

The Influence of Reading Strategies on EFL Students' Comprehension Skill at Al Balqa University in Jordan

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Abstract

This research investigated the effect of reading strategies of Jordanian EFL students' comprehension skill at Al Balqa University in Jordan / Al Karak Branch. The Survey of Reading Strategies Questionnaire that is adopted and adapted from Mokhtari and Sheory (2002) was administered to 30 male and female participants during the second semester of the academic year 2017/2018. The data was analyzed through descriptive statistics to reveal the frequency and type of strategies utilized by the sample participants. The results then were illustrated and discussed in forms of frequencies and percentages concerning the use of the reading strategies by Jordanian English Language and Literature at the University of Jordan. The findings of the study showed that 87% agreed they enjoyed using these four reading strategies, while 82% agreed that these reading strategies facilitated them completely and more accurately in achieving their reading comprehension tasks than the conventional reading comprehension method they generally practice (technical aid strategies, clarification and simplification strategies, coherence detection strategies and monitoring strategies). Then, recommendations were provided for further research studies of this kind in order to achieve a deeper understanding of Jordanian English Language and Literature students' reading strategies use.

Keywords: Reading, Strategies, Comprehension, Reading Comprehension Achievement.

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1. Introduction

Reading as a mental process infers the interaction between some linguistic process and background knowledge bases that are classified as print decoding and comprehension process as stated by scholars such as Norris & Hoffman (2002). The former relates to the visual process of the auditory and printed phonetics in a way that associates with the understanding of the given information of particular reading materials. The latter, thus, involves the reader's knowledge concerning the construction of the meaning units within a text, organization of the information in the reading text as well as the capacity to figure out things in the reading materials in relevance to the knowledge and beliefs of the readers whether in ESL/ EFL (Martino & Hoffman, 2002; Upton and Thompson, 2001 and Kern, 1994).

In general, second language certain linguistic information includes a verge which has to be traversed before the first language skills transfer to second language performance and they emerge alike. This demonstrates that the initial stages of the second language reading development, second language vocabulary, and grammar knowledge are more significant than reading strategies and metacognitive information.

Much research has been conducted in this concern; most of them showed that reading skill in the first language plays an essential role in the development of the second language reading skill. To be more specific, the background knowledge in the first language is very crucial in enhancing the reading comprehension skill and the development of the reading skill when learning a second language (Brown and Haynes, 1985).

Also, researchers take into consideration that the effectiveness of lower-order processes, such as word recognition and syntactic parsing, as an essential situation for the improvement of the first language reading comprehension (Stanovich, 1991; Perfetti, 1985). This reveals that it is very prospective in the advancement of the second language reading comprehension (Koda, 2005). This proposes that second language readers who possess background knowledge and experienced in reading the first language texts are more effective readers compared to others. This can either sustain the constructive transfer of reading skills or develop to be a basis of intervention. Readers who are weak in the first language literacy abilities cannot be predictable to reassign many sustaining resources to the second language reading contexts.

In addition, second language readers who do not have background knowledge about reading in the first language might overlook some basic reading skills and strategies in the second language. This involves pre-reading skills of directionality, sequencing, the ability to distinguish shapes and sounds, and the knowledge that written symbols correspond to sounds and can be decoded in terms of order and direction. Also, the first language readers do not have enough background that is required to reassign adequate reading strategies or skills. Since second language readers possess different fundamental attitudes toward second language reading, they outline their own awareness of how effectively they can present assignments and, therefore, strengthen their achievement as readers. Consequently, this research investigates the effect of reading strategies on Jordanian EFL students' comprehension skill.

2. Statement of the Problem

English is taught in Jordan as EFL in which students are required to master all the four basic language skills (Bataineh and Mayyas, 2017). In Jordan students of English as a foreign language face difficulties in comprehending reading texts. That is, the use of reading strategies in teaching reading comprehension has become a crucial issue. But, teachers of reading at varied education levels in Jordan complain that their students are weak in reading comprehension. They are unable to comprehend reading text appropriately. Thus, the literature does not provide as much research on using reading strategies and its connection of reading comprehension and learning reading (Garner, 1987). In spite of the importance of reading comprehension and its relationship with the use of reading comprehension strategies in comprehending literary text at the university level, it has not been given the attention it deserves.

3. Literature Review

In the past few decades, many scholars and specialists in the field of reading have shown their point of views in relation to the nature of reading in ESL and EFL. The existence of an amalgamation of views led to the appearance of a significant number of reading models. Studies on reading have further gone beyond the models of reading to that of the strategies that are found demanded to achieve the target from reading. This is because scholars propose that the scarcity of research on reading strategies and the limited existence of adequate reading strategies result in raising the difficulties in reading comprehension of a given reading materials (Garner, 1987). This does not only include all types of readers and language learners. This means that the availability of the constructive attitudes of the readers requires a rich deposit of vocabulary, words and background knowledge about the given topic (Al-Akloby, 2001).

To understand reading a text, students should use their knowledge about reading English; invoke conscious & deliberate techniques (Sheorey and Mokhtari, 2001: p. 433). This refers to the lack of awareness by the reading teachers and learners concerning the proper reading strategies to be applied. That is, the teacher and the learner should know when, what, why, how to use this reading strategy. Carrell, Gajdusek, and Wise (1998) define the reading strategy as “actions that readers select and control to achieve desired goals or objectives” (p. 97). Similarly, Young & Oxford, (1997), classify the reading strategies into; planning strategies, attending strategies, evaluating strategies. Also, Garner (1987) states that: “if cognition involves perceiving, understanding, remembering, and so forth, then Metacognition involves thinking about one’s own perceiving, understanding, and the rest” (p. 16). Moreover, cognitive strategies are invoked to make cognitive progress, metacognitive strategies to monitor it (Flavell, 1979).

Researchers and scholars state that the reading strategies in the context of the first language (L1) and second language (L2) teaching reading are interrelated in which they can be interchangeably used in either context (Cheng, 1998). The researcher has focused on the contribution of the reading strategies to developing the reading comprehension skill of ESL/EFL reading materials. Investigations in the field of teaching reading showed that language learners use both macrolinguistics and microlinguistics reading strategies to enhance their reading comprehension skill.

Al-Sheikh (2002) also demonstrates that language learners apply more repair strategies (adjusting the reading time, visualising information, and rereading) and “support reading strategies” in English rather than in Arabic. This indicates that both ESL and EFL language learners use similar reading strategies to achieve text comprehension across different language systems such as L1 and L2. According to McDough (1995), there are four basic categories of reading strategies concluded from the findings and results of previous research studies:

- i. Technical aid strategies (skimming, scanning, marking the text, and using the glossary).
- ii. Clarification and simplification strategies (syntactic simplification, producing synonyms, using a paraphrase of rhetorical function, interpreting the text, and using inference).
- iii. Coherence detection strategies (identifying the macro frame, keeping the meaning in mind, using information about the story, using background knowledge, and identifying key information).
- iv. Monitoring strategies (consciously changing the plan, varying the reading rate, rereading, correcting mistakes, evaluating guesses, and questioning).

During the past two decades, much research has been conducted to investigate the reading strategies and reading skills in the area of EFL and ESL context. Thus, researchers worldwide continue their efforts to gain more understanding of the strategies EFL students employ to deal with English texts of all kinds. As far as the current research is concerned, it is very significant to discuss some of the past studies that relate to the current research.

Malcolm (2009) investigated the reading strategy awareness of Arabic-speaking medical students studying in Bahrain. The data analyses obtained from a questionnaire completed by 160 participants depicted a high utilization of the metacognitive reading strategies in general. Initial student and low proficiency participants opted for translating more than the other participants. This same strategy is less employed by high proficiency and upper year students.

In another study by Park (2010) pointed out that the Korean EFL college students employed the metacognitive strategies with high frequency while reading authentic expository / technical texts in English. This intensity becomes lower when they are exposed to narrative texts in English. It was also revealed that the higher the reading comprehension ability was, the more reading strategies were employed.

Also, Hong and Leavell (2011) investigated on metacognitive awareness, use of reading strategies and self-perception of striving developmental college readers during one semester through metacognitive awareness of reading strategies inventory, personal and academic self-concept inventory, and an individual background questionnaire. The study found the reading strategy instruction made positive effects on students' metacognitive strategic reading and led to significant increase in use of Global Reading Strategies. Although the overall correlation between strategic thinking and learner self-perception showed no statistical significance, correlations between Support Strategies and social anxiety and Global Reading Strategies and mathematical self-efficacy revealed statistical significance.

Similarly, the results of the study by Mehrpour, Bagheri, & Sadighi (2012) for example on teaching reading comprehension strategies to Iranian EFL pre-university students showed that while strategy training appeared to raise students' awareness of reading strategies and could encourage strategy use by some students, some strategies were found to be harder to be acquired. Moreover, the reading strategy instruction was not able to enhance the students' reading performance significantly based on the results of a reading comprehension test given to the participants at the end of the program.

Likewise, Ghafournia and Afghari (2013), using the same instrument, compared the reading strategies used by postgraduates in different fields of studies in Iran. They found that significant differences were noted among students in different academic disciplines (Engineering, Basic Science and Social Science) in overall, direct and indirect strategies. Another interesting finding is that students in Social Science were the highest users of strategies, while students in Engineering were the least.

In addition, a more recent study by Omar (2014) sought to investigate the online reading strategies among elder postgraduates in Libya in general without focusing on any particular demographic variables. His study found that they were moderate users of strategies. Problem-solving strategies were most frequently used while support strategies were the least used.

Consequently, this study intends to investigate the reading strategies used by Jordanian EFL learners at university level.

4. Objectives of the Study

This study addresses the following research objectives:

- i. To examine the reading strategies used by Jordanian EFL students at Al Balqa University in Jordan.
- ii. To identify students' perceptions of the different reading strategies used in comprehending reading text material.

5. Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions formulated based on the above research objectives:

- i. What are the reading strategies used by Jordanian EFL students at Al Balqa University in Jordan?
- ii. What are the students' perceptions of the different reading strategies used in comprehending reading text material?

6. Research Methods

This research employed both quantitative & qualitative approaches (Mixed-Methods) to investigate the relationship between English Language and Literature students' reading comprehension level and their use of reading strategies produced by 30 students at Al Balqa University / Al Karak branch in Jordan for the academic year 2017/2018. Moreover, it is an investigation of a phenomenon that occurs within a specific context that is identifiable, bounded and appropriately studied. The present research adopts the approach of detailed analysis of the relationship between English language and literature students' reading comprehension level and their use of reading strategies at Al Balqa University in Jordan.

The selection of the 3rd year students was motivated by the fact that they have completed their English language compulsory reading comprehension course. All the students selected for the study are bilingual students (English and Arabic speakers). When this research study will be conducted, the students had successfully completed their basic reading comprehension course of EFL for three years as a compulsory subject as part of their B.A degree syllabus requirements.

The researcher used three instruments are the *Reading Strategies Questionnaires*, *Comprehension test*, and the *Semi-Structured Interview Methods*. The Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS.ver20) was used for analyzing the data and testing of study questions.

7. Discussion and Findings

This section of the study provides a brief discussion on the findings and results of the study. The research determined the assumption and distribution of the pre-/ post-tests using numerical through the quantitative and qualitative data collected from the participants via reading strategies questionnaires, comprehension test and semi-structured interview. The analysis used one-way ANCOVA for three independent samples were conducted for the variables of the study. The dependent variable was the reading comprehension as measured by the post-test, and the covariate was the level of reading comprehension as measured by the pretest. A pilot analysis assessing the homogeneity-of regression assumption showed that the difference between the covariate and the dependent variable revealed no significance differences as a function of the independent variable (the influence of the reading strategies).

$F(2, 42) = 0.67, p = 0.52.$

The ANCOVA indicated no significant differences, $F(2,44) = .28, p = 0.77$ which proposes that the used reading comprehension strategies (technical aid strategies, clarification and simplification strategies, coherence detection strategies and monitoring strategies) by EFL Jordanian students at Al Balqa University in Jordan showed the similar effect on the students' level of reading comprehension.

In conclusion, the researcher conducted a Likert-type analysis survey after the post-test to conclude the Jordanian EFL students' attitudes and beliefs about the influence of the reading strategies they used on the reading comprehension skill level. The researcher analysed the data by tabulating the modes of frequencies of the participants' responses. The percentage of frequency was produced from the collected data.

F refers for frequencies of how the participants provided responses to the questionnaires' items. The analysis of the questionnaires showed that 75% strongly agreed that they were easy to use the four reading comprehension (technical aid strategies, clarification and simplification strategies, coherence detection strategies and monitoring strategies) but with varied degrees of proficiencies. Also, 87% agreed they enjoyed using these four reading strategies, while 82% agreed that these reading strategies facilitated them completely and more accurately in achieving their reading comprehension tasks than the conventional reading comprehension method they generally practice.

Finally, 70% strongly agreed they would like to use these four reading comprehension strategies (technical aid strategies, clarification and simplification strategies, coherence detection strategies and monitoring strategies) again when the opportunity is provided. Within the participants group, 75% not only disagreed they appreciated applying these four reading strategies. Also, 75% percent of the participants disagreed when asked if they would like to use these reading strategies in the future. In the cloze group, 27% agreed that these reading strategies were easy to use. The participants in the cloze group generally use these reading strategies in their English language reading comprehension class. It is interesting to note that even though they regularly use this method, 73% do not think that it is easy to use these reading strategies.

8. Conclusion

The findings of the analysis of the frequencies and percentages of the post-test statistics showed the suggestion that the typical dissemination of post-test data was concluded. The findings of the investigation of the one-way ANCOVA for dependent and independent variables of the study proposed that the four types of the reading strategies (technical aid strategies, clarification and simplification strategies, coherence detection strategies and monitoring strategies) examined in this paper showed similar influence on students' reading comprehension level when reading a reading comprehension materials. In conclusion, the participants in this study stated that they had an encouraging experience when using the four reading comprehension strategies, while an almost similar number of participants stated that the four reading comprehension strategies were easy to apply when doing reading in EFL context, particularly in Jordan.

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