

Reading Comprehension Difficulties among EFL Learners: The Case of First and Second Year Students at Yarmouk University in Jordan

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Abstract

This paper discusses English as a foreign language (EFL) reading comprehension difficulties faced by students at a university in Jordan. Data were collected using questionnaires which were distributed to 200 students at Yarmouk University. The questionnaire consists of two parts: the first part contains demographic information about the participants and the second part includes two sections: the students' preferences and the students' reading difficulties. The findings reveal that the respondents are motivated to learn as they are in dire need for acquiring English. However, they face several problems in the reading process, such as ambiguous words, unfamiliar vocabulary, and limited available time to cognitively process the text. The findings of this study may be useful to policy makers in Jordan to improve the learners' reading experience.

Keywords: EFL reading, higher education institution, Jordanian students, reading comprehension, reading difficulties

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Introduction

Reading plays a central role in our educational, working, recreational, and social lives. The ability to read is highly valued and important for social and economic advancement. Reading is the most important skill among the four language skills as it can improve the overall language proficiency (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; McDonough & Shaw, 1993; Krashen & Brown, 2007). Even though one may have reading difficulties in his or her mother tongue, the problems get worse when reading is applied to a second language, as students might be lagging behind in a number of reading components, including accuracy, comprehension, and speed. Lagging behind is a cognitive difficulty associated with the process of reading in another language (Alsamadani, 2008). In other words, these difficulties are more likely to be associated with the nature of the language pragma linguistic or even sociocultural aspects.

Most researchers agree that reading comprehension is not simply recognizing individual words, or even understanding each individual word as our eyes pass over it. All models of comprehension recognize the need for readers to build up a mental representation of text, a process that requires integration across a range of sources of information, from lexical features to knowledge concerning events in the world (e.g., Garnham, 2001; Gernsbacher, 1990; Kintsch, 1998). For this reason, the Simple View of Reading, which could be seen as the first endeavor to describe the “balanced literacy”, suggests that reading comprehension results from developing skills in the areas of decoding and linguistic comprehension (Kirby & Savage, 2008).

Literature Review

Reading

Mastering reading skill requires interaction between the reader and the text. The reader has to decode the meaning of the written words to be able to understand the writer’s point of view. Rivers (1981) said that, “reading is the most important activity in any language class, not only as a source of information and a pleasurable activity, but also as a means of consolidating and extending one’s which are knowledge of the language” (p. 147). Readers have to use their prior knowledge while reading in order to construct meaning. Goodman (1973) declares that the learner “interacts with a message encoded by the writer. He concentrates his total prior experience and concepts he has attained, as well as the language competence he has achieved” (p. 162).

Ehri (1991) reported that there are four different ways to read words; decoding, reading by analogy, reading by prediction made from context and sight word reading. On the other hand, linguistic comprehension which is often operationalized using listening comprehension tasks is defined by Hoover and Gough (1990) as “the ability to take lexical information (i.e. semantic information at the word level) and derive the sentence and discourse interpretation” (p. 131). Several studies have shown that decoding and linguistic comprehension represent for more than 70% of the variance in reading comprehension (Catts, Hogan, & Adlof, 2005).

Decoding difficulties

Reading and writing difficulties have been the focus of many studies since the beginning of the 1960s, where they have mainly focused on children with poor decoding skills (Vellutino et al., 2004), such as those suffering from Dyslexia. Dyslexic is defined as “a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin and characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or

fluent word recognition, poor spelling and decoding abilities" (Lyon, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2003, p. 2). The double-deficit hypothesis suggests that there are three different forms of difficulties associated with reading disability; selective phonological deficits, selective rapid automatized naming (RAN) deficits and combined deficits (Wolf & Bowers, 1999). Poor readers might spend less time reading, therefore, develop limited vocabulary and general knowledge (Yunus, Mohamad, & Waelateh, 2016; Ismail & Yusof, 2016).

Different types of comprehension

Comprehension of language does not only involve the understanding of individual words but also active engagement with the content to create a mental representation (Rashid, 2012). Successful comprehension requires coordination of skills at many levels to extract and construct meaning. The level of difficulty associated with comprehension of certain content depends on the complexity of the language used. There are important differences between the language that we use in everyday conversations and the language used in school (Westby, 2012), where everyday conversations are originally used to achieve daily tasks and share personal information. Academic language includes a different set of words, more complex grammatical structures and different text organization to express content which describes complex relationships (Zwiers, 2008).

Comprehension models

A number of different models have been suggested by researchers, such as mental models by Gernsbacher (1990) and Johnson-Laird (1983), and Construction-Integration Model by Kintsch and Rawson (2005) to account for the complex process of understanding text. The bottom-up models where the process of reading starts with the written words and comprehension is constructed by building the representation stepwise from the individual phoneme to the understanding of the entire text. The top-down models confirm the importance of inference making and schemes used to predict the content of the texts. The parallel models suggest that these two processes (bottom-up and top-down) work in parallel, simultaneously (Kahmi & Catts, 2012).

Recent studies on reading

Nation (2004) reviews what is known about reading comprehension difficulties in children and the results show that not all children who have comprehension difficulties have morbidity in basic decoding. In a more recent study, Hartney (2011) investigated reading difficulties in English as a second language of grade 3 learners in one primary school in the Khomas education region of Namibia. Hartney used mixed-methods approach in the case study which reveals that many children lack proper reading skills and they cannot read properly.

Raihan and Nezami (2012) conducted a study on comprehension strategies and general problems in reading faced by Arab EFL learners at Najran University in Saudi Arabia. The study aimed to find the reasons behind the low level performance of university students in reading comprehension. A survey was conducted through the teachers' questionnaire, and students were observed during several reading sessions. The results show that students face spelling and pronunciation problems to a great extent.

Mohd Mahibur Rahman and Eid Alhaisoni (2013) aim to discuss the present status of education and ELT in Saudi Arabia. They highlight various challenges in teaching English, such as students’ poor proficiency and lack of good learning materials. They call for active participation from the policy makers, syllabus designers, textbooks writers, teachers and students to address the challenges.

Elwér (2014) examined the cognitive and language profiles in children with poor reading comprehension using a longitudinal perspective. Elwér found high levels of instability in compromised oral language skills, such as vocabulary, grammar and verbal memory across all test occasions for the poor oral comprehenders. Rajab and Al-Sadi (2015) identified certain habits and preferences of EFL learners regarding various personal practices of the reading process in the first language (L1) as well as in second language (L2) by using 10-item questionnaire on a Likert scale format. The students’ responses indicated the lack of interest as well as the lack of motivation towards ‘academic reading’ in both L1 and L2.

Methodology

A questionnaire was designed as a research tool to gather data from 200 students who are studying at Yarmouk University during the academic year 2016-2017. In addition to demographic profile, the questionnaire consists of two sections: the students’ language preferences and the students’ reading difficulties, with four questions in each section. The questionnaire was validated by a group of professionals from the English department at Yarmouk University. This questionnaire was adopted from a previous study conducted by Medjahdi (2015). As for reliability, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient test was used to test the consistency of the data collected where Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was as high as 0.89 which is acceptable.

Results and Discussion

Demographic profiles

The data collected shows that of the 200 participants in this study, 28% were less than 25 years old, 14% were 25-35 years old and 8% were 35 years old and above; 40% were females and 60% were males; 61% were in the scientific field and 39% were studying in the art field; 31% were above average in their academic achievement, 41% on the average level and 28% were below average; 56% of the participants were of less than one year in the university, 43% of 2-4 years and 1% of 4 years and above, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic profiles

Age				Percent	Sex		Percent
Valid	LESS	THAN	25	78.0	Valid	MALE	40.0
	YEARS	OLD				FEMALE	60.0
	25-35	YEARS	OLD	14.0		Total	100.0
	35 YEARS	OLD	AND	8.0			
	UP						
	Total			100.0			
Field of study				Percent	Achievement		Percent

Valid Art	61.0	Valid A	31.0
scientific	39.0	B	41.0
Total	100.0	C	28.0
		Total	100.0
Number of years		Percent	
Valid Less than two years	56.0		
2-4 years	43.0		
Four years and up	1.0		
Total	100.0		

Language skills preferred by the learners

The responses of the participants show that 32% of them prefer listening skill, 14% prefer writing, 23% prefer reading, 31% prefer speaking, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Preferred language skills

	Percent
Listening	32.0
Speaking	31.0
Reading	23.0
Writing	14.0
Total	100.0

As shown in Table 2, students' first preference is listening. This may include listening for entertainment, such as listening to music. Listening can improve reading comprehension in many ways. For instance, students may encounter new words when they listen to others. Low preference to reading stated by the respondents reflects that students face reading difficulties and they may not do well in their academic achievement, since they do not prefer to read.

Language of the reading materials

The majority of students (56%) prefer Arabic language, 30% prefer English language while 14% prefer neither Arabic nor English, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Preferred language in reading

	Percent
English	30.0
Others	14.0
Total	100.0

Motivation to read English materials is considerable. However motivation alone is not enough. The students need to be exposed to effective reading strategies and this is rarely emphasized in ESL classrooms in Jordan.

Types of preferred reading materials

A total of 14% of the respondents choose newspapers, 22% prefer short stories, 25% choose reading novels and 39 % choose reading books, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Preferred reading materials

	Percent
Newspapers	14.0
Books	39.0
Novels	25.0
short stories	22.0
Total	100.0

Primary goal of reading

Most learners (16%) said that their purpose from reading is to enrich their general knowledge, 20% state that their objective from reading is to increase their vocabulary knowledge, 23% reads for their academic needs, 40% claim that they read for pleasure and 1% for other purposes, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Purpose of reading

	Percent
Knowledge	16.0
Pleasure	40.0
enrichvocabulary s	20.0
academic needs	23.0
Others	1.0
Total	100.0

Strategies to aid reading comprehension

A total of 16% respondent state that they translate what they do not understand to their mother tongue, 6% carry on reading without understanding, 33% used dictionaries, 32% stop reading, where the remaining 14% choose none of the above, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Responses to reading difficulties

	Percent
Translate	15.0
Open dictionary	33.0

Carry on	6.0
Stop reading	32.0
Others	14.0
Total	100.0

Reading difficulties

A total of 13% respondents agree that they have problems with ambiguous words, 9% have problems of reading aloud in the classroom, 15% have difficulties of pronunciation, 29% have troubles with new words, 32% have problems to guess the meaning, and 2% answered none of the above, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Sources of reading difficulties

Difficulties of pronunciation	15.0	15.0
Ambiguous words	13.0	28.0
New words	29.0	57.0
Reading aloud	9.0	66.0
The meaning of word	32.0	98.0
Other	2.0	100.0
Total	100.0	

Reasons for not reading

A total of 51% agreed that they do not have the habit to read, 6% blamed limited available time, 25% associated reading difficulty to the kind of texts that they read and the remaining 18% agree on the difficulty of the reading skill itself (poor mastery of reading skill), as shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Reasons for not reading

	Percent
Lack of time	6.0
Lack of reading habit	51.0
The difficulty of the reading skill itself	18.0
The difficulty of the kind of texts	25.0
Total	100.0

Time devoted for reading

A total of 56% respondents stated that the time devoted for the reading session is insufficient, while 44% said that the time devoted for reading is sufficient, as shown in Table 9.

Table 9. Enough time allocation for reading

	Percent
Yes	56.0
No	44.0
Total	100.0

Correlation Test. Pearson Correlation**ANOVA TEST**

As for ANOVA test, the test shows that there are statistical significant differences between the responses of the participants attribute to age, sex, field of study, academic achievement and the number of years studying in the university. This is shown in Table 10.

Table 10. ANOVA for all the variables studied

		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Age	Between Groups	8.414	10	.841	2.619	.008
	Within Groups	28.586	89	.321		
	Total	37.000	99			
Sex	Between Groups	11.002	10	1.100	7.533	.000
	Within Groups	12.998	89	.146		
	Total	24.000	99			
Field of study	Between Groups	7.590	10	.759	4.170	.000
	Within Groups	16.200	89	.182		
	Total	23.790	99			
Academic achievement	Between Groups	12.379	10	1.238	2.368	.016
	Within Groups	46.531	89	.523		
	Total	58.910	99			
Years at the university	Between Groups	11.089	10	2.238	1.368	.006
	Within Groups	44.531	89	.523		
	Total	33.000	99			

However, only the second dimension and age show no significant difference in the answers of the participants where sig = .038, as shown in Table 11.

Table 11. ANOVA test shows no significant difference between Age and second dimension

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2.271	2	1.135	3.392	.038
Within Groups	32.466	97	.335		
Total	34.737	99			

Nevertheless, there seems to be a correlation between students' preference and reading difficulties even though weak where Pearson Correlation coefficient is .0126, as shown in Table 12.

Table 12. Pearson Correlation

	Difficulties
preferences	.126

When the correlation was taken between the academic achievement and the comprehension difficulties, there seem to be a stronger correlation which support the higher level of linguistic comprehension, where Pearson Correlation coefficient was .417, as shown in Table 13.

Table 13. Pearson Correlation

	Reading comprehension
academic achievement	.417

As for the correlation between student preferences and comprehension difficulties, the data analysis shows a weak correlation, since there seems to be a correlation between students' preference and reading difficulties even though weak where Pearson Correlation coefficient is .0126. However when the correlation was taken between the academic achievement and the comprehension difficulties, there seem to be a stronger correlation which support the higher level of linguistic comprehension. In fact, this was very evident By ANOVA test, where the test shows that there are always statistical significant differences between the responses of the participants attribute to age, sex, field of study, academic achievement and the number of years studying in the university. Only the second dimension (students' language preference) and age show no significant difference in the answers of the participants where sig = .038.

Conclusions

Reading is an important skill that learners need to master in learning any language. This paper reveals that the secondary school EFL learners face difficulties in their reading comprehension where they encounter ambiguous words, unfamiliar vocabulary, and limited available time to

cognitively process the text. Thus, policymakers and teachers need to find effective ways to tackle this problem in order to engage learners in a meaningful reading experience. It is recommended that future research employs a qualitative approach to observe EFL classrooms in Jordan and explore how reading lessons are conducted. The close observations of the classroom will be useful in identifying the barriers faced by the teachers in teaching reading besides providing insights into the current practices in the classroom. Future research should also examine the students' reactions to the approaches employed by teachers in order to understand their coping strategies in dealing with reading difficulties.

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