

Reading Strategies Used by Palestinian College Students

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Abstract

This study investigates the type of reading strategies used by Engineering students at Palestine polytechnic University. It also explores the differences between students of high proficiency and those of low proficiency in terms of the type of strategies used as well as the correlation between these types of strategies and the students' reading ability. The participants are 100 sophomore engineering students who are enrolled in their second English course at the university. The data were collected by using a self reported questionnaire and reading comprehension passages. Results show that the most frequent types of strategies used by all students are the global strategies followed by problem solving ones and finally the support ones. They also reveal a significant correlation between the global strategies used and the students' reading comprehension ability. Furthermore, the study shows differences between low-proficient readers and high proficient ones in terms of the frequency and type of strategies used.

Keywords: college students reading, EFL reading comprehension, reading comprehension, Palestinian college students.

Introduction

Reading is an essential skill for all students because it is the main doorway to knowledge. However, for college students, especially those in technical and scientific disciplines, one may argue that proficiency in English reading comprehension is indispensable as these students need it to study their subject matter and to acquire knowledge from various sources. It could be said that good English reading ability is a key factor for success in the technical and scientific disciplines at the college level.

Reading strategies have been an important theme for research in EFL in general and reading skill in particular in an attempt to help improve students' reading ability. However, different categories of strategies were generated (Anderson, 1991; Chang, 1998; Oxford, 1990, Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001). Most of the classifications used are built on the two well known reading models; top-down and bottom up. In this study, however, reading strategies were divided into three types; the first is global strategies which are planned by the reader to monitor reading such as predicting the general meaning of the text or having a purpose for reading. The second is problem solving strategies, i.e., those used by the reader to deal with the difficulties he faces during reading such as guessing the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary and reading the parts of the text more than once. The third type is support strategies, which are the strategies that readers use to help them understand the text, such as using dictionaries.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the type of strategies Palestinian Engineering students use in reading comprehension and the relationship between the different types of strategies and reading ability. Moreover, it explores whether high proficient and low proficient students use the same kinds of strategies or different ones. To achieve this aim, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the reading strategies used most by Palestinian college engineering students?
2. Are there differences between high proficient and low proficient readers in terms of the used strategies?
3. Is there a relationship between reading ability and the type of strategies used?
4. What kind of strategies are used by both high and low proficient readers to guess the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary?

Literature review

Reading strategies have been an important theme in the literature of EFL teaching and learning as they reflect how learners deal with reading as a complex skill. Reading strategies have been classified in different categories by different researchers. The most known classification of reading strategies is Oxford's (1990), which put them into six types; memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. However, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) have only three categories; cognitive, metacognitive and, social/affective strategies. Almost ten years earlier, we find that Rubin (1981) suggested five categories related to their contribution to language learning. These categories are, guessing, memorization, practice, deductive reasoning, and monitoring. Another classification was built on the two reading models, top down and bottom up, and included three types; general or global strategies, problem solving and support strategies (Block, 1986).

Several studies have reported on the differences between high-proficient and low-proficient readers in terms of using reading strategies and the relationship between reading strategies and reading ability. (Cheng, 2000; Oxford, 2001; Wenden, 1998; Zhang, 2008). Most of these studies indicated that high proficient readers use more strategies and in more efficient ways (Garner, 1987; Liu 2002; Luo, 2010; Vandergrift, 1999).

Another important dimension of reading strategies that researchers have studied is the relationship between reading ability and strategy use. It was found that the use of some strategies contributes to having a good level of reading comprehension (Block 1992; Hassan, 1999; Zhang ,2001).

In the Palestinian context, a study by Shmais (2002) investigated the use of two participants' reading strategies via think-aloud. She found that they used a number of metacognitive strategies that helped them answer multiple questions on a reading text.

Methodology

Participants

The participants consisted of one hundred students from the college of Engineering at Palestine Polytechnic University. All of them are sophomore students who were enrolled in a second required course in English. These students have received twelve years of English instructions at school and one course at the university level. They are required to have three English courses at the university; the first two mainly focus on reading while the third course focuses on speaking and writing.

Instrumentation and procedures

Three main instruments were used in this study; a reading strategy questionnaire, as well as two passages from newspapers that were used for practicing reading strategies, In addition to the previous instruments four other reading passages from TOEFL practice textbook were used to measure the participants' reading ability. The questionnaire was adapted from Oxford's classification (1990) and it includes 28 statements rated on Likert scale. The students were asked to read a text and then respond to the questionnaire directly. The questionnaire covers three categories of reading strategies; general (global), problem solving and support strategies.

Two reading passages were selected for this study from authentic sources such as newspapers and websites. One of the passages was used to train students on using strategies while the second one was used for the study. For the second passage, the students were asked to read it at home (to be discussed in the classroom) and once they finished reading they responded to the questionnaire and brought it to the teacher.

The third instrument was a reading test that is composed of four passages taken from TOEFL practice book. Each passage is followed by ten multiple choice questions that test general idea, specific details, vocabulary, relationship between different ideas and critical reading. The result of the exam was used to classify students into high proficient and low proficient ones. Moreover, it was used to explore if different types of strategies correlate with reading ability in general. The test was validated by a number of EFL college teachers and piloted before being used. The test reliability turned out to be .78.

Data collection

In order to answer the research questions and to ensure that the participants are fully aware of the reading strategies, they were familiarized with the aim of the research and the questionnaire items. Then, to be sure that they understand the meaning of the items, they were asked to read one-page article and then fill in the questionnaire inside the classroom and ask about any ambiguous item. On the following day, the students were provided with similar articles taken from a newspaper and asked to read at home and respond to the questionnaire. The participants' responses were collected and analyzed according to the research questions.

To measure participants' ability in reading, they were asked to sit for a reading exam using four passages from a TOEFL practice textbook. Each passage is followed by ten multiple choice questions that cover the different constructs of reading. The goal of this test is to measure the participants' proficiency in reading and to divide them into two groups; high proficient and low-proficient.

Results and discussion

Results of the study and the discussion are presented according to the research questions of the study.

Research question 1: What types of strategies are the most used by Palestinian college students?

The results of data analyses for the frequency of using strategies show that the general or global strategies are the most used ones. Table one shows that the mean for general strategies used is (M=2.8) followed by problem solving ones (m=2.20). By contrast, the support strategies were the least frequently used (M=2.12). This means that most of the students rely on their general knowledge of the world and the topic so as to compensate for their linguistic knowledge. However, Al-Sohbani (2013) found that Yemeni university students used problem solving strategies a little more than global and support ones. In fact in this study the most used strategies as individual ones are support ones ; items 27, 28, 14, 13, 3. (See appendix 1)

Table1. Results of descriptive statistics for the different types of strategies used by participants.

N.	Strategy type	M.	Maximum	SD.
100	global(General)	2.800	4	.570
100	Problem solving	2.2079	4	.598
100	Support	2.1229	4	.609

Research question 2: Are there differences between high proficient and low proficient readers in terms of the used strategies?

It is very important in EFL research to investigate the strategies that are used by proficient learners so that they can be used in teaching and learning to help those students with low proficiency. The high proficient students were selected by including having those participants who scored at the highest 25%. By contrast, the lowest- proficient ones were chosen by selecting those who have the lowest 25%.

The results showed that the strategies most used by high proficient students are the global ones, (M=3.06), followed by problem solving ones, (M=2.18), and then comes the support ones, (M=2.13). Although, the participants with low proficiency have the same patterns in terms of the preferred type of used strategies, they have lower frequency. The means of the three types used by low proficient readers are, 2.43 for the global, 2.16 for the problem solving ones and 2.07 for the support. This shows that high proficient readers use strategies more frequently than the low proficient ones, and this may explain the fact that they are better readers. Shang (2011) also found that reading scores correlate with cognitive and testing strategies.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for strategy use by both high proficient and low proficient participants.

Level of participants	Type of strategies	N.	M.	Maximum	SD.
High proficient	global	22	3.06	4	.508
	Problem solving	22	2.18	4	.77
	support	22	2.13	4	.93
Low proficient	global	36	2.43	4	.59
	Problem solving	36	2.16	4	.54
	support	36	2.07	4	.50

Research question 3. Is there a relationship between reading ability and the type of strategies used?

An important goal of this study is to investigate the relationship between reading ability and the different type of strategies. Results show that there is significant correlation between the scores of reading comprehension and only one type of reading strategies, that is the global one, $p=.025$. This indicates that students use global strategies to get higher scores in reading. However, the study did not show significant correlation between reading ability and both the problem solving strategies as well as the support ones. Table 3 shows the results of the correlation analyses between reading ability and the three types of strategies.

Table 3. Correlation between reading ability and types of reading strategies.

Type of strategy	N.	Correlation (R)	Sig. (P)
Global	100	.317	.025
Problem solving	100	-.105	.453
Support	100	-.004	.978

However, the highest correlations were found between reading ability and five individual strategies; three of them are global and the other two are support ones. This means that reading ability requires the use of all types of strategies that reflect top-down and bottom up processing. Other researchers (Shang, 2011; Zhang & Seepho, 2013, Al-Sohbani, 2013; Chen & Intaraprasert, 2014) found a correlation between different types of reading strategies and reading ability.

Table 4. Shows the result of the correlation analyses of reading ability and the five individual strategies.

Table 4. Correlation between reading ability and the individual strategies.

Strategy	N.	Correlation (R)	Sig. (P)
I read the title and try to predict what the reading will be about.	100	.277	.050
I use my knowledge of the world to help me understand the text	100	.401	.004
I connect the reading to other materials I have read	100	.327	.020
I translate into my native language.(Arabic)	100	.280	.049
I try to understand the meaning of every word.	100	-.327	.020

Research question 4: What kind of strategies is used by both high and low proficient readers to guess the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary?

Vocabulary is a very important construct of reading ability. The results of the study show that the most used vocabulary guessing strategy is "I keep a record of the words I learn", (M=.40) and followed by, "I employ special techniques to help me remember the new words", (M=3.7). The other well known guessing strategies such as using context clues and word analysis were used less than these two ones although they are always encouraged and emphasized by teachers.

The results also show that high proficient students use guessing strategies less than low-proficient ones (M=2.22) and (M=2.35) respectively. This could be explained by saying that high proficient students have better knowledge of vocabulary than low proficient ones and that they do not need this strategy as much as the low-proficient ones.

Other strategies:

To explore any other strategies that students may have used, there was an open ended question to elicit their answers. Most of participants who responded to this question included translation activities. Several answers mentioned using translation into the native language (Arabic) of every unfamiliar vocabulary and write it on the passage. Some participants mentioned that they try to have a translation of the difficult sentences or even paragraphs and write the translation on the same sentence or paragraph in the article. This may reflect on teaching practices in high schools. Most teachers encourage students to resort to the Arabic meaning of vocabulary, and they themselves use a lot of Arabic in their classes.

Another group of participants mentioned reading the whole article several times, then trying to do the same with every paragraph. They said that this strategy helped them in identifying the main ideas of the article.

Conclusion

This study explored an interesting issue that plays an important role in EFL reading comprehension which is the use of reading strategies by college students. The results showed

that the most used type of strategies is the global strategies that are required for the top-down processing of the reading skill. It also showed that this type of strategies correlate significantly with the reading ability. This means that one could argue that training students on using such strategies should be an indispensable activity when teaching reading classes.

The study also indicated that although both high-proficient and low –proficient readers have the same order in using the types of strategies, global, problem solving and support, there are differences between them in terms of frequency. High-proficient readers employ the three types of strategies more frequently than low –proficient ones. This result suggests that students should be trained and encouraged to use all types of strategies more frequently.

Regarding vocabulary strategies, the study revealed that the most used strategies are related to keeping records of the new-learned vocabulary items and having special techniques to remember the word. Although teachers always emphasize using guessing strategies such as context clues and the analysis of words into stems and affixes, it turned out that they are not the strategies most used by students. One may safely propose that teachers should know the needs of their students and their learning styles and build on them to help students achieve the intended goals. However, further research on vocabulary and its relationship to reading is needed.

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Director of Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Palestine polytechnic University. Have PhD in TESOL & Teacher Ed. From the Ohio State University. Have been involve in EFL activities as a teacher, supervisor, trainer for more than 20 years. His research interest includes SLA, Reading & vocabulary in EFL. He published several articles in TEFL domain.

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Appendix A: Strategy Questionnaire.

Self Evaluation of Reading Strategies

Please rate the strategies that you have employed while reading the article on a scale from 1-4. One means that you have not used the strategy at all while 5 means that you relied heavily on it.

#	Strategy	1	2	3	4
1	I read the title and try to predict what the reading will be about.				
2	I use my knowledge of the world to help me understand the text.				
3	I read knowing that every text contains meaning and I try to understand it.				
4	I use illustrations to help me understand the text.				
5	I ask myself questions about the text.				
6	I continue if I am not successful.				
7	I identify and underline main ideas.				
8	I connect details with main ideas.				
9	I summarize the reading in my own words.				
10	I skip unnecessary words.				
11	I usually look up words in an English-English print dictionary.				
12	I usually look up words in an English-English on- line dictionary				

13	I look up words in an English-Arabic print dictionary.				
14	I look up words in an English-Arabic on- line dictionary.				
15	I connect the reading to other materials I have read.				
16	I translate into my native language.(Arabic)				
17	When reading I try to distinguish between facts and opinions.				
18	I try to make inferences about the author's attitude towards the issue presented.				
19	I read difficult sections more than once.				
20	I go back to the section that precedes the difficult section to help me understand.				
21	I try to focus on grammatical structures to help me understand the idea.				
22	I use text layout (punctuation, paragraphing, organization, etc.) to help me understand meaning.				
23	I use a variety of types of context clues				
24	When facing a difficult word, I continue to read in order to discover meaning.				
25	I try to guess meaning of a word by dividing it into smaller units (suffixes, stems, prefixes, etc.)				
26	I try to understand the meaning of every word.				
27	I keep a record of the words I learn.				
28	I employ special techniques to help me remember new words.				

Use the space provided to list any other strategies you normally use when reading texts or dealing with vocabulary. You may write in Arabic if you like.

