23

SPECIFIC FEATURES OF TEACHING ARABIC STUDENTS READING IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Issam Salhi
Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Russia – Algeria
T. V. Kuprina
Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Russia, Author ID 55811001900

ОСОБЕННОСТИ ОБУЧЕНИЯ ЧТЕНИЮ НА АНГЛИЙСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ АРАБСКОЙ АУДИТОРИИ

Иссам Салхи
Уральский федеральный университет
Екатеринбург, Россия – Алжир
Т. В. Куприна
Уральский федеральный университет
Екатеринбург, Россия

Absract. Teaching English has become a vital part of the Algerian education system. While reading serves as a means of language acquisition, it is also regarded as one of the most challenging receptive activities for students. According to a number of scientific works, reading is considered as a cognitive and results oriented process that requires implementing certain strategies. The authors use the questionnaire as an instrument for collecting data for their research. The results of the survey demonstrate that students have a number of difficulties in comprehending written texts, due to their lack of vocabulary knowledge and reading skills. Thus, text selection may play a crucial part in reading comprehension.

Keywords: reading, developing reading skills, strategies, reading comprehension, questionnaire, Arabic students.

Аннотация. Обучение английскому языку стало неотъемлемой частью образовательного контекста в Алжире. Чтение является одним из методов обучения, но в то же время рассматривается как один из сложных видов речевой деятельности. По данным ряда исследований, чтение считается когнитивно-конструктивной техникой, требующей внедрения специальных стратегий. В статье в качестве исследовательского инструмента используется опросник. Результаты показывают, что учащиеся имеют многочисленные трудности при восприятии письменных текстов из-за недостаточного запаса лексики и навыков чтения. Выбор текстов может играть решающую роль при понимании прочитанного.

Ключевые слова: чтение, обучение чтению, стратегии, понимание прочитанного, опросник, арабская аудитория.

Introduction

Reading is defined as a cognitive process that involves decoding symbols for the reader to arrive at a certain meaning. This is an active process of recognizing words and developing comprehension. According to the research, reading is a process of negotiating the meaning between the text and its reader. Teaching and learning English as a foreign language has become a vital part of the Algerian education system, because of a considerable demand for this language. In fact, learning English requires mastering the four language skills; namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. Reading is one of the four skills that students should acquire and develop. It is considered as a basic and a necessary skill for a foreign language acquisition, because of its positive effects on learning vocabulary, improving spelling, as well as developing writing skills. Not only is reading a means of language acquisition, but also a fundamental part of learning [8]. However, reading in a foreign language is regarded as one of the most challenging and difficult activities for most of the English language learners to perform, due to the complexity of skills. Most students' attempts in reading comprehension tasks, which are a crucial part of the education process, result in failure, because they often lack comprehension skills and may struggle with certain subject areas. That is to say, it is often more important for the learners to be able to comprehend what they are reading about, than to be able to demonstrate the technical reading skills.

Reading is considered as a cognitive and results oriented process that requires implementing certain strategies, i.e. skimming, scanning, decoding, predicting, visualizing, inferring, summarizing, etc.

H.D. Brown [2] and L. Erler & C. Finkbeiner [4] define strategies as specific methods of approaching a reading problem or a task, for the readers to flexibly control, regulate and evaluate information.

According to O. Suwantharathip [9] and L. Zhang et al (2013) [10], reading requires the use of cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies. J.C. Alderson [1] notes that reading strategies serve multiple purposes, which include writing and speaking skills development. D. McNamara et al [5] consider reading strategies as beneficial for learners with lower reading skills to utilize them without much effort.

English Language Teaching in the Algerian Context

English received a special status as an international language in the Algerian education system with the introduction to the English secondary school syllabus approved by the Ministry of Education (2006). The conception of language learning that consists of the acquisition of linguistic units is extended to methodological and cultural objectives: In this regard, it is stated that, "the aim of teaching English is to help our society to get harmoniously integrated in the modernity through a fully complete participation within a community of people who use English in all types of interactions. This participation should be based on sharing and exchanging ideas as well as scientific or cultural experiences; this participation will help to better understand ourselves and others".

According to Ch. Nuttal [6], teaching English also aims at achieving the following goals:

- to help learners promote self-learning and critical thought;

- to promote learners' intellectual capacities for the analysis, evaluation and synthesis;

- to enable learners to use English-language documents for academic and professional purposes;

- to encourage learners to accept other cultures, and to foster the spirit of tolerance [6].

Therefore, teaching English at the Algerian secondary school is not only concerned with the general educational objectives, but also promotes universal, humanistic and national values. Students are expected to learn how they can tell about their country and its cultural values using the English language; as well as how to be open to culturally-based, universal and human values, which are essential elements of modernity and globalization.

The Status of English in the Algerian Educational System

Nowadays, the demand for foreign languages is recognized around the world, as all of its members are joining together in a 'global village'. Taking this trend into account, the role of the English language in this ever-shrinking global community is becoming increasingly important. English is primarily the language of the new media (e.g. Satellite TV, and the Internet). It is spoken by about 1.5 billion people, and it is the language of international communication in business, diplomacy, technology, sports, travel and entertainment. Therefore, teaching English is becoming a vital part of the education systems all over the world [7]. In the case of Algeria, the recognition of English as a major international language by the Ministry of Education is becoming noticeable. In 2001, The Ministry announced a reform with numerous changes that concerned teaching English. While English is still considered to be the second foreign language in the Algerian Educational System after French, it has received considerable attention within that educational reform. Above all, English is now introduced in the first year of middle school (i.e. eleven-year-old students). It covers seven years of education - four of which at middle school, and three - at secondary school. The education process implies designing new syllabuses, publishing new textbooks and adopting the accompanying documents. Competency-based approach is also being adopted as a new methodological framework.

As it was mentioned before, English is taught as a compulsory subject beginning from the first year of middle school. However, being a second foreign language in the educational system, and due to certain historical and social reasons, English is primarily learned for educational purposes, e.g. to pass exams. It is mostly used in the formal classroom environment and there are few opportunities, other than in school, to use it for daily communicative purposes [3].

Methodology

In this work, the questionnaire is used as an instrument for collecting data; it was addressed to third year students of Ahmed Boukhobza secondary school, who major in languages and science (70 students in total). The research also focused on teachers' responses as part of the survey. The interview included nine questions addressed to two teachers from the same secondary school.

Students' Questionnaire Analysis

**Question One:** What is your preferred skill to develop?

When students were asked about their preferred academic skill, the responses varied a lot. The questionnaire results are shown in the following tables, named similarly:

Third year foreign language students:

The responses of the participants (35 students in total) demonstrate that only 11% of them preferred a listening skill, while 31% named a speaking skill among their favorites; 40% of the respondents named reading, and the other 17% preferred a writing skill.

1.1 Skill Preferred (Language Major)

Favorite skill	Number of students	Percentage
Listening	04	11%
Speaking	11	31%
Reading	14	40%
Writing	06	17%
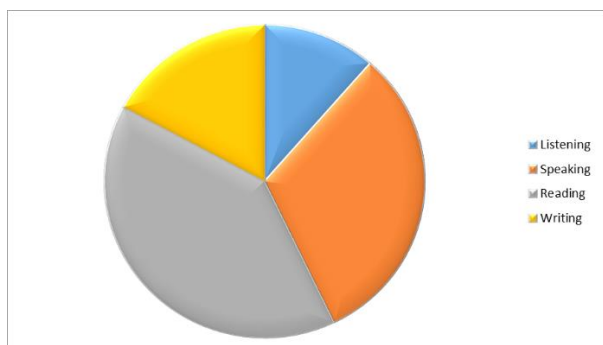
**Pie-chart 1.1.: Skill Preferred (Language Major)**

Third year science students:

On the other hand, when the students of a science major were asked about their favorite skills, 34% of them selected listening, 14% preferred speaking, while the others preferred reading and writing (34% and 17% respectively).

1.2 Skill Preferred (Science Major)

Favorite skill	Number of students	Percentage
Listening	14	34%
Speaking	06	14%
Reading	14	34%
Writing	07	17%

As the table above shows, the students' most preferred skill is listening. This may include listening for entertainment, such as listening to music; while listening may also improve reading comprehension in many ways. For instance, students may encounter new words when they listen to the audible information.
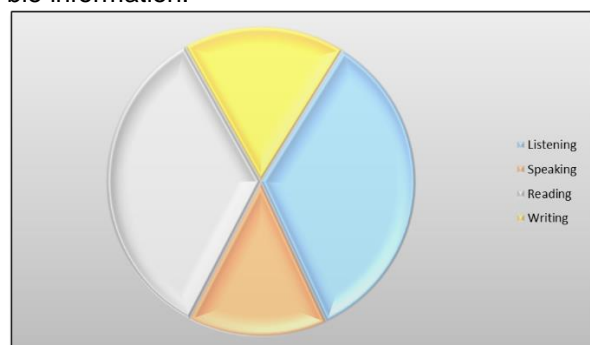


Pie-chart 1.2.: Skill Preferred (Science Major)

Question Two: What kind of materials do you prefer to read?

When asked about reading materials, 12 participants mentioned newspapers and magazines, while 32 participants named books, and 26 participants mentioned short stories. The purpose of asking this question was to learn what kind of reading materials the respondents under analysis were interested in.

2.1 Reading Materials Preferred

Reading materials	Number of students	Percentage
Newspapers, magazines	12	17%
Shorts stories	26	37%
Books	32	46%

Bar-graph 2: Reading Materials Preferred
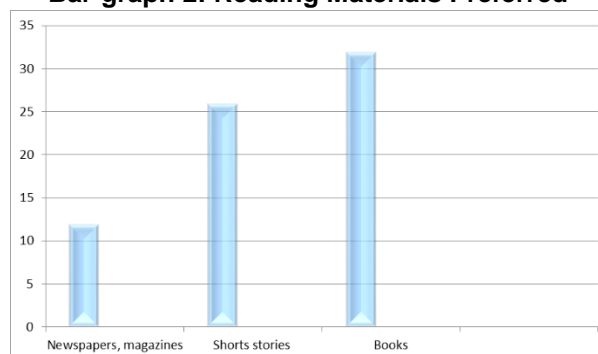
Question Three: What reading strategy do you use?

3.1. Learners' Reading Strategies

Reading strategies	Number of students	Percentage
Skimming	24	34%
Scanning	33	47%
Reading aloud	13	19%
Total number	70	100%

When the respondents (70 students in total) were asked about the strategy they used for reading, 24 of them mentioned skimming, 33 respondents selected scanning, whereas 13 respondents preferred the reading aloud strategy.

Question Four: What is your purpose of reading?

Most of the respondents (54%) claimed that their purpose of reading was to enrich their general knowledge, while 27% stated that their objective was to read for pleasure. 16% of learners mentioned reading to enrich their vocabulary knowledge, and only 3% claimed that they read for certain academic needs.

4.1 Learners' Purpose of Reading

Purpose of reading	Number of students	Percentage
Read for pleasure	19	27%
Get information or general knowledge	38	54%
Enrich vocabulary knowledge	11	16%
Read for academic needs	02	3%

Question Five: What do you do when you read but you do not understand the material?

52% of the respondents stated that when they were reading and did not understand the material they tried to translate the information into their mother tongue, which is Arabic; while 35% of the respondents answered that they used the dictionary. 10% of the students claimed that they stopped reading, while only 3% of the respondents carried on reading having no clear understanding.

5.1 Learners' Strategies While Reading

Learner's Strategies	Number of students	Percentage
Use a dictionary	25	35%
Translate into Arabic	37	52%
Carry on reading	01	03%
Stop reading	07	10%

Question Six: What are the difficulties that you often encounter while reading?

The majority of the participants 54% agree that when they read, they often have problems with new words, which prevent them from understanding the whole text. 20% of the respondents claimed that they faced problems with the exact meaning of some words. Three groups of the respondents with the same percentages (8%) have difficulties with unfamiliar and ambiguous words, as well as with pronunciation and reading aloud in the classroom.

6.1 Difficulties Encountered while Reading

Causes	Number of students	Percentage
Difficulties of pronunciation	06	8%
Unfamiliar words	06	8%
New words	38	54%
Reading aloud	06	8%
The meaning of words	14	20%
Total number	70	100%

Question Seven: What causes these difficulties?

When asked about the main causes of reading difficulties, 43% of the students named lack of time, while the same percentage (43%) also claimed that they did not have a habit to read. 14% of the respondents considered the main reason for their reading difficulties to be the complexity of the reading skill itself.

7.1 Causes of Reading Difficulties

Causes	Number of students	Percentage
Lack of time	30	43%
Lack of reading habit	30	43%
The complexity of the skill itself	10	14%
Total	70	100%

Question Eight: Is the time devoted to reading sessions sufficient?

The majority of the participants (67%) claimed that the time devoted to reading sessions is sufficient to perform their reading tasks, while 23% stated that the time was insufficient.

8.1 Time Sufficiency

Answers	Number of students	Percentage
Yes	47	67%
No	23	33%
Total number	70	100%

Discussion of Students' Questionnaire

This study was set to investigate the reading comprehension difficulties among the English-language learners in secondary school. Data were collected to examine the difficulties encountered by students when they read in the English language. The analysis of the questionnaire reveals that the students have certain difficulties in the comprehension of written materials.

The responses of foreign language students (35 respondents in total) reveal that few of them (11%) prefer developing the listening skill, while 31% prefer mastering the speaking skill. 40% of these students are interested in developing their reading skill and the minority of the respondents (17%) prefer the writing skill. On the other hand, the findings show that, based on the responses of the science students (35 respondents in total), the majority (34%) prefer developing their listening skill - they claimed it to be the best way to acquire new vocabulary. 14% prefer developing their speaking skill, while 34% are interested in reading, and 17% prefer writing. As far as the second question is concerned, 17% of the respondents prefer newspapers and magazines as the best materials to read, while 37% prefer short stories, and 46% prefer to read books. Besides, the findings for question four reveal that 34% of the respondents selected skimming as their best reading strategy, while 47% mentioned scanning and the other 19% chose reading aloud.

Based on the responses to the third question, it could be noticed that most of the respondents (54%) read for the purpose of getting information or general knowledge, while 27% read for pleasure, and 16% read to enrich their vocabulary. Only 3% of the respondents read for certain academic needs. In addition to that, in question five the respondents claimed using different strategies that may help them understand the reading materials. 35% of the respondents use the dictionary as the best tool to check the meaning of words; 52% translate the information using their native language, i.e. Arabic. 10% of the respondents claimed that they stop reading when they face problems, whereas 3% carry on reading even if they have no clear understanding.

The results obtained from question six show that three groups of students with the same percentage (8%) have difficulties at the level of pronunciation and the meaning of words, as well as reading aloud. 54% consider new words as a problem, and 20% view the unknown meanings of words as an obstacle. In this regard, among the causes of these difficulties, 43% of the participants mentioned lack of time, and another 43% claimed lack of reading habits in the English language, while 14% related to the difficulty of acquiring the skill itself. The majority of the respondents (67%) claimed the time devoted to reading sessions being sufficient to perform the reading task, while 33% claimed that this time was not enough for them to achieve their reading activity goals.

Below is the record of the teachers' interview.

Teachers' Interview

Question One: How many years have you been teaching English?

Teacher 1: I have 22 years of practice.

Teacher 2: I have been teaching English for 7 years.

Question Two: Which skill do your students prefer to develop?

Teacher 1: Reading skill.

Teacher 2: Reading.

Question Three: What kinds of materials do you use for teaching reading comprehension? What is your opinion about their benefit for the teaching process?

Teacher 1: I use pictures and handouts, because they are very useful - they keep the learners more engaged and focused.

Teacher 2: I prefer using pictures and videos, because such materials facilitate reading comprehension; they help those readers, who have difficulties, to comprehend and analyze the idea of a text; such materials should also be connected to the language that the students are learning. Using these materials gives an opportunity for the students to convert language into images and images into language.

Question Four: Does the text selection have an effect on reading comprehension? How does it affect comprehension?

Teacher 1: Of course, the text selection is very crucial, since it is not only to teach the learners new linguistic knowledge, but also to guide the whole lesson to reach the objectives smoothly.

Teacher 2: Yes, the text selection affects reading comprehension a lot. The technical, scientific or literary texts that cover the topics beyond students' conceptual level or language should be avoided, because they would simply leave a negative impact on students and decrease their level of curiosity and interest in reading the text.

Question Five: What do you do when your students do not understand a text they are reading? How can you help them understand it?

Teacher 1: Usually, I teach my students the keywords before I give them the handouts that contain the text. In this way, I can make sure they will have no difficulties in grasping the idea of the text.

Teacher 2: First, I explain some keywords that are included in the text through pictures; students may be reading the text for them, however they sometimes do not understand what they have read, and they just skim the text.

Question Six: What are the difficulties that your students often encounter while reading?

Teacher 1: The difficulties usually start when students' vocabulary knowledge is not as good as it should be. Therefore, as teachers we try every time to enrich their vocabulary on a daily basis.

Teacher 2: The most common difficulty lies in determining what information is important in the written passage.

Question Seven: From a language teacher's perspective, what may cause these difficulties?

Teacher 1: Their vocabulary may not be as good as it should be, in addition to their lack of reading habits.

Teacher 2: This may be a poor question design, or students may have a limited vocabulary.

Question Eight: Is the time devoted to reading sessions at school sufficient? Why?

Teacher 1: Time is never enough to overcome all the weaknesses, especially when it comes to being able to fully decode and understand a text.

Teacher 2: One hour devoted to reading for pleasure may help students to take each step in the reading process and to master reading comprehension.

Question Nine: What materials and techniques can you offer to help improve students' reading comprehension?

Teacher 1: A possible solution may be to give students the assignments that require reading outside the classroom, or simply to instruct them to read short stories by devoting more time to that.

Teacher 2: As teachers, we have to encourage our students and motivate them to read and develop their reading habits.

Teachers' Interview Analysis

It should be noted that the two teachers' experiences range from seven to twenty-two years respectively. Both teachers agree that their students' most preferable skill is reading. Taking teaching materials into consideration, Teacher 1 regards pictures and handouts as the best materials to be used within an EFL classroom, and states that such materials fit best to keep learners' interest and involvement. Teacher 2 claims to be using pictures and videos, as they facilitate reading comprehension. They add that this kind of materials should be used in relation to the language under study, to give an opportunity to convert and adapt the language into images and vice versa. In addition to that, the responses to question four demonstrate that both teachers are of the same opinion that the text selection has a great impact on students' level

of reading comprehension. They state that the choice is crucial, since the materials are aimed not only at teaching learners new language information; they are also a means that the teacher uses to achieve the lesson objectives efficiently and smoothly.

Furthermore, for question number five, the teachers listed certain techniques that they use to help their learners understand what they are reading. Additionally, the teachers stated a number of difficulties that their learners face, starting with a poor and limited vocabulary and ending with determining a certain message within a written passage. The teachers also claim that they usually lack time to facilitate the process of developing the students' reading comprehension. Nevertheless, the teachers tend to show more interest and care about their students by suggesting certain techniques that may help them to develop their reading skills.

Discussion of Main Findings

This work aims to determine certain reading comprehension difficulties that EFL learners may face when they read in English. It also highlights the main reasons that lead to such difficulties. The results of the survey may well confirm the following hypotheses of this work, based on the research questions that have been posed.

Research question one: what are the difficulties and problems that secondary school students may encounter while reading? Hypothesis one: EFL Learners fail to comprehend the reading materials in English, because of their lack of vocabulary knowledge and unfamiliar words. The teachers' comments have proved that their learners are facing such reading problems, thus the first hypothesis is confirmed.

Research question two: what are the main causes of such difficulties? Hypothesis two: the main reasons lie in the students' lack of vocabulary knowledge and irregular reading habits. This idea is revealed in the teachers' responses, which confirm the second hypothesis.

Research question three: does the text selection affect the students' development of reading comprehension skills? Hypothesis three: text selection may play a crucial part in the development of reading comprehension. As the responses show; the reading materials under study must be appropriate to the learner's level of language proficiency. Therefore, the third hypothesis is confirmed. Finally, the teachers suggested certain techniques and ways to motivate students to read more in order to become proficient readers.

Conclusion

Reading is the most important skill among the four activities that language learners need to master at school. It is a cognitive and results oriented process that requires implementing certain strategies. It can also improve the overall language proficiency. However, many students believe that reading is one of the most frustrating activities they will ever face in their education process. Even though one may have reading difficulties in his or her mother tongue, the problems get worse when reading is performed in a foreign language. For this reason, this work is mainly concerned with the reading comprehension difficulties in EFL classrooms at secondary school. Reading becomes a fundamental element of the acquisition of a foreign language that students need to perform to improve their language proficiency. The upcoming research on teaching reading comprehension in secondary schools should conduct a deeper analysis about how to develop learners' reading skills, based on certain reading strategies, to help students improve their performance and become better readers.

References

1. Alderson J.C. Language learning strategy instruction: Current issues and research / J.C. Alderson // Annual Review of Applied Linguistics. 2000. No 25. P. 112–130.

2. Brown H.D. Principles of language learning and teaching. White plains / H.D. Brown N.Y.: Pearson Education. 2007. 410 p.

3. Dubin F. Whatever EFL teacher should know about reading / F. Dubin // English teaching forum. 1982. 73 p.

4. Erler L. A review of reading strategies: focus on the impact of first language / L. Erler & C. Finkbeiner Oxford OUP. 2007. 206 p.

5. McNamara D.S. Handbook of Latent Semantic Analysis: Evaluating Self-explanations in I START: Comparing word-based and LSA algorithms / D.S. McNamara, C. Boonthum, I.B. Levinstein, K. Millis USA: Psychology Press. 2009. 544 p.

6. Nuttal Ch. Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language / Ch. Nuttal London: Heinemann Educational Books. 1998. 282 p.

7. Paris S. Reinterpreting the Development of Reading Skills / S. Paris // Reading Research Quarterly. 2005. Vol. 40. No. 2. P.184–220.

8. Richards J. C. The Language Teaching Matrix / J.C. Richards Cambridge: CLTL. 1990. 185 p.

9. Suwantharathip O. Implementing reading strategies based on collaborative learning approach in an English class / O. Suwantharathip // Reading Matrix: An International Online Journal. 2015. No 15 (1). P. 91–101.

10. Zhang L. Metacognitive strategy use and academic reading achievement: Insights from a Chinese context / L. Zhang & S. Seepho // Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching. 2013. No 10 (1). P. 54–69.

Сведения об авторах

САЛХИ Иссам

аспирант, Уральский федеральный университет имени первого Президента России Б.Н. Ельцина (Екатеринбург, Россия)

КУПРИНА Тамара Владимировна, tvkuprina@mail.ru

кандидат педагогических наук, доцент, доцент, доцент кафедры иностранных языков и перевода и кафедры международной экономики и менеджмента, Уральский федеральный университет имени первого Президента России Б.Н. Ельцина (Екатеринбург, Россия)