Original Article

Strategy Intervention and Reading Proficiency in the Saudi EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

A number of researches maintain that comprehension competencies of English language learners can be strengthen by fostering awareness of reading comprehension strategies.The main objective of this research study is to investigate the impact reading strategies on the EFL student's reading skills. To evaluate the above-mentioned objective, quantitative and qualitative methods have been implemented. Interview questions and close-ended questions were distributed among the EFL students and their teachers. Data were drawn from a total of 306 (both close-ended and open-ended questions) EFL-major university students. The results demonstrate that students incorporate reading strategies in their academic setting for the purpose to tackle with their reading difficulties. Hence, there is a positive impact of reading strategies in reducing reading problems of EFL students. The outcomes of this research paper could potentially become as a point of reference for in-service teachers in Saudi Arabia and for other similar case studies examining EFL students' understanding and utilization of reading strategies.
Keywords: reading strategy process, EFL students, reading comprehension proficiency, reading strategy

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, English is considered as the global and international language to communicate with each other. For instance, in Middle East countries like Saudi Arabia, English is demonstrating growing popularity and it is emerging as a principal foreign language to be incorporated in schools, colleges and universities. One prime is example of Algeria, where French was being replaced by English as the main foreign language to be adopted in the academic setting. The rationale for selecting English as the principal Foreign Language (EFL) is the usage of this language in many fields such as diplomacy, international trade, international research, affairs of international cooperation, peace talks and among others (Chang, 2006). However, in many educational institutions of Saudi Arabia, the reading proficiency of the students is still inadequate and unsatisfactory. There is normal tendency of Saudi students to approach reading passively and are highly dependent on the usage of a bilingual dictionary while communicating, thus investing large amount of time and energy over direct sentence-by-sentence translations. Reading comprehension is regarded as one the most integral element in English language learning because it enhances the grip on the language. In 2006, Chang stated that English language teaching is essential element of international communication activities. Therefore, students require the need to be educated in enhancing their English language skills and to use this language while writing, speaking, reading and listening in order to effectively contribute in their international communication activities. For learning a foreign language, mastering the learning process is considered as an integral element of second language learning (Ahmadi, & Hairul, 2012). Furthermore, it helps to increase the level of vocabulary. By engaging in reading activities allow the learner to learn new words which he or she can incorporate in their daily routine communication and academic life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers have demonstrated that learning reading strategies have a direct impact on reading comprehension proficiency of students (National Reading Panel, 2000). However, it is not yet been identified as to how learning reading strategies can assist in reading comprehension proficiency. The

practice of reading strategy is usually adopted by instructor or classmates while learning a reading strategies program (Palincsar& Brown, 1984). As a matter of fact, reading strategies demonstrate how learners can perceive a task, how they make sense of what they read and what strategies to adopt when they are unable to understand a particular content. In addition to that, several researches have been conducted with regard to identifying the reading strategies that one can use while engaging in reading comprehension. In strengthening the reading comprehension skills of students, highlighting the reading strategies is of vital importance. However, with the increased usage of English language and increase emphasize on English learning in the world, there are numerous students who face difficulties in attaining the acceptable standards of teaching and learning in this subject area. Most of the authors have argued that readers, who lack English reading proficiency, make use of various reading strategies in different ways (Brown, 2007). Teachers play an important role to teach the students and enhance their reading skills in English language. Moreover, by improvising English reading skills, students can demonstrate high academic achievement [4]. Another advantage of adopting various reading strategies is that it influences the interest and motivates the students to engage in reading comprehension activities (Chandavimol, 1998). To facilitate learning and make reading more efficient, reading strategy is a valuabe method and reading technique. In the viewpoint of Crookall and Oxford (1989), for the purpose to reduce the comprehension difficulties, learners can incorporate various reading strategies to increase their reading comprehension and effectively solve the comprehension related tasks. Brown and Wright (2006) discovered the potential benefits of reading strategy instruction in elevating the reading awareness of students. They also suggested that by increasing the amount of reading strategies incorporated by students, it can relatively encourage the students' English reading and writing capabilities(Dehnad, 2005). A reading strategy denotes to the methods that a can implement in order to construct and maintain the meaning and it is solely constructed on reciprocal teaching strategy.

READING STRATEGY

Reading strategy instructions are mainly categorized into two main dimensions. The first dimension states the use of readers' strategy (Harmer, 2007). It has been observed that the use of reading strategy differs significantly among high and less proficient readers. In 2006, Leavell and Hong Nam conducted a research on language learning strategy use and discovered that those students who are in their beginner's level and who are in their advance academic level such as Masters and Ph.D make less use learning strategies as compared to intermediate students. In 2002, Reichard and Mokhtari described that reading strategies are actions or activities that students implement in order to facilitate their reading skills. In 2005, Brantmeier elaborated that reading strategies is a useful approach that students can incorporate so that they can be able to understand and read the given content effectively. Therefore, reading strategies are methods implemented in the procedure of reading comprehension particularly by EFL students. In 2007, Mcnamada explained his viewpoint regarding reading strategies and stated that it is a behavioral and cognitive technique that students can incorporate to improve their reading skills (Harmer, 2007). When EFL students find it difficult to interpret the content, then it is probable that they will go through considerable issues in communicating with others. Hence, the EFL teachers and instructors have more responsibility to be familiar with accepted reading strategies and explain its uses to the learners.

COMPONENT OF READING STRATEGIES

In the perspective of Oxford (1990), there are six main components of reading strategies that are considered highly integral and easy for learning. The students can make use of these components to demonstrate high comprehension skills in English Language. Furthermore, by gaining knowledge about these strategies, readers can demonstrate more interest and enthusiasm towards reading comprehension activities. These components include predicting, skimming, scanning, inferring, guessing the meaning of new words and Self-monitoring [7].

Prediction

In prediction, readers make possible predictions about the probable meaning of the text when he or she first views the text [8]. A reader may make prediction by looking at title, author and cover page etc. The reader make initial guesses and related predictions to get an idea about the passage. A teacher may provide the learner with picture or other pictorial representation to help the reader to predict the topic or given text. A reader can also make use of keywords that are provided to him or her by the teacher(Harmer, 2007).

Skimming

The process of skimming comprises of reading the text quickly to attain the main idea of a passage. In most of the cases, reading the first paragraph of the text equipped the reader with the overall overview of the entire topic and it is considered as an efficient way of understanding the main idea of the text.

Skimming includes glancing rapidly through a text to attain a general impression of the text (Meissner , & Yun, 2008). Students are provided with the opportunity to go through illustrations in order to get an initial idea of the contents, settings and characters.

Scanning

Scanning is another useful technique to speed up the reading process for students who face significant difficulties while reading a text (Eskey, 2005). The scanning generally means to quickly glance through the text and material. In scanning process, a reader may locate the specific details such as dates, places, names or some particular content. Scanning requires a lot of mental and physical effort on the part of the reader and to search for words in order to have the clear meaning of the text. Scanning requires the students to quickly go through the text in a discipline manner and keep the coordination between eye movement, finger movement and brain on one track while avoiding the impulse to stray.

Inferring

Students require a lot of practice and dedication to polish their inferring skills in reading comprehension. Infer in its general meaning is to conclude or deduce a text from reasoning and evidence, other than from explicit statements [7]. Thus, students are able to make conclusions based on the reasoning and evidence available in the text or passage. Through inferential strategies, students can learn the complex skills which are called inference. One of the requirements for inferring is high order thinking skills, which makes it difficult for many students to acquire.

Guessing the meaning of new words

A reader may require guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words (words that reader does not know) out of the context in order to understand the meaning of the context (Harmer, 2007). Guessing the meaning of new words assist the students to learn new words and enhance their vocabulary. It is a useful technique to improve the reading skills and grab the meaning of unfamiliar words from the rest of the sentence. It saves a lot of valuable time and speed up the reading process for language learners.

Self- monitoring

Self-monitoring is an essential technique for improving reading comprehension skills by cultivating the natural inner dialogue of readers (Eskey, 2005). The process of self-monitoring provides the reader to determine whether the given sentence or paragraph makes sense or not. Thus, readers mentally interact with what they are reading. Self-monitoring is the process that helps the students to get mentally engaged in the sentence by understanding its meaning and to easy memorizes the whole sentence.

IMPORTANCE OF READING STRATEGY

In the viewpoint of Ben David (2002), students often face many obstacles to attain a grip in English language because they are unable to understand the meaning of the text while reading (Dehnad, 2005). However, one way to cope up with such concerns is to adopt reading strategies in their academic routine to facilitate the learning process of foreign language and reading comprehension. Furthermore, by implementing various reading strategies such as predicting, scanning, skimming etc. will enable the students to relate newly learned knowledge to their previous information in context areas which is an important element in reading comprehension skill. In order to help students to monitor their reading comprehension, instructors needs to teach the students on how to make use of reading strategies in the most effective manner [4]. It has been observed that EFL students illustrate high level of competencies and motivation in learning English by adopting reading strategies. Moreover, they engage in reading activities on a regular basis and develop an urge in themselves to enhance their reading skills by purchasing novels and other books, besides curriculum course books. It is important for the students to realize as to what and when to apply appropriate reading strategies while facing critical challenges in reading comprehension (Harmer, 2007). Many researches on reading strategies have observed that students who deals with considerable difficulties in reading comprehension demonstrated extraordinary improvements after attaining explicit training in meta-cognition (Duffy, 2005).

THEORIES AND MODELS OF READING STRATEGIES

Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive literally means "big thinking" or thinking about thinking. Metacognitive strategy is a plan of action educated to the students using explicit teaching methods (Harmer, 2007). To develop a deeper understanding of a theme or topic of the book, efficient readers know how to utilize the metacognitive strategies in a cohesive manner. Metacognitive strategies attempt to enhance the brain processing speed. The components of metacognitive strategies include memorizing, questioning, visualizing and synthesizing the information and examine the brain thinking capability.

Cognitive Strategies

The process of constantly challenging the brain results in increase intellectual and cognitive abilities. Results have shown that students who regularly engage in mind relating activities have demonstrated improvements in learning the foreign language. One of the foremost requirements on the part of readers for good reading comprehension is to monitor their understanding while reading a sentence (Farhady, 2005). Cognitive strategies produce judgmental skills that help the students to develop themselves as strategic and flexible learners. The steps in developing a cognitive strategy includes, developing a substantive and procedural plans, setting and creating goals, developing a purpose and determining priorities.

Socio-affective Strategies

The socio-affective strategies are methods for developing and stimulating learning through establishing a level of understanding and empathy between the student and instructor. These strategies are non-academic in nature and depend on interaction, emotions and attitudes of the students with the teachers (Meissner , & Yun, 2008). The elements in socio-effective strategies include participating in discussions, engage in cooperating learning groups, interacting with others to facilitate learning, discussing tasks in class and consulting teachers for specific help.

METHODOLOGY

Instruments and Participants

The research design used for this specific study is a mixed of both qualitative and quantitative methods for the purpose to gather more accurate information from the participants. According to the perspective of Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2004), mixed method approach helps to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of both methods in a single research study [10]. The research instrument that has been adopted for this study includes both open-ended interviews and close-ended questionnaire to gain an insight from the participants. The data gathered was conducted and managed by the researcher himself and he has the sole responsibility to maintain the confidentiality of the data. For open-ended interview questions, there were a total of 4 questions and a number of 8 questions were included in the close-ended questionnaire. Likert scale was implemented by the researcher in all the close-ended questions ranging from 'never' to 'always'. The use of Likert scale was highly beneficial for the researcher to code the data into SPSS software.

A total of 296 applicants participated in open-ended questions; out of which only 1 was female and 295 were males. A total of 10 applicants participated in close-ended interview questions. There was a diverse range of participants in this study in terms of their age. However, the minimum age for the applicants to participate in this research study was 18 years. The questionnaires were distributed to the students as well as to their teachers at different universities of Saudi Arabia. The students selected for this research were in the first year of their academic phase. The researcher managed to acquire the authority himself to enter the premises of the university and conduct the research.

RESULTS

The response rate for this research was extremely high i.e. 100 percent for both interview and close-ended questions (see Figure 2). Most of the applicants were young and in their early 20s while only a few were in between the age bracket of 26 to 30 (See Figure 1). Likewise, the majority of the participants were single and only few were married (see Figure3). Most of the applicants have been studying English for at least 1 to 6 years (Figure 4). The participants responded that prior to begin reading, the first thing they do is to recall what they know about the topic (see Figure 5). Most of the applicants said that when they do not understand any part of the sentence, then they read it again to clear the uncertainty about the sentence (Figure 6). Majority of the respondents stated that they ask questions and read for answers as they continue to read the text (see Figure 7). On average, majority of the respondents predict what might happen to a character as the move along with the story (see Figure 8).

For interview questions, most the applicants responded that they face many difficulties while attending English language courses such as understanding the meaning of text, interpreting the information and explaining their point of view in English. According to their responses, these challenges can be solved by talking in English with each other rather in their native language. Most of the respondents stated that by visually illustrating the topic and the use of multimedia technologies can help the EFL students to improve the English reading class. As for the last question, they rated the current reading material as inadequate and ineffective and needs further improvements in its overall structure.
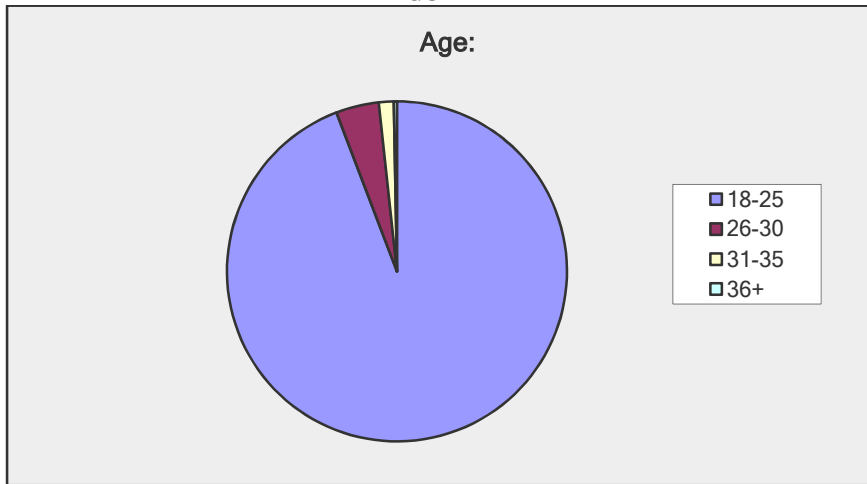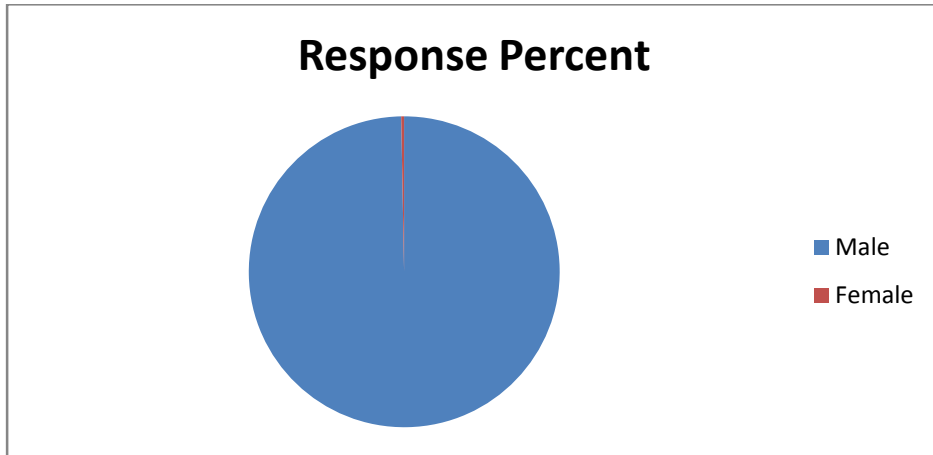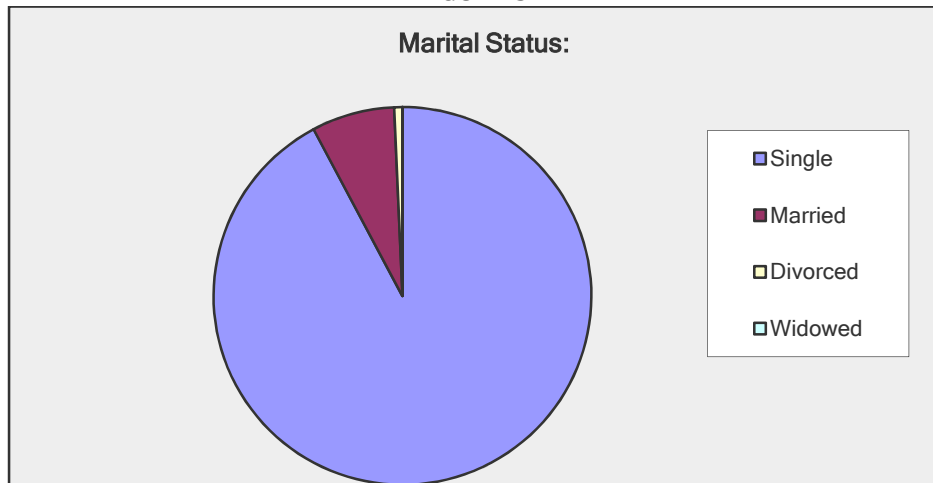
FIGURE 1

Age:

Legend:
- 18-25
- 26-30
- 31-35
- 36+

FIGURE 2

Response Percent

Legend:
- Male
- Female

FIGURE 3

Marital Status:

Legend:
- Single
- Married
- Divorced
- Widowed

FIGURE 4

How long have you been studying English?

1-6 years

FIGURE 5

Before I begin reading...

I think about what I know about…

I skim the pictures, charts, and…

I ask questions.

I think about the cover, title, and…

2.60   2.80   3.00   3.20   3.40   3.60

FIGURE 6

While reading...

I record an unfamiliar word that I…

I reread to understand confusing…

I identify unfamiliar words.

I identify confusing parts.

I make mental pictures.

I stop and check to see if I…

2.80 2.90 3.00 3.10 3.20 3.30 3.40 3.50 3.60

FIGURE 7

As I continue to read...

I raise questions and read for…

I predict and adjust as I read.

I read the captions under and…

I reread to remember more details.

I stop and retell to check what I…

I use pictures, graphs, and charts…

3.00   3.05   3.10   3.15   3.20

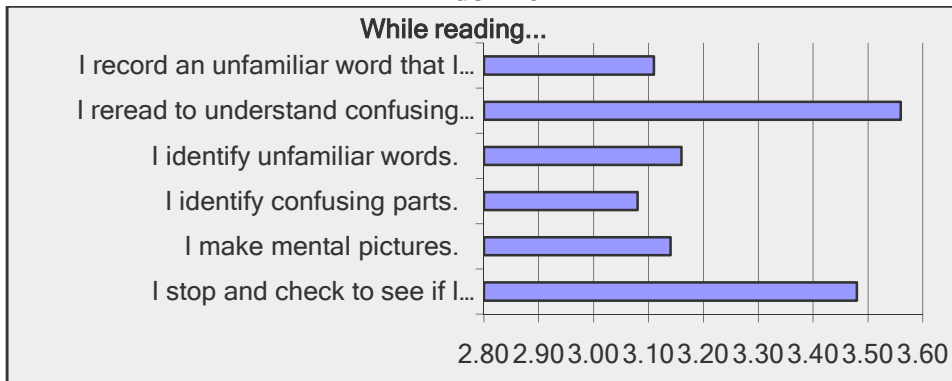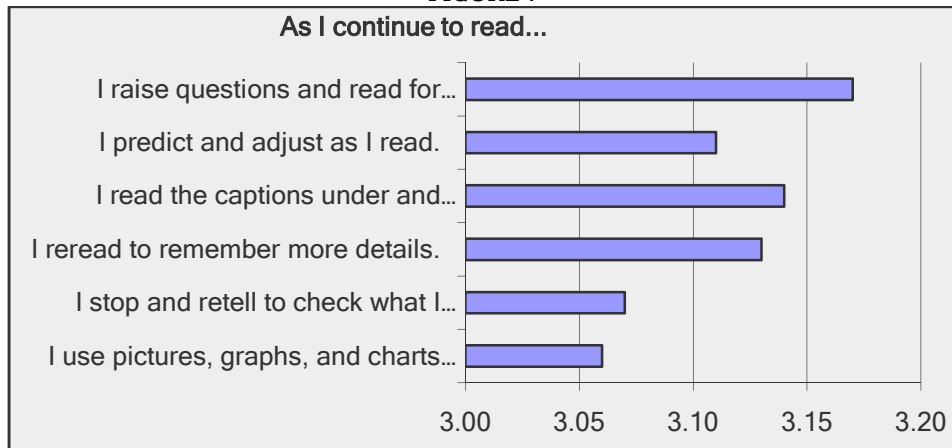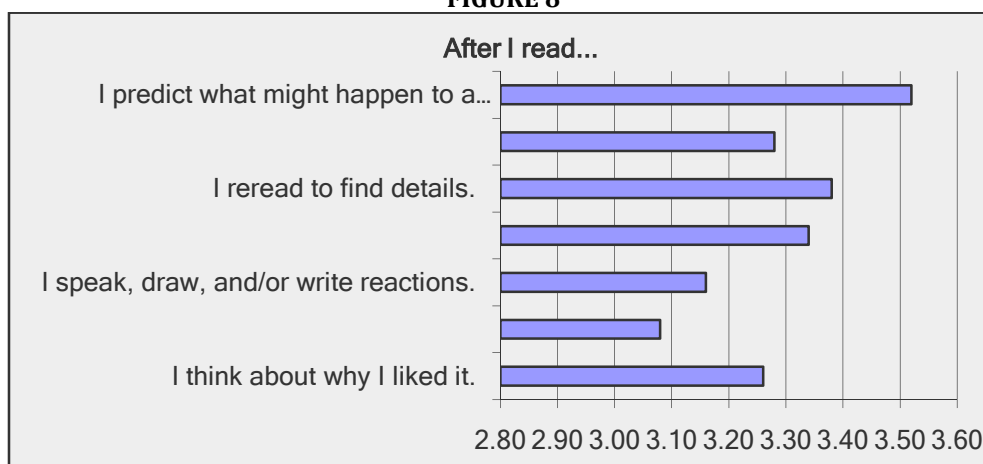**FIGURE 8**

DATA ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

The results indicated that the EFL students first memorize what they know about the topic as they start to read. That means they predict the given text which is one the component of reading strategy that was discussed in this paper. They try to re-read to understand the perplexing parts which indicate that they use scanning technique to find the words from which they are familiar with and then grasp the overall meaning of the sentence. EFL students ask questions from instructors if they find any difficulty while reading, it demonstrates that they make use of socio-effective strategy. The above outcomes suggested that students who speak English as a foreign language face many difficulties and consider current teaching structure as ineffective and unproductive for them. The results are a clear indication that students use reading strategy in their class either intentionally or unintentionally. After they are finished with reading process, they start predicting as to what might happen next that ultimately helps to sustain the interest of the students in the topic, thus supporting the theories discussed in literature review. All of their responses are closely related with the theories and models explored in this research paper. Therefore, the validity and reliability of reading strategies for EFL students is highly effective and fruitful.

CONCLUSION

The increase popularity of English language in many countries has impacted the students to a large level. Many educational institutions have now selected English as the primary foreign language. In return, students have to learn English in order to pass with good grades because English is used as the principal communication medium. However, numerous students face substantial challenges while learning English and could not demonstrate the desire results. One of the difficulties they face is while reading English texts and sentences. Issues like understanding the meaning of the sentence, interpreting what they have understood and explaining their understanding in English language (Harmer, 2007). For this matter, reading strategy is useful technique that EFL students can adopt to increase their English reading proficiency.

The components of reading strategy includes predicting, scanning, inferring, guessing the meaning of new words, and self-monitoring. It is necessary to the English language instructor to revise their current teaching material and structure. They should adopt more up-to-date material and make use of advance multimedia technologies to increase the motivation and enthusiasm towards the lecture(Dehnad, 2005). The teachers should also be aware about the importance of reading strategy for enhancing EFL students' reading skills. It is believed that the effective use of reading strategy is the optimal solution for resolving EFL students' reading difficulties.

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