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READING SKILLS DIFFICULTIES AMONG EFL LEARNERS IN SAUDI ARABIA

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Abstract

Saudi EFL students experience similar difficulties as other language learners do when learning English. One of the most crucial disciplines of foreign language (FL) method study is the employment of reading strategies by speakers of EFL. Students who actively employ their reading comprehension techniques are able to comprehend and remember more of what they read as well as develop better levels of language competence. In this review paper, researchers find out the challenges that EFL learners face in reading in the Saudi Arabian context are: limited vocabulary, Lack of self-study exercises and difficulty grasping the meaning of the text, spelling of words and pronunciation problems; limited discussion among the class and group work; not reading widely enough and reading fluency. The strategies suggested for improving EFL reading skills are: hearing the teacher read aloud to the class; and scaffolding. The findings of this review study found that effective reading methods are essential for raising reading skills in EFL students in Saudi Arabia.

Introduction

In Saudi Arabia, English instruction started in 1927 at the secondary and intermediate levels and was introduced in 2005 at the elementary level. Despite the fact that English has been taught in Saudi Arabian schools for a very long time, learners' proficiency in the language

generally and particularly is drastically substandard (Alshumaimeri, 2011a; Wedell & Alshumaimeri, 2014). All language learning activities, including writing, reviewing, expanding vocabulary, learning grammar, editing, and using computer-assisted language learning programs, are based on reading instruction (Mikulecky, 2008, p. 12). According to McNamara (2007), the nation of Saudi Arabia comprises a 20 million population. The fact that many pupils prefer not to read novels, history, or stories from books stresses Saudi Arabia's educators. This has a detrimental effect on students' development and academic success.

Although there are many challenges that EFL learners in Saudi Arabia must overcome in order to acquire the language, "learning to read" is the area where they get the most support. The instructors also go into great detail on how to implement corrective measures in order to improve students' academic performance, reading skill development, and language acquisition Sharma (2022).

Reading is a cognitive process that incorporates a variety of knowledge sources, from lexical attributes to the knowledge of current scenarios in the world. Reading skills in "balanced reading" are the consequence of growing abilities in the areas of decoding and linguistic understanding (Kirby & Savage, 2008). Reading is treated haphazardly in Saudi Arabian EFL classrooms, with repetition taking up a significant portion of class time, the teacher bearing the entire responsibility for teaching pupils to read, and the students being unable to assess their reading ability. After teaching their EFL students the English alphabet and its associated sounds at the pre-university level, English teachers on the Saudi Arabian EFL canvas take their reading abilities for granted. Reading necessitates sophisticated and comprehensive cognitive abilities, both linguistic and nonlinguistic (Alarfaj & Alshumaimeri, 2012).

Statement of the problem

EFL learners in Saudi Arabia have trouble understanding English-language content, which may be caused by a lack of lexicon they learn in school and poor word-guessing techniques. However, in Saudi Arabia, a constructive approach is encouraged in the curricula. Most of the students learn vocabulary by searching for the meaning of the words from dictionaries or by defining the meaning of the words they use in Arabic. Situational cues were discovered by

researchers to be unreliable resources for learning new words. Learning how to deduce the meanings of unfamiliar words while reading is crucial to developing learners' L2 word knowledge. Even though there have been many reports on word-meaning inference research, it is still unknown how students develop this skill Hamada (2009).

Significance of the study

The findings of this study ought to propose strategies to enhance the instruction of English as a foreign language as well as assist EFL teachers in improving reading skills among Saudi Arabian students. Additionally, the findings may add to our understanding of various teaching practises and how pupils determine their own reading practices. The study also seeks to establish the link between reading challenges among EFL learners in Saudi Arabia and reading strategies. The research findings will aid in planning for academic teaching programs, general training programs, and guiding programmes for high school graduates.

The EFL literature separates EFL reading into two categories: "extensive reading," in which students read long texts, and "intense reading," in which students read short texts. The definition of extensive reading given by (Al-Homoud & Schmitt (2009) is "learners reading as much as possible, for enjoyment or information, rather than learning certain language aspects." Reading that is comprehensive is typically "self-selected." As a result, the main difference between intensive and extended reading can be attributed to the size of the text that the learner is reading.

Reading proficiency among EFL students in Saudi Arabia: Prior studies, challenges, and solutions

Reviewing current research papers on Saudi EFL learners' English competence, although they are few, it appears that Saudi students have a highly restricted vocabulary learning. Additionally, they exhibit a lack of motivation and fundamental communication skills Nezami (2012). These problems can be attributed to a variety of things, including ineffective teaching methods, unsuitable resources for teaching, a lack of practise in class, inadequate teacher preparation, the negative effects of assessing on the process of teaching and learning, less experience in the selected language, and the short amount of time allotted for learning English in

an institute (Al-Qahtani, 2016). Saudi students undoubtedly experience the same reading issues that other Arab EFL students do while reading materials written in English. In reality, the summaries of TOEFL and IELTS statistics show that Saudi test takers' least proficient subject is reading in the world Aryadoust (2012). In a study to examine the reading skills and reading abilities of Saudi EFL learners at the university level, Nezami (2012) found the following to be the main issues: limited vocabulary, Lack of self-study exercises and difficulty grasping the meaning of the text, errors in the spelling of words and pronunciation problems, limited discussion among the class and group work, not reading widely enough. The scanning and skimming inability Insufficient drive Parsing issues with syntax aside, Having trouble making predictions and utilizing knowledge from the past; inability to summarize the text.

Okasha (2020) studied the efficacy of employing strategic reading approaches for enhancing EFL reading skills among Saudi students. While the control group received the standard classroom approach, the group that was being experimented with made use of strategic reading approaches. According to the study's findings, Saudi EFL students who want to improve their reading skills need a creative approach. As a result, the study indicated that teachers embrace cutting-edge approaches like peer review, reading conferences, and consciousness to give feedback to EFL learners in reading.

The research by Alenzi (2019) assessed pre-university educators' perceptions of reading skills in English as a foreign language (EFL). To get a whole picture of the educational process, it also acknowledged the problems faced by university students in their reading skills classes. The results showed that learners suffer when instructors are unaware of effective teaching techniques. The outcomes also demonstrated that culture and background information were significant factors in improving pupils' reading skills.

In a correlational research paper, the foundation of Saudi students' reading self-efficacy beliefs and reading techniques was investigated (Shehzad et al., 2020). 188 Saudi EFL students from five Saudi public colleges made up the study's 188 participants. Participants were chosen by stratified random sampling. To gather the data, a questionnaire with three constructs was all used: a questionnaire with reading strategies, reading consciousness, and beliefs. The findings highlighted that self-conscious ideas were strongly related to reading beliefs. The use of

metacognitive reading methods was likewise highly related to reading self-efficacy views. On the contrary, the findings indicated that reading effectiveness beliefs are significantly and favorably related to reading technique.

The findings of studies done on EFL learners concentrated on several issues that readers frequently encounter. Learning progress and information processing fluctuate between students due to a variety of factors, including psychological, cognitive, cultural, socioeconomic, linguistic, and other variables.

Challenges faced by EFL learners in Saudi Arabia

Keezhatta & Omar (2019) carried out a survey with EFL teachers and students in Saudi Arabia at the secondary level to determine which students had reading difficulties. They came to the conclusion that some of the problematic factors that affect their reading performance include concentration, overall comprehension, reading fluency, motivation, and retention. The most effective strategies cited by learners for comprehending English literature at a passable level include decoding sounds and words; reading books of their own choosing, hearing the teacher read aloud to the class; scaffolding; systematic vocabulary education, and reading aloud. The reading culture in the L1 community, L1 reading standards, background knowledge, methods of reading instruction, backlash from testing, and learners' motivation are some of the most frequently mentioned factors that affect the current EFL reading situation in Saudi Arabia (O'Sullivan, 2009). At first, reading is not very common in the Saudi population. Saudi learners struggle to read in their own dialect since they don't often read for enjoyment (Al-Shumaimeri, 2006). Second, local languages are more common in the Saudi population than mainstream Arabic. Due to this, reading abilities in standardised Arabic are now at the level of a second language, whilst reading abilities in English are at the level of a third language, O'Sullivan (2004). Thirdly, prior knowledge is a variable that can help or hinder reading. There are certain general baseline knowledge and global awareness gaps among Saudi pupils. This is due to the fact that both L1 and L2 learners have reading habits (Al-Shumaimeri, 2009). Fourth, there are issues with Saudi Arabia's reading curriculum. Studies show that Saudi EFL teachers are underqualified and lack the necessary skills to use efficient methods of instruction Bersamina (2009).

Solutions/Strategies to the problems faced by EFL Learners

It was discovered that EFL students use various reading techniques across the four schema categories. In language schema, EFL students apply their phonetic, decoding, and logical understanding. Logical knowledge is the main tactic employed by participants under the linguistic schema. (Zhao & Zhu, 2012) assert that linguistics schema is essential for assisting EFL students in comprehending written information. The EFL students apply formal construction, structural knowledge, and rhetorical knowledge in relation to formal schema. According to the results, formal construction is the participants' preferred reading strategy. Reading strategies are "the mental operations or comprehension processes that readers pick and employ in order to make sense of what they read," according to Abbott (2006, p. 637). Reading comprehension is not an automatic process, but it is influenced by the use of a particular reading strategy, according to research on reading Yukselir (2014).

According to Kindle (2009), reading aloud is a regular occurrence in primary school settings and is seen as a crucial tool for vocabulary growth. Word learning has been proven to benefit from adult mediation and interactive read-aloud procedures, but little is known about the actual teaching strategies employed by primary teachers. Read-alouds are complex educational interactions where teachers select texts, teach vocabulary, and determine the most effective teaching methods (Alshumaimeri, 2011b).

Additionally, the EFL students use previous knowledge, basic information, and knowledge under the content schema according to the situation. The emergent themes indicate that prior knowledge and conceptual knowledge are the predominate tactics employed by the EFL learners under the content schema. Additionally, it was discovered that Arab EFL learners struggle with word meaning, synonyms, and odd terms; syntax; previous knowledge; long sentences; and a general lack of enthusiasm. FL students use techniques such as using Google Translate, dictionaries, grammar guides, and social media.

Suggestions for Improving EFL Reading skills

According to the research, there are three categories of reading strategies: "pre-reading strategies, during-reading strategies, and post-reading strategies" (Cekiso & Madikiza, 2014) Pre-reading techniques provide students with a broad understanding of the subject and help them form expectations for what they will read (Al-Issa, 2006). These tactics are used at the beginning, before students start reading the book, and they seem to aid in providing an overview of the material. Using techniques like inferring meaning from context, during-reading tactics help readers deal with issues Altalhab (2019). The final sort of strategy is known as "post-reading strategies," and it refers to techniques that let readers draw inferences and generalizations from the text (Alenizi & Singh, 2019). Alshumaimeri (2011b) indicated that EFL teachers should recognize and consider the different reading methods as strategies for comprehension and improvement of skills. Teachers should cater to different reading styles (Alshumaimeri, 2011b).

Conclusion

The review paper's findings suggest that the adoption of reading comprehension techniques helps EFL students readily comprehend the materials. EFL students should read more real texts to improve their comprehension of many types of written texts in their language. Despite the fact that some texts may not be relevant to their interests, having a solid reading habit aids students in understanding authentic materials. Successful readers make an effort to use a variety of techniques and abilities to understand texts. The field of teaching English as a foreign language benefits from the findings of this study as well. It will give Saudi teachers the tools they need to enable students to identify learning behaviors and modify their learning strategies to match their unique needs and the demands of the classroom when it comes to learning English as a foreign language.

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