IMPROVING EFL LEARNERS READING PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

Reading is considered as a vital skill in learning, and reading ability is necessary for any learner searching for success. The study aims at investigating the importance of reading skills for EFL learners and examining EFL students ability to be a better readers. To achieve such a skill, learners need to be exposed to a wide range of written texts and taught effective reading comprehension strategies. The study also reviles that extensive reading promotes reading fluency and increases reading speed. Major elements of fluency are speed of reading, accuracy, and proper expressions. Reading strategies are considered as one of the features of cognitive psychology which are essential for successful comprehension. This means using the information the learner already knows to reach a conclusion. Sudanese EFL students are not exposed to training in reading skills. Many students do not know how to activate their schemata. Some differences exist between successful and less successful readers in terms of their actual and reported reading strategies, their use of reading strategies, their strategy awareness, and their perception of the good reader. Some learners experience foreign language anxiety which is a situation-specific and unique type of anxiety closely related to the acquisition of a foreign language.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a skill of great importance in ELT contexts. It is the basis of instruction in all aspects of language learning. It is linked with thinking in that language. There is a correlation between reading engagement, keeping attentive and involved for extended periods of time, and higher readers' achievement in reading comprehension. Comprehension as the essence of reading involves "the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning" (Sweet & Snow, 2003). EFL learners use reading strategies so as to sense what they read. Reading strategies aremental processes that readers consciously select to use to complete reading tasks successfully or as techniques and methods readers use to make their reading successful (Baker and Boonkit, 2004 (Janzen, 2003). believes that these strategies range from bottom-up strategies to more comprehensive ones like top-down strategies.

Objectives: This research paper aims at:

1. Investigating the importance of reading skills for EFL learners.
2. Examining EFL students ability to be a better readers.

Questions: The study will answer the following questions:

1. What is the importance of reading skills for EFL learners?
2. To what extent do EFL learners able to engage in reading comprehension?

Theoretical Background: Reading is often used to describe both what beginners do when they are learning to read and what good readers do when they are involved in fluent reading. However, the two kinds of readers do different things and therefore have very different needs as they struggle to become better readers. Reading at these two extremes of skill, and at the various levels of proficiency between them, is a series of activities which presuppose different levels of knowledge, different needs and purposes. Reading is primarily a cognitive process (Rathert, 2012). Reading is a self-discovery process. During this process, readers interact with written materials by investing both cognitive and metacognitive efforts to decompose new knowledge so as to make or infer meaning. However, reading comprehension can be seen as the final product (Kalayci, 2012). Teachers often believe that reading classes should be teacher-centered. According to Bedir (1998),

if teachers adopt rote learning, learners are usually expected to tackle comprehension difficulties by themselves. Moreover, teachers must focus not only on language development, but also on reading strategy practice. Rivas (1999) notes that language problems seem to be the most frequent source of reading difficulties confronted by EFL learners at intermediate level. It is a fact that reading in a foreign language is strongly linked with thinking in that language. If one wants to read well in English, s/he must think in English as they read. If one thinks in another language and translate into English, he will usually have difficulty with comprehension. According to Bedir (1998), this is time-consuming and the result is usually incomplete comprehension. Understanding the words and the grammar is not enough while reading. The learner needs to make logical connections between the ideas and information in reading. This means using the information the learner already knows to reach a conclusion. Sudanese EFL students are not exposed to training in reading skills. The students do not know how to activate their schemata.

Reading Comprehension: Reading comprehension is an active cognitive process which involves reasoning to construct meaning from a written text and understanding it effectively and comprehensively. Enabling EFL learners to deeply and adequately understand the written language, necessitate teaching them the reading comprehension skills that comprises reading proficiency. Readers who are able to select texts they will read, engage in higher-order thinking as they read, move from stage of just summarizing or retelling of a text to the stage of construction and critical reflection on a text. To achieve such a target, learners should be exposed to a wide range of written texts and taught effective reading comprehension strategies (Kirmizi 2009) stresses the importance of reading comprehension strategies clearly: Acquisition of better reading strategies is apparently needed to crack the illusion of comprehension in readers who are settling for low standards of comprehension. They need to acquire and implement strategies to facilitate deeper levels of comprehension. Thus, support students' reading comprehension through training on appropriate reading strategies has been a main focus for language instructors. It has often been argued in reading literature that due to the complex and complicated factors involved in reading comprehension in general and in EFL reading in particular i.e., linguistic, cognitive and socio-cultural variables, designing an effective reading instructional strategy is not an easy task (Hudson, 2007).

Billmeyer (2004) assures that although reading strategies are helpful, "the engagement in reading is not the product of strategies alone but a fusion of strategies with mental dispositions. These intellectual processes or dispositions frequently referred to as "Habits of Mind' (HoM). Costa and Kallick (2008) declare that these HoM are performed in clusters of behaviors rather than in isolation. Billmeyer (2004) adds that HoM are alterable; students can learn to question, reflect, and think interdependently. When it comes to reading comprehension, Moore and Hall (2012) state that when used intentionally, HoM help students interact with texts in active and purposeful ways. Therefore, Billmeyer (2004) stresses that a major goal of reading instruction must be to support students in developing and habituating these HoM in their reading practices until they become one interdependent unit. Burgess (2012) suggests that out of the 16 Habits of Mind explained by Costa and Kallick (2008), the following specific habits apply

directly to developing the reading comprehension skills: Persisting, Managing impulsivity, Applying past knowledge to new situations, Listening with understanding and empathy, Thinking flexibly, Communicating with clarity and precision, Striving for accuracy, and Taking responsible risks. It is based on the conviction that learners can gain a deeper understanding of a text when they work together and are prompted bya leader's skilled questioning. There is a strong and positive correlation between reading engagement, keeping students attentive and involved for extended periods of time, and higher student achievement in reading comprehension (Klauda& Guthrie, 2015). According to Wigfield et al. (2008) the term 'engagement' as a goal of teaching reading is consistent with a multi-dimensional approach in that it includes behavioral, emotional/motivational, and cognitive aspects. Thus, the engaged reader is assumed to be behaviorally active (reading frequently), internally motivated (liking to read), and cognitively active (uses strategies in reading). In the present study, reading engagement will be operationalised as "a meta-construct subsuming all aspects of reading: not just motivation but a balance of interests, attitudes, motivation, self-regulation, and the ability to use cognitive abilities while reading to become deeply involved with a text. Klauda and Guthrie (2015) examined the development of reading motivation, engagement, and achievement in early adolescence by comparing interrelations of these variables in struggling and advanced readers. Findings showed that advanced readers showed stronger relations of motivation and engagement with achievement than struggling readers. However, motivation predicted concurrent engagement and growth in engagement similarly for struggling and advanced readers.

Habits of Mind and Reading Comprehension: Billmeyer (2004) states that there are three broad reading comprehension habits that all readers must develop: self-managing, self-monitoring, and self-modifying. Costa and Bena (2008) point out that there are key habits of mind that help readers in each comprehension habit as follows: Key HoM that help readers self-manage are applying past knowledge to new situations and questioning and posing problems; while HoM that help readers self-monitor are thinking about thinking and thinking and communicating with clarity and precision. Finally, HoM that help readers self-modify are thinking interdependently and remaining open to continuous learning. Fletcher (2013) considers that along with attitudes and perceptions conducive to learning, HoM form the backdrop for all learning and must always be carefully considered in the learning process. He indicates that one way to make procedural knowledge (i.e., the how) visible to more students is by explicitly teaching habits of mind. Anderson (2010) identified six key principles that are evident in using the HoM in teaching and learning. These principles include an understanding that: (1) thinking skills alone are not enough, students must also have a disposition to utilize these skills; (2) the development of thinking and understanding is a constant interplay of sharing and communication between the group and the individual; (3) it is the culture of the classroom that teaches, sets the tone for learning and communicates to students what it actually means to think and learn well; (4) educators need to strive to make students' thinking more visible and foster better learning and thinking through using the right approach (including routines and structures, probing questions and careful documentation) (5) a variety of resources are also needed to 'free the mind' to engage in new and deeper thinking; (6) the need for the development of professional communities.

Reading Strategies: Second language reading comprehension is a skill of paramount importance in all ELT contexts. "It is the basis of instruction in all aspects of language learning: using textbooks for language courses, writing, revising, developing vocabulary, acquiring grammar, editing, and using computer-assisted language learning programs" (Mikulecky, 2008, p. 1). One well-established procedure for teaching reading is EFL learners' use of reading strategies. Reading strategies, as Brantmeier (2002) indicates, are "the comprehension processes that readers use in order to make sense of what they read"; they are characterized as approaches, actions, and procedures used to improve reading comprehension. Reading strategies are considered as one of the features of cognitive psychology which are essential for successful comprehension (Walker, 2000).Moreover, reading strategies have been defined as plans and behaviors for solving problems when faced in constructing meaning (Janzen, 2003). Janzen believes that these strategies range from bottom-up strategies to more comprehensive ones like top-down strategies. Bottom-up strategies are defined as making use of information, which is already present in the data such as understanding the text by analyzing the words and sentences in the text itself, or looking up an unfamiliar word in the dictionary. On the other hand, top down strategies make use of previous knowledge such as connecting what is being read to readers background knowledge (Janzen, 2003).

Some other strategies include evaluating, asking questions, checking for answers, making predictions, summarizing, paraphrasing, and translating (Zare & Othman, 2013). In addition, successful comprehension does not happen automatically but it depends mostly on directed cognitive effort which includes knowledge about and regulation of cognitive processing (Batumlu & Erden, 2007). During reading, the cognitive effort is expressed through strategies which are "procedural, purposeful, effortful, willful, essential, and facilitative in nature" (Alexander & Jetton, 2000,).Moreover, The reader must purposefully or intentionally or willfully invoke strategies and does so to regulate and enhance learning and comprehension. Al Melhi (2000) has uncovered that some differences exist between successful and less successful readers in terms of their actual and reported reading strategies, their use of reading strategies, their strategy awareness, and their perception of the good reader. Accordingly, strategic awareness and monitoring of the comprehension process are significantly important features of competent reading (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001). Such awareness and monitoring in the literature is often referred to as metacognition which includes knowledge of strategies for processing texts, the ability to monitor one's own comprehension, and the ability to modify strategies when needed.

Foreign Language Reading Anxiety: Many foreign language learners experience foreign language anxiety (FLA) which is "a situation-specific and unique type of anxiety closely related to the acquisition of a foreign language" (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Although language anxiety can sometimes work as a helpful energizer for L2 learning, the harmful effects of anxiety which is considered debilitating anxiety (Brown, 1994) cannot be easily ignored in the context of L2 teaching. It is argued that each skill has its own anxiety such as foreign language listening anxiety (Chang, 2010), foreign language reading anxiety or FLRA, foreign language writing anxiety (Cheng, 2002), and foreign language speaking anxiety, that

FLRA is a distinct phenomenon but related to FLA in general. FLRA is seen as a "mediating variable that intervenes at some point between the decoding of a text and the actual processing of textual meaning" Saito et al. (1999) suggest that teachers could prepare the students for "the possibility of reading difficulties and possible anxiety when introducing reading assignment." They also suggest that to reduce anxiety, teachers should develop reading practices that are more effective than word for word translation and help learners abandon their unrealistic expectations for understanding everything they read.

EFL Students' Reading Performance: Reading is considered as a vital skill in learning, and reading ability is necessary for any learner searching for success. Due to the complexity of the reading processes, students have to benefit from the background knowledge, linguistic knowledge, encyclopedic knowledge, contextual knowledge, etc. they possess and all their skills and strategies of reading in order to comprehend the meanings of the text. Crystal (1987: 209) notes,

> *"The field of reading research would not seem to be a particularly promising or attractive one. It is, however, an area that has attracted many investigators, partly by virtue of its very complexity, and partly because any solutions to the problem of how we read would have immediate application in areas of high social concern"*.

According to Goodman (1967), readers benefit from their background knowledge when they read. However, Rumelhart (1977) has emphasized on the role of schemata in reading. Anderson and Pearson (1984) think reading require readers to interpret the new information and assimilate them with the information already exist at their memories. Bamford and Day (1998) refer to reading as constructing meaning from a written text. Mikulecky (1990) do not separate between reading and comprehension. Nattal (1983), on the other hand, is convinced that reading happens spontaneously, not by teaching. For Aebersold and Field (1997), reading occurs from looking at the text and assigning meaning from its written symbols. Eskey (1988) thinks the reader needs a complete interaction with the text to be comprehend. For Eskey, reading in L2 demands more cognitive efforts.

Bottom-up and Top-down Processing Skills: On skilled and less-skilled readers, some studies prefer focusing on engaging students in bottom-up, some on top-down processing skills. However, good readers always use interactive reading, which integrates elements of both levels of processing. In fact, most readers begin reading by using top-down in reading strategies until they face a problem like encountering an unknown word, then they shift to bottom-up reading strategies. They slow down to decode the new word Carrel (1988).

Competence and Performance in EFL Reading Comprehension: Fromkin and Rodman (1981) refer to reading performance as "how" the language is used by someone. In order to maximize the validity of performance, students and teachers need to be aware reading in a foreign language needs certain techniques and strategies to be mastered. Nation (2009, p. 149) describes a number of them for improving readers' reading skills. He emphasizes that the techniques and strategies should not be seen as isolated activities but as means of bringing meaning into practice. To

be effective and efficient readers, EFL students have to tackle all the following elements of competences: Phonological competence: knowledge of sounds and sound combinations; syntactic competence: knowledge about the possible syntactic combinations; semantic competence: knowledge about the meanings of words, phrases and sentences; lexical competence: having extensive amount of words; morphological competence: knowledge of word formation or word structure; communicative competence: knowledge about the social, pragmatic and contextual characteristics of a language; grammatical competence (linguistic competence): knowledge of the use of different functioning rules of the system of the language; sociolinguistic competence: knowledge of producing sentences according to the communicative situations i.e., knowing when, where and whom to say things; discursive competence: knowledge of determining different types of discourse; and strategic competence: knowledge to maintain communication i.e., strategies language users have to understand others.

Reading Fluency: According to (Day & Bamford, 1998), extensive reading, an approach to second language (L2) reading instruction, that make covering large amounts of reading material enjoyable for students. The goal of ER is straightforward: to help students become fluent, independent, and confident readers. ER is one way that L2 learners are exposed to English, especially in an environment of English as a foreign language. ER promotes reading fluency and increases reading speed. As students are assigned to read a large amount of comprehensive materials, speed becomes important as it facilitates the enjoyment and comprehension of materials. Blevins (2005) claimed that ER is an effective approach to improving learners' reading fluency. Day and Bamford (2002: 137) posited 10 principles of ER: The reading material is easy; a variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available; learners choose what they want to read; learners read as much as possible; the purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding; reading is its own reward; reading speed is usually faster rather than slower; reading is individual and silent; teachers orient and guide their students; and the teacher is a role model of a reader.

Reading Fluency: When learners are able to recognize words accurately and rapidly, they have greater capacity for attention leading to comprehending a text. Paran (1996) claimed that "if L1 readers possess attributes in reading which L2 readers do not, then it is the task of the language teacher to develop ways of encouraging the development of these attributes" (p. 30). He also stated that if automatic word decoding is a major attribute of L1 reading, a way of fostering automaticity should be found. Samuels (2006) argued that the essence of reading fluency is the ability to decode and comprehend a text simultaneously. In dealing with components of reading fluency, Martinez, Roser, and Strecker (1999) suggested that fluency depends on "appropriate rate, accuracy, phrasing, and expression. Reutzel (2006) claimed that major elements of fluency are speed of reading, accuracy, and proper expressions. Blevins (2005) noted that a fluent reader is one who can read rapidly, recognize words automatically, and interpret phrases correctly. He stated that recognizing words automatically represents accuracy or smoothness of word decoding. Rasinski (2004) argued that there are three dimensions in reading fluency: accuracy in word decoding, automatic processing, and prosodic reading. He claimed that

learners' automatic processing in decoding can be assessed by looking at their reading speed. Although some researchers mentioned the components of oral reading fluency or Reading in a Foreign Language. Developing reading fluency prosodic reading, such as appropriate or correct phrasing and expression, most researchers and practitioners seem to agree on the following two components of silent reading fluency: (a) accuracy of word recognition, and (b) speed of reading.

Conclusion

Reading skills is of great importance for EFL learners. Good achievers in reading a foreign language always link reading with thinking in that language. Due to the complexity of the reading processes, students have to benefit from the background knowledge, linguistic knowledge, encyclopedic knowledge, contextual knowledge. This means using the information the learner already knows to reach a conclusion. Moreover, the reader must purposefully or intentionally or willfully invoke strategies and does so to regulate and enhance learning and comprehension. Sudanese EFL students are not exposed to training in reading skills. The students do not know how to activate their schemata. Many foreign language learners experience foreign language anxiety which is a situation-specific and unique type of anxiety closely related to the acquisition of a foreign language.

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