals that reading is central to learning a second language. In other words, reading is a key to success in all other language skills. (Anderson, 1999).

However, reading is often referred to in the ELT literature as the forgotten third skill despite the fact that its significance may be self-evident to many EFL/ESL teachers. Nonetheless, within a larger context reading in a second language continues to be extremely important and L2 reading ability is in great demand as long as English remains the language of science and technology.

4. 2. 2. Synonyms and Antonyms:

Deriving meaning of synonyms and antonyms from context was entered in the second step of the prediction equation. It had a correlation co-efficient of .417 (p=<0.0001) with the criterion variable ESL Proficiency. This variable accounts for 5% of the variance in students' overall ESL proficiency. This signals that knowledge of synonyms and antonyms constitutes an important part of the students' vocabulary. The researcher has always encouraged his students to learn words and their equivalents or opposites as an effective strategy of learning new words. The significance of opposites is deeply rooted in the contention of linguists and philosophers that language saws the universe into two parts, i.e., binary oppositions.

Learning antonyms and synonyms is part of building students' vocabulary. Word knowledge is essential for enhancing college ESL students' oral and written modes of communication and includes a range of skills and learning experiences provided through the integration of reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Nation, 1990; Zimmerman, 1997). Most L2 researchers asserted that having college ESL students guess the meaning of unfamiliar words by using their eyes and minds to look inside the text enhances word knowledge. They used numerous vocabulary building strategies with college ESL learners such as personal word lists, semantic mapping, imagery, and computer-assisted instruction to help them become independent learners of the tremendous amount of unfamiliar key terms and concepts they encounter in their content area classes. Zimmerman (1997) found that vocabulary instruction combined with self-selected reading assignments and course-related reading increased college ESL students' knowledge of words provided they were given: (a) multiple exposure to words; (b) exposures to words in meaningful contexts; (c) rich and varied information about each word; (d) establishment of ties among instructed words, student experience, and prior knowledge; and (e) active participation by students in the learning process.

Despite the research investigations that have been conducted with college ESL students on vocabulary development, more research is needed in this area.

4. 2. 3. Deducing Meaning from Context:

The third predictor variable of ESL proficiency was "Deriving Meaning of Words from Context". It had a correlation co-efficient of .477 (p=<0.0001) with the criterion variable ESL proficiency. It accounts for 2.8% of the variance in the students' reading ability. The contribution of this variable is rather small but it is statistically significant. It can be noted that it has contributed to both reading ability and ESL proficiency. This emphasizes the important role of the strategy of guessing meanings of words from context.

According to Anderson (1999), teachers may cultivate students' vocabulary by training them in guessing the meaning of unknown words from the context. This is supportive of the reading comprehension process. For many second language learners, reading means knowing many words. Controlled vocabulary materials can also be used as well as analyzing of word structure. This is one of the strategies employed by SL learners and there is general agreement that good readers use a wide range of strategies. Therefore, it is recommended here that teachers of reading have to introduce a wide variety of strategies (Blachowicz and Ogle, 2008). Guthrie, Wigfield, Perencevich (2004: 3) pointed out a number of attributes that good readers have and stated that: "They are able to use background knowledge, form questions, search for information, summarize accurately, organize their new-found knowledge, and monitor their comprehension as they read books.".

Nation (1990) suggested five steps to help students guess the meaning of difficult or unfamiliar words from the context. These are: identifying part of speech, examining clause or sentence containing the unknown word, examining relationship to other sentences, guessing the meaning, and finally checking that the guess is correct.

However, in L2 reading contexts, much less discussion is devoted to word recognition. Grabe and

Stoller (2002) attribute this avoidance to a limited understanding of the role of rapid and automatic word recognition processes in reading. They also pointed to the tremendous difficulties involved in providing L2 learners with the time, resources and practice required to develop a large recognition vocabulary. However, this skill should not be ignored in L2 contexts if our goal is to help learners become fluent L2 readers.

5. Conclusion:
Reading comprehension is a complex construct that entails investigating a large number of factors that interact and influence the process of comprehension. The reading skills that were examined in this study included skimming and scanning, deducing the meaning of unknown words, differentiating the main ideas from supporting details, and understanding the communicative function or value of sentences.

The present study attempted to shed some light on the many criteria that define the nature of fluent reading abilities and the many skills, processes and knowledge bases that act in combination, and often in parallel to create the overall reading comprehension.

The findings reported in the present study corroborate the importance of reading in acquiring a second language. Proficient readers are found to perform well on the reading sub skills. It is established in the study that a number of reading skills (e.g., understanding main ideas, making inference and guessing vocabulary from context) are essential skills which readers of English as a second/foreign language need to develop.

From the findings of the study, it can be concluded that students who perform well on the reading sub-skills as well as the reading comprehension test (good readers) tend to attain higher levels of proficiency in the target language.

However, there are many topics that remain to be explored in L2 reading research. These include word-level issues in reading development, discourse organization and text comprehension, main idea comprehension and instructional routines, extensive reading and motivation, social and cultural context influences on reading, and assessment of reading.

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