

Reading Comprehension Strategies among EFL Learners in Higher Learning Institutions

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Abstract

A variety of reading strategies are required to comprehend reading materials. Without effective reading strategies, students mostly face reading comprehension difficulties. This study aims to investigate reading comprehension strategies among English foreign language (EFL) learners in higher learning institutions. The study employed qualitative method and 10 Arab students of Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) and Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT) were interviewed. Inductive thematic approach was used to analyze data. The findings indicates that the most commonly used reading strategies among the EFL learners are logical knowledge (under linguistic schema), formal construction (under formal schema), cultural knowledge (under cultural schema), and prior knowledge and conceptual knowledge (under content schema). This study concludes that reading strategies help the EFL learners in understanding English reading materials. To improve reading strategies for EFL learners, there is a need for collective effort of English language teachers, curriculum designers, educationists, education policy makers, and the EFL learners themselves.

Keywords: Arab EFL learners, comprehension, higher institutions, reading strategies

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1.1 Introduction

English language as any language consists of four skills; listening, reading, speaking and writing. These skills are divided into two groups; receptive and productive. While receptive consists of reading and listening skills, productive refers to writing and speaking. When the learners learn receptive skills, they receive the language from spoken or written text and decode the meaning to understand the text. The reading skill is increasingly seen as one of the most important skills. Reading can be considered one of the basic ways of acquiring information in our society and for academic purpose in particular. It plays a vital role because it is one of the most frequently used language skills in everyday life. It is assumed that the person who is not able to read well will face serious trouble, especially in what is regarded to be educational and, subsequently, job opportunities (Ganesh, 2015).

Lack of effective reading strategy is identified as one of the significant factors affecting reading comprehension efficiency among EFL learners in higher institutions (Koda, 2007). This area has attracted a lot of research into Language 1 and Language 2 language acquisition and reading fluency in the Arab world (Elbeheri, Everatt, Mahfoudhi, Abu Al-Diyar, & Taibah, 2011). Oral language plays a significant role in learning to read as it has been observed that development of reading is directly proportionate to the development of oral language (Perfetti & Dunlap, 2008). Proper strategies need to be followed to achieve the desired goal rather than focusing on assessment as a tool to enhance comprehension skills (AlJamal, Hawamlehm, & AlJamal, 2013). Lack of reading exercises among students and training among teachers might be responsible for the poor outcome in terms of reading skills among students, which could result in poor academic performance (Abdelrahman & Bsharah, 2014; Alroud, 2015).

English language learners are expected develop good reading skills. Foreign language researchers have focused on searching for effective methods to increase students' reading ability. They advocate the use of extensive reading to motivate readers. Learners who do not understand reading material cannot enjoy reading. The most significant problem faced by the instructors today is reading deficiency among the university level students, which may reflect poor performance in their educational activities (Nezami, 2012). This might be due to the fact that students need a variety of strategies in order to comprehend reading materials. Therefore, this study aims to investigate reading comprehension strategies among Arab EFL learners in higher learning institutions.

2.1 Reading Comprehension Strategies

Strategies for reading comprehension could be discussed across the four types of schema: formal schema, content schema, cultural schema, and linguistic schema. Formal schemata consist of background knowledge of rhetorical, organizational, and formal constructions of various types of texts (Li, Wu & Wang, 2007). Thus, formal schema is viewed as the knowledge of the manner in which various genres are accessed. According to Richards et al. (2000), schema refers to the underlying structure responsible for the construction of a text. Different types of text and discourse such as description, letters, stories, poems, and reports are differentiated by the manner in which the subject, propositions, and other information are merged together to produce a component. This fundamental structure is recognized as formal schemata. For instance, a schema comprising

various stories might consist of components such as setting, episodes, events, and finally reaction. In fact, stories comprise a setting in which characters, place, and time are recognized, followed by episodes leading towards a reaction. Different structures are found in various genres. Inadequate knowledge of these structures results in considerable difficulties in reading comprehension (An, 2013).

Content schema refers to prior knowledge of the text content area. It encompasses conceptual information on what typically occurs in a particular topic. It also contains information on the manner in which these activities relate to each other to create coherence. It is an unrestricted set of typical events and units for a particular occasion (Li et al., 2007). The presence or absence of the content schema affects the reader's comprehension of the text in terms of topic area (Ke, 2004). Li and Zang (2016) posit that content schema refers to the background knowledge about the content. It includes information such as cultural background knowledge, previous experience, and related information of the text. Several studies of second-language and reading comprehension indicated that the first strategy include the prior cultural experiences that are extremely important in comprehension. Schema form is a high order structure containing knowledge of rhetorical organization structures. It also refers to the discourse structure of various genres of articles. Each kind of article has its specific framework. Cui (2016) contends that content schema-theoretic view of reading is more commonly used in global reading strategies compared to the two other factors (problem solving reading strategies and support reading strategies).

Regarding cultural schema, the strategic cultural schema determines the extent of the human knowledge of textual structures and rhetorical conventions, which can affect reading comprehension, and how this knowledge can be effectively taught. In an ideal situation, the sociocultural approach to schemata in reading comprehension can solve the following two problems (Lin, 2004). First, it enhances students' sensitivity to cultural differences in addition to their cultural knowledge in content. Second, it increases their skills in reading comprehension. Therefore, content schema is mainly culture-specific while cultural schema is typically considered as part of content schema (Li et al., 2007).

Linguistic schema is related to the vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. It contributes significantly to the comprehension of reading material. According to Zhao and Zhu (2012), linguistic schema refers to readers' prior linguistic knowledge, including the knowledge about phonetics, grammar and vocabulary as traditionally recognized. Readers are both text interpreters and decoders, and their interpretation abilities become more automatic and vital as their reading skill develops. Educated people predict meaning for accurate decoding. Therefore, effective comprehension of any reading material is impossible without adequate decoding skills (Nakamoto, Lindsey, & Manis, 2007).

Every word and well-formed sentences are believed to have a general idea in regards to their meaning. In this strategy, failure to understand non-defective terminologies is consistently attributed to specific accent which conceivably deficits a communication. As a rule of grammar is misapplied, grammatical coherent is broken (Zainal, 2017). Lesaux and Harris (2017) note that schema strategies have shown the importance of background knowledge within a psycholinguistic

model of reading. It is suggested that a variety of techniques and classroom activities should be fully observed (Beattie & Ellis, 2017; Martínez, Ruiz Molina, & Valle, 2016).

2.2 Theoretical Approach

This study adopts schema theory, which refers to how learners use prior knowledge to understand and learn from text. The term ‘schema’ was initially used by Barlett in psychology as ‘an active organization of past reactions or experiences. Subsequently, Rumelhart (1980) introduced the term in reading. The author defined schema as “a data structure for representing the genetic concepts stored in memory” (P.34). Schema can simply refer to connection of mental structures signifying readers’ knowledge of everyday activities (Brown, 2001; Harmer, 2001; Nassaji, 2002). Gilakjani & Ahmadi (2011) note that schema does not only influence how learners become familiar with information, but also how they store the information in their memory.

The basic assumption of schema theory is that written text does not convey meaning by itself; it only offers directions for readers on how meaning can be constructed or retrieved from previously acquired knowledge. This prior knowledge is also called readers’ ‘background knowledge’ while the previously acquired knowledge structures are called ‘schemata’ (Barlett, 1932; Nassaji, 2002; Rumelhart, 1980). The theory interprets that when people comprehend, they need to combine their own background knowledge with the information in a text. In this process, the prior knowledge and knowledge structure work effectively in people’s cognitive activities (Zhao & Zhu, 2012). Readers’ schemata are ordered in a hierarchical manner, in which the most universal remains at the upper and the most specific at the lowest level. Schema theory postulates that understanding the meaning of writing is an interactive process between the text and the readers’ prior knowledge.

Schema plays a significant role in the process of reading. It has been established that schema theory is valuable in helping learners to improve their reading ability (Li et al., 2007). Schema theory is widely applied in many disciplines and had a wide influence on first and second language teaching, especially in relation to reading (Malcolm & Sharifian, 2002). For this reason, schemata are hypothesized as helping readers to predict future occurrences based on past frames of knowledge through interaction between the reader and the text (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2016). Schema theory has been applied to guide the process of this study.

3.1 Method

This study employs qualitative method, in which interview techniques is used to collect data from 10 EFL learners of Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) and Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT). Semi-structured interview is used to collect data related to strategies adopted by the EFL learners in understanding the text. According to Creswell (2009), qualitative research refers to the use of different philosophical assumptions, strategies of inquiry, and methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation. It is “a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning” (p.5). A qualitative method is needed to explore and understand a particular phenomenon in depth from the perspective of participants. This study utilizes qualitative method because it is helpful in detailed exploration of a particular phenomenon. Interview technique is used in order to explore the reading strategies in detail.

The research questions in qualitative study usually emphasize on how social experience is formed and assigned meaning. The presupposition nature of an inquiry emphasizes the correlation between the researcher and topic(s), as well as the situational limitations that form the investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This suggests that in the present study, qualitative research can provide in-depth understanding of reading comprehension difficulties faced by EFL learners.

Semi-structured interview was used as data collection technique which consists of several important open ended pre-determined questions which are useful in identifying the areas to be investigated Gill et al., (2008). Questions can be asked to interviewees to obtain answers related to the strategy used by learners in understanding reading materials. Open-ended questions are asked so that the participants can best explain their experiences unconstrained by any point of view of the researchers or past research results. An open ended response to a question allows the participant to create the options for their own responses (Creswell, 2012). A face-to-face interview was performed, in which questions were asked and answers were recorded from only one participant at a time. In a qualitative analysis, researchers may use several face-to-face interviews to obtain valid data for analysis (Creswell, 2012).

Purposive non-probability sampling was used to select the interview participants. It is typical in qualitative research to study a few individuals or a few cases. This is because the overall aim of a researcher is to provide an in-depth analysis of the chosen phenomenon or area (Creswell, 2012). In this type of sampling, researchers intentionally select individuals and location to study and understand the phenomenon to help him to achieve the objectives of the research. The information richness of the participants is considered in this regard (Patton, 1990). Ten Arab EFL learners were considered for the interview in this study. The main purpose is to develop an in-depth examination of reading comprehension strategies under investigation. Inductive thematic approach was used to analyze the data. The use of themes is a way of analyzing qualitative data because themes are similar codes grouped together to form the main idea in the database. The emerging themes were grouped based on the responses on the strategies adopted by EFL learners provided by the participants.

4.1 Findings

Issues related to reading comprehension strategies are taken into consideration. These issues are: method adopted by the readers in reading the text, readers' strategies in addressing their reading difficulties, and their satisfaction with the adopted strategies. The four types of schema mentioned earlier are considered in analyzing these issues.

4.1.1 Linguistic Schema

The participants were asked to express their views regarding how they read English text, which is the first predetermined question for the interview. Responses related to linguistic schema were identified. The responses indicate that the participants use three different reading strategies from linguistic schema. These strategies are: Phonetic knowledge, decoding knowledge, and logical knowledge. The following table shows the reading strategies related to linguistic schema adopted by EFL learners in reading from the chosen institutions.

Table 1: *Linguistic Schema*

Strategy Applied			
Participant Code	IPK	IDK	ILK
PC1	0	0	1
PC2	0	0	1
PC3	0	0	1
PC4	0	0	1
PC5	0	1	0
PC6	0	0	1
PC7	0	1	0
PC8	0	1	0
PC9	0	0	1
PC10	0	0	1
Total	0	3	7

Note: Interviewee Code (IC), Phonetics Knowledge (1PK)
Decoding Knowledge (1DK) Logical Knowledge (1LK)

Table 1 shows that the most commonly used reading strategy among the respondents in relation to linguistic schema is logical knowledge, where the participants study the title, read the main topic, understand the title, or read the context. The reading strategy used by the majority of the participants (n=7) can be categorized under Logical Knowledge, which is part of linguistic schema. Under this category, Participant 1 claims to use the strategy of “studying the title”, Participant 2 opts for “reading the title”, Participant 3 chooses the strategy of “reading the main topic”, Participant 4 claims to use the method of “understanding the title”, Participant 6 understands English text by “reading the context”, Participant 9 tries to “start with the content”, and Participant 10 begins by “studying the title”.

It can be seen from the table that three of the participants use Decoding Knowledge as reading strategy. Participant 5 understands English text by “scanning the topic”. Participant 7 “gets the general idea” while Participant 8 reads “the sentences or paragraphs carefully” to be able to understand the main idea. Therefore, it can be said that Decoding Knowledge is the second most commonly used strategy among the Arab EFL learners in the chosen institutions. However, none of the participants uses phonetic knowledge as reading strategy based on the interview data. They

mostly use logical knowledge, followed by decoding knowledge. Linguistics schema plays a vital role in helping EFL learners to understand written material (Zhao & Zhu, 2012). Though no strategy related to phonetic knowledge was identified, for EFL learners to study the title they must be familiar with the phonetics knowledge of the L1 from the syllabic connections to form a word structure then logically connect the title wordings.

4.1.2 Formal Schema

Regarding formal schema, the responses are categorized under rhetorical knowledge, structural knowledge, and formal construction. The responses indicate that the dominant reading strategy used by the participants is formal construction. The following table represents the reading strategies used by the selected EFL learners from the chosen institutions.

Table 2: *Formal Schema*

Participant Code	Strategy Applied		
	2RK	2SK	2FC
PC1	0	1	0
PC2	0	0	1
PC3	0	0	1
PC4	0	0	1
PC5	1	0	0
PC6	1	0	0
PC7	0	0	1
PC8	0	1	0
PC9	0	1	0
PC10	0	0	1
Total	2	3	5

Note: Interviewee Code (IC), Rhetorical Knowledge (3RK), Structural Knowledge (3SK), Formal Construction (3FC)

Table 2 indicates that majority of the participants (n=5) use formal construction as reading strategy. Most of them grasp the contextual or extrinsic idea from the text. For example, Participant 2 understands “the general idea” to have “a focus and quick reading of a given comprehension”. Participant 3 grasps “the topic and content background”, Participant 4 just “reads what is relevant” to grasp the idea, Participant 7 uses to grasp the ‘contextual idea’ from the text and apply it in

reading strategy, while Participant 10 identifies “full idea about the text content”. The second most commonly used strategies among the participants are Rhetorical Knowledge (n=2) and Structural Knowledge (n=2) respectively.

Under Rhetorical Knowledge strategy, the participants either set their target or objectives to be achieved through reading, and use them as reading strategy. For example, Participant 5 sets “some target goals and sets questions in regard to the topic” while Participant 6 puts “some objectives that should be reached”. Under Structural Knowledge, the participants become selective or look for the intrinsic idea from the text. For example, Participant 1 highlights “the main sentences, wordings that compose the thematic related idea”. Participant 8 chooses “some books and articles” to read while Participant 9 highlights “the sentences” while reading English text.

4.1.3 Cultural Schema

Themes related to cultural schema were identified from the responses of the participants. The responses indicated that the participants use three different reading strategies from cultural schema. These strategies are: Cultural content, textual knowledge, and psychological knowledge. The following table shows the reading strategies related to cultural schema adopted by EFL learners in reading from the chosen institutions.

Table 3: *Cultural Schema*

Participant Code	Strategy Applied		
	3CCK	3TK	3PK
PC1	1	0	0
PC2	1	0	0
PC3	1	0	0
PC4	1	0	0
PC5	1	0	0
PC6	1	0	0
PC7	1	0	0
PC8	0	1	0
PC9	0	1	0
PC10	0	0	1
Total	7	2	1

Note Interviewee Code(IC) Cultural Content Knowledge (2CCK), Textual Knowledge (2TK), & Psychological Knowledge (2PK)

Table 3 indicates that majority of the participants (n=7) use Cultural Knowledge as reading strategy. This indicates that the dominant reading strategy used by the participants is cultural knowledge. Most of them search for area of interest or area relevant to their field. For example, Participant 1 keeps on reading “if the subject fits in” the study area, Participant 2 uses to “continue reading” if the material is interesting, Participant 3 uses to “continue reading the story” which is good to him, Participant 4 just reads what “is relevant” to his study. Also, participant 5 reads English material “if it is related to” the field of his study, Participant 6 continues reading English text “if it is related to” his area”, while Participant 7 stated that “if I need it in my study, I continue reading it”.

The second most commonly used strategies among the participants is Textual Knowledge (n=2). Under this strategy, the participants try to understand the full meaning or search for general idea from the text. For example, Participant 8 chooses “some articles and books related to” his field, while Participant 9 directly reads what is needed in the study. Only one participant 10 uses Psychological Knowledge as reading strategy, where she searches for “what is on” her mind” depending on the topic.

4.1.4 Content Schema

Themes related to content schema were identified from the responses of the participants. The responses indicate that the participants use three different reading strategies related to content schema. These strategies are: prior knowledge, conceptual knowledge, and situational knowledge. The following table shows the reading strategies related to content schema adopted by EFL learners in reading from the chosen institutions.

Table 4: *Content Schema*

Participant Code	Strategy Applied		
	1PK	4CK	4SK
PC1	0	1	0
PC2	1	0	0
PC3	1	0	0
PC4	0	1	0
PC5	1	0	0
PC6	0	0	1
PC7	1	0	0
PC8	0	0	1

PC9	0	1	0
PC10	0	1	0
Total	4	4	2

Note: Interviewee Code(IC), Prior Knowledge (4PK),
Conceptual Knowledge (4CK), Situation Knowledge (4SK)

Table 4 indicates that Prior Knowledge (n=4) and Conceptual Knowledge (n=4) are the most commonly used reading strategies related to content schema adopted by the participants. Under Prior Knowledge strategy, the participants focus on either quick reading or smooth reading, where they try to develop their reading ability by trying to read quickly or smoothly. For example, Participant 2 reads English material that helps him “to have a focus and quick reading, Participant 3 focuses on “vocabulary and smooth reading of a given comprehension”. Participant 5 starts reading material that helps him “to have smooth reading, while Participant 7 focuses finds the idea by “reading quickly”.

Under Conceptual Knowledge, the participants use note-taking, complete reading or compose idea. For example, Participant 1 reads “content body of the text”, Participant 4 reads “the abstract, then first paragraph”, Participant 9 looks for “idea by taking note” while Participant 10 reads “the text completely to understand the idea”. Only two of the participants use Situational Knowledge as reading strategy. For instance, Participant 6 stated that “after I finish, I evaluate myself”, while Participant 8 tries to “answer some questions” to understand the full meaning of the text after reading through the text.

4.1.5 Strategies adopted by EFL learners in Understanding English Text

The responses indicate that the participants use several strategies to address their reading difficulties. There are many strategies adopted by the EFL learners in understanding English text. Based on the aforementioned strategies, most of the participants (n=6) use Google translate to solve their reading difficulties, where they use it to translate the text into their mother tongue in order to understand the main idea. For example, Participant 1 has “some ways to solve the mentioned difficulties using Google translate”. Also, most of them (n=6) use dictionary to find the meaning of strange words in order to understand the text. One of the participants adopts reading practice to understand the English text, where they read it several times to familiarize themselves with the text. For instance, Participant 3 usually “checks word’s meaning in the dictionary”. Some of the participants (n=4) adopt the strategy of repeating the sentences until they understand the full meaning. For example, Participant 6 repeats “the sentences to understand the meaning”.

In addition, some of the participants (n=3) consult of grammar books to solve their reading problems. For example, when they find any grammatical expression not familiar to them, they try to find any grammar book, read the relevant content and understand how the sentences have been constructed in such way. In this regard, Participant 1 usually “read grammar books to reshape” his usage of grammar. About half (n=5) of the participants ask their colleagues or lecturers about the

meaning of words or sentences they do not understand. Most of the participants (n=6) guess the meaning of words or sentences from the text. For example, Participant 9 solves “reading difficulties by consulting friends”. Almost half (n=4) of the participants watch videos to solve their reading difficulties. They focus on language while watching English videos on Television or social media such as YouTube or LinkedIn. For instance, Participant 6 watches videos on “social media like YouTube and Twitter”. Only one participant ignores the strange words, summarizes the paragraphs, or simplifies the sentences in order to fully understand the meaning. This participant (IC7) states that he “ignore words” that are not familiar to him.

The third question for the interview asks “how satisfied are you with the ways you follow in understanding English reading materials. Regarding this question, majority of the participants (n=8) stated that they are always satisfied with the method they follow while only two participants mentioned that they are not satisfied with the strategy they adopt in solving their reading problems. This indicates that majority of the participant are successful in achieving their reading objectives through the strategies they adopt.

5.1 Discussion

This study uses interview techniques to investigate the reading strategies adopted by Arab EFL learners in the selected institutions in the process of understanding written material. Specifically, the study analyzed the issues related to reading strategies adopted by the EFL learners, how they solve their reading difficulties, and their satisfaction with the adopted strategies.

It was found that the EFL learners use several reading strategies across the four types of schema. In linguistic schema, the EFL learners use phonetic knowledge, decoding knowledge, and logical knowledge. The dominant strategy used by the participants under linguistic schema is logical knowledge. According to Zhao and Zhu (2012), linguistics schema plays a vital role in helping EFL learners to understand written material. Regarding formal schema, the EFL learners use rhetorical knowledge, structural knowledge, and formal construction. The responses indicated that the dominant reading strategy used by the participants is formal construction. In relation to cultural schema, the EFL learners use cultural content, textual knowledge, and psychological knowledge. The themes suggested that the dominant strategy under cultural schema is cultural knowledge.

Also, the EFL learners use prior knowledge, conceptual knowledge, and situational knowledge under content schema. The emerging themes suggested that the dominant strategies used by the EFL learners under content schema are prior knowledge and conceptual knowledge. It was also found that the Arab EFL learners face difficulties related to word meaning, synonyms and strange words, grammar, prior knowledge, lengthy sentences, and lack of attention and interest. The qualitative phase of this study also revealed that the EFL learners use strategies such as the use of Google translate and dictionary, grammar books, and social media. The EFL learners utilize the above mentioned reading strategies to resolve their reading difficulties. It was found that the EFL learners initially need a written text related to their field of study. It was also found that majority of the participants are always satisfied with the method they adopt in solving their reading

problems. This indicates that majority of the participant are successful in achieving their reading objectives through the strategies they adopt.

It is interesting that the findings of this study confirmed that the tenet of Balart's (1982) Schemata theory clearly indicates schema plays a significant role in the process of reading. Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) noted that schema does not only influence how learners become familiar with information, but also how they store the information in their memory. It has been established that schema theory is valuable in helping learners to improve their reading ability. All acts of comprehension encompass learner's knowledge about words. The concept of schema has been a major theoretical construct in reading comprehension.

6.1. Conclusion

This study used interview to specifically investigate the strategies used by the Arab EFL learners in reading comprehension. It is evident that the EFL learners use several reading strategies across the types of schema. The dominant strategy used by the participants under linguistic schema is logical knowledge. In formal schema, the dominant reading strategy used by the participants is formal construction. The dominant strategy under cultural schema is cultural knowledge. Also, the dominant strategies used by the EFL learners under content schema are prior knowledge and conceptual knowledge. This study also revealed that the EFL learners use strategies such as the use of Google translate and dictionary, grammar books, and social media. The EFL learners utilize the above mentioned reading strategies to resolve their reading difficulties. It was found that readers initially need written texts related to their field of specialization. It was also found that majority of the participants are always satisfied with the method they adopt in solving their reading problems. The interviewees gave their maximum cooperation despite their tied schedule. They also responded willingly to the entire questions. To improve reading strategies for EFL learners, there is a need for collective effort of English language teachers, curriculum designers, educationists, education policy makers, and the EFL learners themselves.

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