

RESEARCH ARTICLE

**DIFFICULTIES OF READING IN SUDANESE
SECONDARY SCHOOLS
(A Case Study of Nertiti Locality)**

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Abstract

It has been observed that many Sudanese secondary school students, after spending seven years studying English language, are unable to read, with comprehension, simple English textbooks. This may be attributed, among other things, to the fact that the EFL syllabus includes limited number of reading skills. The present study investigates the reading difficulties faced by Sudanese secondary school students. The descriptive analytical method was used to conduct the present study. The study targeted population which included all students from nine public secondary schools within the borders of Nertiti Locality, as well as English teachers; forty students and ten teachers were selected randomly as a sample size. The researcher used a questionnaire and comprehension test as instruments for data collection. The study concluded the existence of some differences in reading difficulties based on gender. Students vary in their reading comprehension because of their academic streams. Students should be provided with some reading remedial techniques to overcome their reading difficulties by using short stories, magazines, newspapers, and simplified literary texts.

Key Words: reading perception, cognitive strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, comprehension

Introduction

Reading is a dynamic process that discriminates readers in the light of interaction of three factors; the type of the text being read, the purpose of the reader and the kind of reading skills and strategies he uses. (Ireland;2001). In foreign language learning context, where exposure to the target language in its spoken form is not widely available, reading in its different forms becomes an indispensable tool toward learners advancement in their English proficiency levels and development of their socio-cultural competence (Dornyei 1990). Reading is also a tool for fostering academic success among students.(Linquanti,1999). In Jordan (Alkhawaldah, 2012) used a survey to reading problems of the secondary school students. The most problematic areas identified by the students were: lack of familiarity with vocabulary items, lack of connection intensive and extensive reading activities, teacher-related malpractices in teaching reading comprehension and in consistency learner's pre-knowledge and existing ideas in the passage.

In Yemen,(Balfakeh, 2009) finds that dealing with unknown words is by far the most problematic area among secondary school students. Alajmi(2003) investigates the reading difficulties of Omani students soon after they graduate from their secondary school education. According to the students in her study, the most encountered reading difficulties are: lack of background knowledge, and lack of automatic recognition skills that enable students to recognize sounds and words.

1. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Reading

Reading is one of the most effective ways of foreign language learning. Reading simply is the interpretation of a written message. Walter R. Hill (1979, 4) briefly defines reading as what the reader does to get the meaning he needs from contextual resources. Reading is a fluent process of readers combining information from a text and their own background knowledge to build meaning and the goal of reading is comprehension (Nunan, 2003, 68). The ability to read requires that the reader draw information from a text and combine it with information and expectations that the reader already has (Grabe, Stoller, 2001, 187). Alderson. (2000) states that reading is compromises two components: word recognition and comprehension. Krashen and Terrell (1989, 131) pointed out that reading enables learners to comprehend better which is an important factor for developing language competence.

Hedge (2003) writes the goals of learners“ in a reading process as:

- The ability to read a wide range of texts in English.
- Building knowledge of language which will facilitate reading ability.
- Building schematic knowledge.
- The ability to adapt the reading style according to reading purpose (skimming and scanning).
- Developing an awareness of the structure of written texts in English.
- Taking a critical stance to the contexts of the texts.

Similarly, Williams (1984, 13) suggests some reasons for reading in a foreign language:

- Learners can have further practice in the language that they have learnt,
- Learners can practice language in order to reuse it in other skills such as speaking and writing,

- Learners can learn how to get benefit from the texts to extract the information they need,
- Learners can find enjoyment or interest through reading.

Sanacore (1994, 604), is of the opinion that encouraging learners to read will lead them guessing the meanings of words, phrases from the context, and the more they read the more they will understand the meanings of sentences and concepts. And an ongoing reading habit will enable learners understand a text easily; even they do not know meanings of some words in the text. Reading extensively will enhance their comprehension. Learners will easily comprehend in the foreign language if they advance their ability of guessing the meanings of words from context which will promote their speaking performance.

2.2 Reading Difficulty and Disability

Researchers learned that recognizing individual phonemes is an important step toward learning to read. In fact, tests of children's ability to manipulate phoneme, predicted later reading aptitude.

Fry (1991:35) asserted that students should not start any kind of reading before they are familiar with the material they are about to read.

Development of reading ability is influenced by many genes. Researchers continue to look for genetic clues into the basis of reading development. An understanding of how genes interact with other genes and with environment to influence reading ability may contribute to more effectively identifying individuals at risk and developing the means to improve their reading ability or prevent reading problems. Attempting to address the difficulty, which children encounter in reading Alafraj (1996) indicates that little research has been done to investigate the factors in student's life that significantly affect his attitude toward reading or his ability to read. Nuttall famously said, "Reading is caught, not taught" (1996: 229). Maley explains the implications of this for teachers when he says, "We need to realize how much influence we have on our students. Students do not just (or even) learn the subject matter we teach them; they learn their teachers. Teacher attitude, more than technical expertise, is what they will recall when they leave us" (1999:7).

2. Methodology

This study adopted descriptive survey research design. The researcher studied individuals and phenomena in their natural setting using quantitative approach (Creswell, 2005). Comparison and figures are used for data presentation.

2.1 Population

The study targeted population involved all students from nine public schools as well as some English Language teachers within the border of Nertiti Locality in Central Darfur State, the region which is located in western Sudan. The sample of the study was drawn from this population using purposive sampling. This technique was used to sample the students of nine public secondary schools in the locality and the sample comprised of forty students twenty girls and twenty boys and ten teachers were selected from five schools; two English language teachers were purposively selected from each school. The students were selected on the basis of performance and the teachers on the basis of specialization. The researcher involved 3rd class students and they were categorized into science and art streams.

2.2 Instruments

The researcher used two instruments for data collection; the first one is a semi structured questionnaire for the teachers which are semi-structured; consisting of both open and close-ended questions. Teachers' questionnaire had two sections: the first part required from the teachers to give

information about themselves and the second one Dealt with information on reading difficulties where they were assessed on the ability to handle learners with reading difficulties and the strategies they put in place to enhance reading comprehension. And the second instrument is a test was used in which one is asked to supply words that have been removed from a passage in order to measure students' ability to comprehend text.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

This part is concerned with presentation of participants' responses and the analysis of teachers' questionnaire.

2.3.1 The Analysis of Teachers' Questionnaire

No	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Strongly Disagree	Disagree
1	Students of secondary schools in Nertiti locality find some difficulties in reading comprehension	3	7	Non	Non	Non
2	Reading texts in school English syllabus is not compatible with students' linguistic levels.	1	5	1	Non	3
3	There are some differences between males and females in reading comprehension	Non	8	1	Non	1
4	Many English language teachers in the locality do not apply whole reading strategies in classrooms	Non	8	1	Non	1
5	Students vary in their reading comprehension because of their academic streams	Non	6	2	Non	2
6	Students' cultural environment (poor, rich) can affect on their reading comprehension	Non	5	1	2	2
7	There are slight differences in reading difficulty components	1	6	2	Non	1
8	lack of vocabulary recognition present the highest reading difficulties for students	2	6	2	Non	Non

The figures in column (1) shows that 30% of the respondents strongly agree with the assumption "Students of secondary schools in Nertiti locality encounter with difficulties in reading comprehension." while 70% of the concerned teachers comply with the idea. So we can say that almost 100% of the respondents support the notion.

The result analysis of column (2) illustrates that 10% of the teachers strongly agree with the notion that "Reading texts in secondary schools are not suitable with students' linguistic levels." And 50% support this idea. Nevertheless, 30% of respondents disagree with the idea and 10% undecided. The numbers in column (3) displays that 70% of the respondents advocate the idea that "There are some differences between girls and boys in reading comprehension." Whereas, 10% undecided and 20% do not support the idea.

The statistical analysis of column (4) unveils that 80% of the respondents advocate the idea that "Many English teachers in the locality do not apply the whole reading strategies in classrooms." Only 10% undecided and 10% do not support the assumption.

The figure in column (5) shows that 60% of the instructors support the statement of "Students vary in

their reading comprehension because of their academic streams." Whereas, 20% of the respondents undecided and 20% of them do not agree with the statement.

The statistical analysis of column (6) discovers that only 50% of the respondents advocate the idea that "Students social environment can affect their reading comprehension." Nevertheless, 20% of the respondents strongly disagree with the idea and 20% of them do not support it.

The figure in column (7) discloses that 10% of the respondents strongly agree with the assumption that "There are slight differences in the six reading difficulties components." And 60% of the informants advocate the assumption. And 20% undecided while only 10% disagree with it.

The result analysis of column (8) shows that 20% of the respondents strongly agree with the idea that "Lack of background knowledge and lack of vocabulary recognition represent the highest reading difficulties encounter students." Moreover, 60% of the informants advocate the statement, whereas 20% undecided.

3.3.2 Analysis of Students' Test

Table (1) Art Stream Students (20 Respondents)

Questions	Gender	Number of respondents	Success	Failure
Part (1) Give short answers. " whole comprehension of the text"	Female	10	30%	70%
	Male	10	40%	60%
Part (2) True/False statements.	Female	10	50%	50%
	Male	10	60%	40%
Part (3) Vocabulary recognition	Female	10	30%	70%
	Male	10	20%	80%

The figures in table (1) show that 70% of girls' and 60% of boys' respondents of Art Stream students failed to answer the questions of part (1) that is only three girls and four boys from art stream managed to pass it, this represents only 35% of the students passed this part. 55% of art students managed to pass part (2) True/False statements that are five girls and four boys. For vocabulary recognition part only 25% of students managed to pass it that is three girls and two boys.

Table (2) Science Stream Students (20 Respondents)

Questions	Gender	Respondents	success	Failure
Part(1) Give short answer General comprehension	Female	10	40%	60%
	Male	10	40%	60%
Part(2) True/False statements	Female	10	60%	40%
	Male	10	50%	50%
Part (3) Vocabulary recognition	Female	10	40%	60%
	Male	10	50%	70%

The statistical analysis of table (2) for students of science stream shows that four boys and four girls of the students managed to pass part (1) the general comprehension of the text. 55% of art students managed to pass part (2) True/False statements that are five boys and four girls. Whereas only four girls and four boys managed to pass part (3) of vocabulary recognition.

4. The Findings

Sudanese secondary school students (males & females) have reading difficulties and particularly, students of secondary schools in Nertiti locality. However, there are slight differences in the six reading difficulties components used in this research. The difficulties of those components range from the highest to the lowest. Therefore, Sudanese secondary school students' highest reading difficulty component is background knowledge of the text followed by vocabulary and structural knowledge, automatic recognition skills, syntheses and evaluation skills, and meta cognitive.

The impact of gender on reading difficulty components indicate that no significant differences are found between the two groups of male and female students in the reading difficulties components, which suggest that both male and female secondary school students have similar reading difficulties in general. However, when the English test was conducted for each item, it was discovered that a significant difference between male and female students were found in some items. For example, males had more difficulty in locating important words in the text than the females had. However, females had more difficulty in relating cause and effect information than males.

Regarding academic stream on reading difficulties no significant differences are found between arts and science students in the reading difficulties components, which suggest that students, in both streams, have these reading difficulties components except that art students have more reading difficulty in word background knowledge component than science students do. However, the English test for students shows that there is slight difference between the two groups in some items. For example, when compared to science students, art students had more difficulties in the following areas: gap filling with appropriate vocabularies, understanding sentences from their grammatical structure, distinguishing between phrase and a sentence, and confusing some letters.

Whereas, in the impact of linguistic level on reading difficulties; all three achievement groups (the low, the middle and high achievement groups) have reading difficulties in all items included in the questionnaire in general. The three achievement groups also differ on all the reading difficulties components. However, the low and the middle achievement groups have more reading difficulties than the high achievement group in those reading components.

5. Recommendations

According to the findings of the study, the researcher recommends that EFL teachers must expose the variety of reading texts and materials in English language to their students i.e. they may be given more practice in reading skills and strategies so as to develop students' ability in reading. In addition to that students should be encouraged to read different materials for fun and entertainment to get the habit of reading so as to develop the automatic recognition skills and strategies and build their word power.

Moreover, students should be provided with some reading remedial techniques to overcome their reading difficulties by using short stories, magazines, newspapers and simplified literary texts and the English Language teachers should help EFL students overcome their reading difficulties by adopting suitable methods of teaching, giving them more practice and training in reading skills and strategies.

6. Conclusion

It is time to recapitulate the main points that emerge from the analysis and discussion in the preceding sections. The findings and the recommendations of this study may be useful for EFL teachers and students on one hand and EFL designers on the other hand. The same may be useful for the further researchers in the area of ELT in general and boosting reading skill in particular.

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