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Reading skills among EFL learners in Saudi Arabia: A review of challenges and solutions

Abeer M. W. Alharbi *

Curriculum and Instruction Department, Faculty of Education, University of Jeddah, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

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Abstract

The reading process appears controversial and momentous in teaching and learning. Extensive research has been done about the reading process in the mother language and foreign language, the difficulties associated with the reading of foreign language, and the associated qualities and issues of these languages. An investigation is required on the issues that hinder reading abilities. English is considered a foreign language in Saudi Arabia, and this study investigates the issues that hinder the learners' reading abilities and skills. The principal concern has been the challenges faced by the learners and the solutions. Based on the research findings, this study also highlights the implications of reading being taught to learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The research study unfolds challenges that hinder the reading skills enhancement of the EFL learners and the teachers as well. The challenges include lack of sufficient knowledge of the language, lack of vocabulary, curriculum issues, interest of students, and other such issues. Along with this, the solution to the challenges is also presented in this study. such as conducting training of the teachers, diversifying the methods of teaching reading, recognizing students' learning styles, motivating the students, conducting extra classes, and various others. This study will enable the educationists to revise the curriculum according to the concerns of the students and will lead to the betterment of the reading skills of Arab EFL learners.

Keywords: Comprehension; EFL; Reading Ability; Saudi Arabia; Teaching Reading; Teacher training.

1. Introduction

The English reading ability has always been considered crucial in academics and is considered as most vital of the four language skills [1]. Reading research has always been done to look for the components that distinguish proficient readers from less proficient ones based on reading components and reading behaviors. The EFL reading is divided into two categories: intensive reading and extensive reading. Intensive reading relates to the students that read short texts, whereas extensive reading involves reading long texts for information or pleasure [2]. It requires an adequate English language vocabulary, adeptness in reading ability, skimming, scanning, and comprehension power [3, 4, 5].

English is a foreign language in Saudi Arabia, and all citizens do not need to communicate in English. KSA is now involved in various international activities like politics, G20, and U.N. activities, and English is the primary means of communication in the listed activities. English is also used as the medium of instruction for tertiary-level education like engineering, medicine, and computer skills; English proficiency is becoming essential for students wishing to pursue their degrees at international levels [6, 7]. In this world which is termed a "Global Village", the vitality of reading is not limited to the first language instead, it equally extends to reading in a foreign language. English is now globally used as a mode of communication, so it is mandatory to read English skillfully [8]. It is satisfying that policymakers, government, students, and teachers are well cognizant of the vitality of the English language, and revolutionary efforts are being

* Corresponding author: Abeer M. W. Alharbi

Curriculum and Instruction Department, Faculty of Education, University of Jeddah, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

made at every level of education to impart proficiency among learners. Despite all these efforts, the situation of English teaching is still in flux, as the root cause remains unaddressed.

The main motive of this study is to present the challenges associated with the reading skills of EFL learners in Saudi Arabia. This research study also presents the solutions to the problems encountered by EFL learners. This study may pave the way for improving EFL learners' reading skills by addressing the challenges experienced by the learners reported by various research studies. Furthermore, this study may also act as a roadmap for the course coordinators, designers, and teachers to effectively design and teach the EFL learners and improve the pedagogical methods.

2. Literature Review

English reading ability has always been considered crucial in academics. In 2012 Nezami [4] conducted a research study to investigate the university-level EFL learners of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). The reading skills and the comprehension of English were investigated, and the major problems that were identified are semantic parsing problems, lacking motivation, limited self-study activities, hindrances in skimming and scanning, problems in the prediction and usage of prior knowledge, lack of interest in collaboration and group work, problems of pronunciation and spellings, limited vocabulary, problems in understanding meaning, lack of ability to summarize text, dearth of extensive reading. A research study listed the barriers that hinder the enhancement of the students' reading skills: insufficient exposure to the foreign language, lack of motivation, lack of confidence, anxiety issues, inadequate knowledge, and ineffective pedagogy practice [9]. The barriers that relate to the physiological characteristics of the reader comprise a lack of intelligence, less linguistic knowledge, poor vision, and unnecessary movement and noise during class.

According to a research study, the cross-language factor, knowledge of the target language, and exposure to the language play an important role [10]. The prior experience of the reader about reading the foreign language greatly affects the learner's ability as the learner remembers the experience and the first experience of the language determines the learner's interest in the foreign language. According to a research study, cultural familiarity with a text positively affected readers. Exposure to the target culture can also significantly improve the performance of EFL learners [10, 11]. The learners' performance in reading comprehension among EFL learners gets affected by content familiarity, and gender also plays a prime role [12].

The EFL learners in Saudi Arabia lack proficiency in predicting the meaning of words used in some particular context and in comprehending the gist of a passage written in the English language [13]. With proficiency, the lack of comprehension also plays a vital role in limiting the reading skills of EFL learners. Comprehension skills are mandatory for students, and they work a lot to attain better academic and professional aspects [14].

Since the 1990s, in Saudi Arabia, a growing sense has prevailed that the graduates from schools fail to meet the expected proficiency level in English language subject. The teachers in the classrooms stick to the typical teacher-centered approach that focuses on memorizing instead of understanding and knowledge [7, 15]. The Saudi teachers fail to provide an encouraging classroom atmosphere, and the classrooms also lack interactive practices that may assist in developing communication skills. The curriculum of Saudi Arabia expects that the secondary graduates should have at least learned 3000 words of English after seven years of instructing in English. However, according to Alnujaidi [8], the actual English vocabulary was just 500 -700 words. Moreover, in 2006, Al Jazirah (Saudi newspaper) survey claimed that almost 87% of the learners graduating from high schools do not meet the expected English proficiency level [16]. In research, 40% of Saudi students thought that the lack of proficiency in the English language was due to the shortcomings of the secondary and primary schools where English was neglected [17].

Vocabulary learning is essential for developing language skills, and teachers should assist the students in building vocabulary knowledge for acquiring language skills [1]. Teaching English vocabulary is an important challenge that teachers in Saudi Arabia face, and vocabulary has a prime influence on reading skills. Psychometric studies propose that vocabulary occupies a central position in reading ability, and the interaction between background knowledge and vocabulary activates reading comprehension. The size of the vocabulary is essential for EFL learners. Unless they know at least 3000 words that are frequently used in the language, fluency cannot be achieved [3].

In early schools, the teachers should motivate the students to read by utilizing various techniques and alternatives to enhance the interest of the students and adopt strategies like starting with a survey about the type of reading material the students feel is difficult and easy [18]. Clary [19] suggested six ways teachers could adopt to motivate the students to start reading. The strategies include capitalizing on the reading interests, building a conducive environment, providing significant adult models, increasing the accessibility of the reading material, using motivational methods, and

sparing time for reading in schools [19]. Capitalizing on the interests could be done in two ways: one is to know what individual students like, and the other is to know what most students like [20]. The employment of web 2.0 technology could be used to enhance the interest of EFL learners. Motivation is the primary psychological factor that boosts the students' skills [21].

However, the usage of the mother language as an instruction medium in EFL classes cast a negative impact on learning English. The learner's communicative competence gets minimized as the exposure to the English language gets reduced, and the learners get zero or low opportunities to communicate and practice in English. Alharbi [11] claimed that using the native language in classrooms could decrease the motivation level of the students to read and speak English. In the EFL context, classroom practice is crucial where the learners have limited opportunity to interact with English outside the classroom.

The training of the in-service and pre-service teachers should be made mandatory. The study's findings revealed that the teachers lack basic knowledge about reading skills and an understanding of how they can be promoted [22]. Researchers presented the idea that the parents should also be actively involved in the education of students; it will benefit both children and parents and bring extensive improvement in the students' reading abilities [22].

Al Nooh [23] surveyed a group of Saudi EFL learners and teachers of the second stage for the identity of the reading problems. They concluded that comprehension, concentration, reading fluency, retention, and motivation were the areas that greatly influenced reading skills. Moreover, the learners stated that reading books of interest, decoding words and sounds, listening to a teacher who is reading English aloud in class, systematic instructions regarding vocabulary, and scaffolding are some techniques that can significantly improve the learners' reading skills [23]. Studies identified various physical factors that can enhance the reading skills of the students like a comfortable learning environment, familiarizing the students by finger tracking the written text to avoid distractions, provision of coherent text that does not have hard expressions, and stimulating the reading speed at early ages [24].

External distracters cast an impact on the senses while reading, and the distractors include persons, things, and sounds. The distractions lower the reading speed of the learners. According to studies decreasing distractions can increase comprehension and reading speed [25]. The ability to summarize can also significantly improve the learners' reading skills as the reader has to identify the main points and express them briefly by analyzing the text, so it enhances the concentration level and the reading skills of the learner and improves the vocabulary as well. Previous research suggests that summarization and data classification make learners recall and understand information easily [25].

Alshumaimeri [26] suggested that students must be free to choose how they read. In the study, the students considered oral reading an effective method of understanding passages. The study participants described that oral reading is preferred due to concentration and memorization and is also considered good for pronunciation and practice of the language. This oral reading method is also preferred because of the traditional methods used for teaching, like rote learning, which requires learners to memorize passages as the oral method provides the best comprehension [26]. Furthermore, the study suggests that in the case of Saudi Arabia, the English language teachers should utilize all the available reading methods to identify the method that best serves the course objectives [26].

This extensive literature review revealed various issues that continuously hinder the reading skills of EFL learners in Saudi Arabia. The literature review also highlights some strategies that could be adopted to address the challenges faced by the learners and the teachers in teaching EFL. The EFL learners should also be taught how they can rule out their issues at the individual level, and they should be taught how to plan, regulate, and monitor strategic processing when reading different text types [27].

3. Conclusion

This study presents a preliminary understanding of the issues that are faced regarding the reading skills of EFL learners in Saudi Arabia. Content familiarity, gender, English vocabulary, knowledge schema, teaching preferences, availability of learning material, ways of teaching and reading, English course curriculum, knowledge of the language, and various other factors affect the learners to excel in their reading skills. These factors collectively affect the reading skills of EFL learners.

Based on the findings of this study, various recommendations could also be given that may assist the learners and the teachers in overcoming the issues. The strategies include summarization, oral reading, interactive learning, provision of a comfortable learning environment, avoiding distractions, reading aloud, self-learning, making the students read from an early age, and using computer-aided learning like WebQuest may serve the best.

A few more suggestions that can benefit the learners, teachers, and the community could also be considered. Firstly, there is a need to promote the reading interest of English students, and different strategies should be adopted to ensure that the students are actively involved in reading; this could be accomplished by supporting the use of libraries and encouraging the teachers to use effective ways of teaching. The teachers must conduct training sessions to guide them on effective teaching methods. The curriculum should be designed by considering the feedback of the teachers and the students. A student-friendly reading environment should be provided to the students. Moreover, extra coaching classes should be arranged for the students and the teachers who face difficulty teaching English. The reading-friendly environment should have material that prompts the student to read regularly.

For future work, this study could be extended by considering the in-depth analysis of the prime issues that affect the reading skills of EFL learners. Moreover, this study could be extended to other regions.

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