

Saudi Students' Awareness of Reading Strategies and Factors affecting their EFL Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

A large number of foreign-language reading specialists view reading as an interactive process. This means that while the reader's mental processes occur at different levels, he engages himself in an interaction with the print to create meaning (Barnett, 1988; Carrell, Devine & Eskey, 2000). It is the interaction among the reader variables (an interest in the topic, a purpose for reading, a prior knowledge of the topic) and text variables (the text structure and vocabulary) that determines the reader's comprehension of the text (Hosenfeld, 1979). This explanatory study is a part of a larger research (Alsamadani, 2009) aiming at exploring Saudi students' knowledge and use of the three kinds of reading strategies: planning (before reading), attending (while reading), and evaluating (after reading). The research also investigates the relationship between reading strategy use among Saudi EFL learners and their comprehension level. To explain the results of the quantitative data, qualitative data was obtained in this study by interviewing 10 Saudi students, five males, and five females. Results showed that Saudi college-level students perceived many factors as having great effect on their reading comprehension. Factors such as prior knowledge (schemata), enthusiasm for reading, time on task, purpose for reading, and vocabulary size were mentioned during interviews as having crucial effects on students' comprehension. Finally, the study suggests that EFL educators in Saudi Arabia focus more on these factors in planning their reading curriculum and instruction. The study also recommends that reading instruction should supplement students with sufficient and balanced extensive reading activities.

Keywords: reading strategies, EFL research, Reading Instruction, Reading Comprehension.

Introduction

A large number of foreign-language reading specialists view reading as an interactive process. This means that while the reader's mental processes occur at different levels, he engages himself in an interaction with the print to create meaning (Barnett, 1988; Carrell, Devine & Eskey, 2000). It is the interaction among the reader variables (an interest in the topic, a purpose for reading, a prior knowledge of the topic) and text variables (the text structure and vocabulary) that determines the reader's comprehension of the text (Hosenfeld, 1979).

According to "schema theory," the reader may misunderstand the new material, ignore it, or revise schemata to validate the new information given within the text when it does not fit into his own schemata (Rumelhart, 1980). Carrell (1987) created the divisions of schemata into content schemata and formal schemata. The former is background knowledge about the content which helps the reader understand and remember more than someone who is less familiar with the topic (Carrell, et al., 2000). Formal schemata describe the reader's expectations about how different textual information will fit together and in what order it will appear.

As a former teacher of English at elementary and secondary schools and a supervisor of EFL for two years, I can say that teaching EFL reading in Saudi Arabia depends mostly on repeated reading. Students read different genres of texts several times in class and then answer questions, most of which are based on facts. Comprehension of texts is usually measured by their ability to answer such factual questions correctly. This involves the first two levels of Bloom's taxonomy: knowledge and comprehension. However, I believe that students should learn how to effectively read and reflect on reading to go beyond these levels to analysis, syntheses, and evaluation. Testing what students learn in real life, comparing ideas from different books based on their applicability, and modifying these practical ideas to fit their needs are skills that enhance their reading ability.

Classification of Reading Strategies

Reading strategies can be classified according to the time they are used – before, during, or after reading. They can also be categorized as either global or local according to the part of the text on which they focus (Young & Oxford, 1997). A general distinction is also made between cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Garner (1987) states: "If cognition involves perceiving, understanding, remembering, and so forth, then metacognition involves thinking about one's own perceiving, understanding, and the rest" (p. 16). Flavell (1979) maintained that "cognitive strategies are invoked to make cognitive progress, metacognitive strategies to monitor it" (p. 909). Moreover, Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) suggest that the metacognitive knowledge of readers includes an awareness of an array of reading strategies.

For this research, reading strategies will be grouped into three main types:

- Planning strategies (before-reading strategies) include selecting goals, preparing (activating relevant schemata), gauging (determining difficulty of tasks and depth of processing involved), and estimating (predicting the information processing demands of the task).

- Attending strategies (while-reading strategies) include focusing (on materials), searching (relating presented information to memory), contrasting (comparing presented information to memory), and validating (confirming presented information with existing knowledge). Encoding strategies include elaborating (linking presented information with existing knowledge) and qualitatively relating (linking presented information with deeper levels of existing knowledge).
- Evaluating strategies (after-reading strategies) include testing (determining the consistency of new information), and judging; reviewing strategies include confirming (using new information), repeating (practicing recall), and revising.

Purpose of the study

This explanatory study is part of a larger research (Alsamadani, 2009) which investigates the relationship between reading strategy use among Saudi EFL learners and their comprehension level. The main findings of the quantitative data showed that using reading strategies is not always a guarantee for good comprehension; Saudi EFL learners showed great awareness and use of reading strategies though their reading comprehension level still below the average (Alsamadani, 2009). For that reason, the researcher decides to collect qualitative data to explain these quantitative results by asking participants' about other factors they believe having great effects on their reading comprehension.

Therefore, one of the aims of this study is to explain the quantitative data of Alsamadani (2009) by learning more about Saudi EFL students' perceptions of other factors affecting their comprehension. The study also aims at exploring Saudi students' knowledge of the three types of reading strategies: planning (before reading), attending (while reading), and evaluating (after reading).

Significance of the Study.

Saudi Arabia has spent millions of dollars to make free education available to all members of its community. Exploring Saudi students' awareness of reading strategies and factors affecting their reading comprehension will provide data that help in suggesting implications for effective EFL instruction. This study aims to provide information needed to enhance teaching pedagogy and to improve learning conditions in Saudi Arabia because, in order to improve the teaching of EFL reading in Saudi Arabia, research is needed to understand the learners' reading problems and to evaluate their progress as they progress through EFL programs in the educational system.

In my experience as a former EFL teacher and supervisor, I have observed a huge gap between Saudi college-level students' proficiency level and that of the higher proficiency expected from EFL university students. The Educational Testing Services (ETS) reports of the last seven years showed that Saudi students who took the Test Of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scored the lowest compared with their peers from Middle Eastern countries (Educational Testing Services, 2007). Therefore, the results of this study will generate baseline information and provide insights to decision makers in higher education institutions and in the Ministry of Education.

Another significance of this study is that it will show the general types of reading strategies which Saudi EFL learners usually use when confronted with academic texts. Addressing the reading needs of university EFL learners in Saudi Arabia will not only help these learners succeed in their language learning but also help them succeed in their academic and professional futures.

Research Questions

The main research questions of this study were:

- Are Saudi students aware of the three types of reading strategies: planning (before reading), attending (while reading), and evaluating (after reading)?
- What are the factors that affect Saudi students' comprehension when reading English texts from their own perspectives?

Sample

To address the two questions above, qualitative data were obtained by interviewing some Saudi students who are studying English as a foreign language at Saudi universities. The sample consisted of 10 EFL Saudi students, 5 males, and 5 females. Faculty members at English colleges helped nominate students to contact based on their academic level: 3 freshmen, 3 juniors, 2 sophomores, and 2 seniors. The aim was to obtain a representative sample so that the information obtained from them could be representative of the population.

Data Collection

After contacting each person and asking about the appropriate way to do the interview, the researcher specified a day for each interviewee. Female students were interviewed on the phone due to religious and cultural barriers. Each interview lasted 30 minutes, during which the researcher spent most of the time listening and tape-recording. The researcher tried to put the interviewees in a situation of a reading task. The interviewer made each interviewee assume that he/she had a reading assignment [the phrase is not so clear; is it (such as reading the chapter of a book)? (reading a book, chapter)], after which someone would discuss his/her understanding of the materials he/she had just read. The aim was that the interviewee understood that he/she would be reading for comprehension, not just for finishing the task. The researcher made sure that every interviewee was clear on the questions before he/she began talking. The interviewer avoided using the words that might influence interviewees' responses. The two main questions were:

1. Tell me about ALL you will do once you decide that it is time to read until you feel that you are ready for your discussion.
2. According to your own judgment, which of the practices that you do in order to understand the English text affect your comprehension?

Findings

Qualitative results showed that Saudi college-level students seem to be aware of different types of reading strategies (planning, attending, and evaluating). When talking freely, with no guidance from the interviewer, 50% of the participants reported using all three types of strategies (planning, attending, and evaluating). This suggests that half of the participants were aware of the importance of these strategies in facilitating their comprehension; otherwise, they probably would not perceive them as important. The other 50% of students mentioned different combinations of strategies: 30% mentioned using only attending strategies, 10% mentioned planning and attending, and 10% mentioned planning and evaluating. After the follow-up questions were given, 60% of the students concurred on the importance of using planning strategies, 30% mentioned attending strategies, and 40% mentioned evaluating strategies. These results suggest that

the participants might perceive other factors as affecting their comprehension more than reading strategies.

When the interviewer asked the second question (i.e., “According to your own judgment, which of the practices that you do in order to comprehend the English text affect your comprehension?”), 80% of the sample reported attending strategies as having the most effective impact on their comprehension. This result is consistent with the students’ awareness of the importance of reading strategies; 30% of the interviewees reported using attending strategies from the first time with no guidance from the part of the researcher. Ten percent of the students perceived planning as the most important strategy type affecting their comprehension. The last 10% of students perceived evaluating strategies as the most important factor to affect their comprehension.

In different situations, 50% of students mentioned that the techniques they used after finishing reading helped them build mental structures (Schemata) of the new information. Another 30% of students believed that summarization was the most important factor in their final comprehension; in fact, 20% of them mentioned that they used these summaries for their future revision of the text. Other factors that students mentioned during the interviews as possibly having an impact on their comprehension can be categorized into six themes: enthusiasm for reading, prior knowledge, role of transfer, having a purpose for reading, time on task, and vocabulary size.

Discussion of the findings

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, one of its aims was to explain the major findings of Alsamadani (2009). Alsamadani (2009) found that Saudi students use and are aware of different types of reading strategies. He also found that there is no significant relationship between the use of these reading strategies and the level of comprehension. The current qualitative results revealed that Saudi students perceived some factors as having a greater effect on their reading comprehension. Factors such as prior knowledge (schemata), enthusiasm for reading, time on task, purpose for reading, and vocabulary size were mentioned during interviews as having crucial effects on students’ comprehension. Fifty percent of the participants mentioned that they do not read unless it is required; “We are a nation that does not read,” one of the interviewees said at the end of the interview. This finding reflects Al-Nujaidi (2003) finding on reading among Saudi students that extensive reading was an unpopular activity among EFL learners in Saudi Arabia. He asserts that the majority of Saudi students do not voluntarily read English materials outside of class.

This is a serious problem because enthusiasm for reading is a very important characteristic of good readers. Cheng’s (1998) findings indicated that sociocultural factors influence participants’ reading purposes and their use of different reading strategies. Students who do not develop enthusiasm for reading in both L1 and L2 might face serious challenges. They might lack the ability to activate semantic and syntactic knowledge, recognize some rhetorical devices, obtain knowledge of text structure, learn to use cues to predict meaning, and become aware of the variety of purposes for reading, and reading strategies, such as experimenting, hypothesizing, creating, and constructing meaning. Perhaps, most importantly, finding confidence in oneself as a reader may be difficult for those readers.

Prior knowledge (schemata) was the second factor the participating students mentioned as affecting their comprehension. Sixty percent of the students referred to prior knowledge of the topic as an important factor affecting their comprehension. Some students mentioned that when they read they build structures (schemata) for the information to help them understand it. Others compare and contrast what they are reading with their previous knowledge. All 60% of the students reported that their knowledge of the topic determines how they approach reading it. Thirty percent of the students reported that they would quit reading if the topic was not interesting to them. This fact might affect students' scores on the TOEFL. Most of the passages on the TOEFL reading section are on different topics: scientific, political, technical, social, and academic. Saudi students, because they do not spend much time in free reading, find most of these topics boring and difficult to understand simply because they have no prior knowledge of them.

Another theme obtained from the findings is the role of transfer. Forty percent of the students reported that they were familiar with reading strategies they used to read English texts, even before they started learning English. They mentioned that in the beginning it was difficult for them to transfer these strategies; however, with time and practice it became easier. Examples of strategies participants found feasible to transfer were taking summaries, skimming, scanning, discussing with others, writing main ideas, and asking questions. Some of the students mentioned that the only thing they adapted to when learning English was the orthographic system. These findings go along with Pritchard's (1990) and Tang's (2001). Both researchers indicated that bilingual students used the same reading strategies across languages.

Having a purpose for reading was also perceived as having a great effect on EFL Saudi learners' comprehension. Fifty percent of the participating students reported that they usually do not start reading unless they have a purpose for the reading. They defined the reading purpose as to answer comprehension questions about the topic they are approaching. One female student said that she always anticipates and then writes the main idea of the reading based on her prior knowledge of the topic, skimming the content, and scanning of each reading section. She then writes some questions on the topic and starts reading, looking for answers. Other students mentioned that they continually ask questions while they are reading and write them in the margins.

These findings confirm Alsheikh's (2002) and Feng's and Mokhtari's conclusions. Al-Sheikh (2002) found that Saudi learners use more support reading strategies such as asking questions and translation. Feng and Mokhtari (1998) found that these supporting reading strategies were very popular among EFL learners. Finally, 40% of the Saudi students reported that the strategies they use depend on the information they are looking for; in fact, some of them said that they would tend to read paragraph by paragraph (slow reading) in order to get what they are looking for.

Additionally, participants seem to value the time given for the task. Fifty percent of them emphasized the importance of time given to finish the task for achieving their comprehension goals. They insisted that they tend to take their time to understand and comprehend what they read despite how much time it takes. This point might also explain why Saudi students have scored the lowest on the TOEFL for the last four years (Educational Testing Services, 2007). Reading test scores on the TOEFL do not depend solely on students' comprehension; a major part depends on the students' ability to

manage their time, with comprehension, to finish the task. Therefore, Saudi students might not lack the knowledge and use of reading strategies, but they do lack time-management strategies.

Finally, vocabulary size was also found to have a substantial perceived relationship with students' comprehension. Sixty percent of the participants mentioned that their level of vocabulary affects their comprehension. They reported that they tend to translate words that they don't know because they feel anxious when reading something they don't understand. Only 10% said they would translate word by word, while 90% of the students reported that they translated what they thought of as important for the overall understanding of the text.

What is interesting is the gender difference among students regarding using the internet for translation. Forty percent of female students reported that they frequently use the internet and online dictionaries to translate what they do not understand. One student mentioned that she translates a whole sentence or text to get its general idea before she returns to continue reading. On the other hand, 30% of male students perceived the internet as a distraction that they would avoid. Differences in attitudes towards the role of the internet in reading were not limited to translation but extended to evaluating strategies. For example, 40% of female students would use the internet to find other reviewers of the same topics and share their reviews with them. In contrast, 30% of male students would avoid that for the fear that it would confuse them.

Lack of vocabulary size also affects students' eagerness about completing the task. They noted: "I always worry if I do not understand many words" and "One day I was reading an article on Political Science and I started crying in the middle of the task, because it was full of terminologies that I did not understand" These statements revealed the perceived importance of vocabulary size on reading comprehension, which also confirms Al-Nujaidi's (2003) finding that there is a strong and significant relationship between vocabulary size and comprehension level.

Implications for Instruction

The findings of this explanatory study suggest that the awareness, and maybe use, of reading strategy types does not always guarantee proper reading comprehension. These findings imply that EFL teachers should not solely focus on teaching reading strategies to enhance students' comprehension. Other intervening factors, mentioned in this study, need their attention as well. In addition, EFL teachers should emphasize vocabulary learning at all levels. This does not mean that vocabulary should be the only focus of language instruction; however, given the impact of vocabulary knowledge on other language skills, vocabulary instruction should warrant more attention, especially at early stages. All possible vocabulary-learning techniques and materials, including graded readers, wordlists, vocabulary cards, definitions, and all pedagogically sound vocabulary activities, should be efficiently utilized to expand Saudi EFL learners' vocabulary size as early as possible in their education.

Developing reading skill should be the objective of all EFL programs in Saudi Arabia. Reading materials, using graded readers that have a vocabulary and reading fluency focus, such as Scholastic ELT and Oxford Bookworms, help in building students' vocabulary and reading fluency (Nation, 2001). They could be used as serious supplements to the EFL curriculum.

Conclusion

The current explanatory study aimed at explaining the quantitative results of a larger research aiming at investigating the relationship between Saudi students' reading strategy use and their comprehension level. Thus, this illustrative study mainly explores other intervening factors that might affect Saudi EFL students' reading comprehension by gaining information about their awareness of reading strategies types as well as their perceptions of other factors affecting their comprehension. Although they seem to be potentially strategic readers (Alsamadani, 2009), Saudi EFL learners' comprehension does not depend solely on the reading strategies. Prior knowledge (appropriate schemata), enthusiasm for reading, time on task, purpose for reading, and vocabulary are significant factors that contribute much to the final comprehension. Therefore, the study suggests that EFL educators in Saudi Arabia focus more on these factors in planning their reading curriculum and instruction. The study also recommends that reading instruction supplement students with sufficient and balanced extensive reading activities.

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Appendixes

APPENDIX A : A SAMPLE OF INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

Name:.....

Institution: King Abdul-Aziz University

Academic level: sophomore

Time: 5 p.m.

Date:

Place: King Abdul-Aziz University

.....
Interviewer:, suppose that you have a reading task (a book, a chapter of a book, etc.) after which someone will examine your comprehension (understanding) of the materials you have read. I want you to tell me all what you will do since you decide that it is time to start reading, until you feel ready for your discussion.

Interviewee: Usually When I get any chapter or book, first it depends on the topic. If the topic is familiar to me or if it is in my specialty, I find it easy and love to read it. But if the reading is not interesting, I find it boring! So, usually I read the title first and I try to know what does the title mean I discuss the title sometimes with my friends to guide me to the main idea, so after that I start having time, or I start reading the chapter page by, overview First I will overview all the chapter page by page by quick reading. The second I will start reading but it is slower than the first reading, it will be specific reading like scanning, ... yeah I will start reading slowly and see the info. Sometimes I stop with some voc. because. I don't know what does it mean but I try to know the meaning from context of sentence it will help me sometimes to read it twice or third times to know what does this word mean. I give myself a lot of time to read it. Until I finish the reading like to discuss it with a lot of people all the people who I think they r intelligent or familiar with the topic everybody to know their reflection. I get their ideas and write them down in my notebook after that I try to be ready to discuss the book with my professor in my class or with anyone..I try to compare their understood with my understood. It is good because I prefer discussing with others to get the information deeper in mind not just memorizing and coping and pasting it. . Sometimes I read carefully or for specific information. Sometimes, I take much time on reading one or two pages, I try to read carefully so I do not go to other page if I do not understand the first. Also, sometimes I don't read some chapter if it is not related to my major but if I have to read or I have discussion in it I will read I t and understand it and be familiar with everything t... I think that's my way Sometimes I try to summery the article in one page or two page. This is will help me in my discussion; this is first idea, second idea, etc. t focus It help me so much in my discussion and improve my reading... Next time when I read the same book or article I try to read my note and summaries. Thank you. That's it

..... End of interviewee talking freely.....

Interviewer: While you are reading, do you have some techniques to control your concentration and check your comprehension?

Usually when I'm reading something and I finish reading, sometimes I understand the first part and try to understand the second part, I confuse the first part. Usually I will be

skipped to the third part and then go back to the second part, Sometimes when I read I prefer to study alone. this is my way in my whole life because with ether people its distraction. I prefer to study reading alone.

.....
Interviewer : So the environment plays a role in your comprehension?

yes

Interviewer: Ok! how about other factors. Do you feel bored while you are reading? Do you have ways of controlling these feelings?

Usually my feelings or my sympathy does not impact on my reading because I know I have to read this, I don't care about my living . I leave all things away . It does not impact on my education or reading because either y studying or nothing. But sometimes when people sit next to me its distraction.

.....
...
Interviewer: From your answer, it's clear that u use some techniques before reading and some others while reading: Do u have some other specific things u do while reading

Usually I am using my pen to underline some voc and sentences I would like to memorize usually I like I said I'm using my pen, eyes because in Arabic language usually we read from right to left in English it's from left to right so I have to be familiar sometimes I use some snacks, drink juice yeah like this.

Interviewer : How about other factors that help you increase your original goal commitment, do you have a kind of control on them?

No! Only environment impacts me more.

Interviewer How about factors that control your mood, your self-encouragement: are you aware of them? Do you have such kinds of techniques to control and use these factors?

I think that my mood is OK since I read any book because if I have no good mood I will not read. But I don't think of my mood when I read because I ask myself either I read or nothing.

.....
Second Main Question

Interviewer : From your own point of view, Which ones of the techniques you use : before reading, while reading or after reading have great effect on your comprehension?

I think the most impact..... The most impact is environment. I like to be in a nice place and the people around and in front you . And also the design of table if u sit in rest table chair it will fit my article ... Because sometimes I have quite area and it should be I have to have a lot of time to read and sometimes family issues is distraction if I have appointments.

Interviewer :let me clarify this: so do u say that what you do before reading affects your comprehension? In other words, is it the environment or other things u do while reading that have great effects on your comprehension?

I think the best impact on me is the language because during my reading the language sometimes because the last article was about case court or court case sorry because I am

not familiar with the court and this is article is not related to me some times the language impact on me and also environment I put cell phone in silent mode to not distraction on.
Yeah

Interviewer : So what you do during reading OR what you do before reading have great effect on your comprehension?

No, what I do during reading first, then the environment

.....
Interviewer : OK! How about after you finish reading, do you have certain rituals or techniques to do ?

Yes! Sometimes I make summaries and outlines. I use these summaries and outlines to go back to the chapter or the book next time. So I don't have to read it again. I also ask some questions that I did not understand from my reading. I try to ask myself what else this book did not answer. Yeah ..so I can expand my learning and look for other books in my area.

Interviewer : Did you learn all these techniques in school ?

I think the methods that I use it when I read books because I was familiar with this b4 I did not get new way just a new way to read from left to write. Usually in Arabic I do the same.

Interviewer : Do you use the internet to help you in your reading?

NO, because I think the internet will waste my time. It is difficult. Usually when I read a book, I ask myself I'm the first person who read this book.

.....

Note

- Other direct questions were analyzed according to the specific answers the student gave for each question. There were no need to highlight these answers since they were very specific.
- When transcribing the interview, the researcher sometimes avoided transcribing some of the fillers such as 'ah', 'umm', 'Like', etc. Other than that, the researcher transcribed the interview exactly as it was (the reader might notice a lot of grammatical mistakes in the interviewee speech).