The difficulties that Preparatory Year students at University of Hail face when reading online materials

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Abstract:

    This study investigates the difficulties that face students when they read online materials among Preparatory Year students at University of Hail / KSA academic year 2018/2019 during Second Semester. The data gathered to address this topic came from multiple sources. First, to examine the students' responses to the open-ended question as to what they perceived as their reading difficulties when reading online for academic purposes, I calculated the percentage of their responses to the OSORS and investigated whether the reported data from both groups were found to be different from each other.

    In a later part, I discussed in greater detail each type of reading difficulty separately by means of their responses to the OSORS' open-ended question in conjunction with the other qualitative data, namely pre- and post-reading interviews, observations through think-aloud sessions, and self-reports of online reading strategies. Also, to ascertain inter rater reliability, the co-coder and I separately coded the data. Disagreements were resolved by discussion.

    The following points report different types of online reading difficulties that were reported by the OSORS respondents, the reported areas of difficulty could be separated into these emerging themes: (1)

vocabulary difficulties; (2) grammatical structure difficulties; (3) difficulties regarding the length and organization of the text; and (4) difficulties regarding the text evaluation.

Keywords: reading online materials, preparatory year students, University of Hail

INTRODUCTION:

As we all know because large amount of course books, references, and internet materials are written in English, reading is one of the main gateways to access knowledge. Academic reading or reading for learning purpose has become one of the most important demands placed on EFL postgraduate students. In order to fulfill their academic requirements, reading English academic text skillfully is especially necessary to them.

Most EFL adult learners when they further their study at a graduate level cannot read English academic text skillfully. Many teachers may even employ a variation of the grammar translation method to teach reading by asking their students to translate English reading passages into EFL. Their assumption is that EFL students are weak in English because they have a limited vocabulary. Thus, the only way they can read English is to translate English words into Arabic first. Having been taught to read in this way, many Arabic EFL adult learners are still weak in both decoding and comprehension. According to Samuels (1994), fluent reading entails heavy demands on the reader's attention and relies on the automatic processes of decoding and comprehension. A lack of both decoding and comprehension skills may have limited the automatic processes among EFL adult learners.

Based on the understanding that skillful readers display a higher degree of reading strategy awareness, reading strategy instruction has become highly recognized among EFL teachers. Research has suggested that reading strategies used by proficient readers can be taught to EFL learners, so EFL learners should be trained to acquire and develop reading strategies (Anderson, 2004). As training EFL learners to use certain reading strategies will improve

their reading skills and help them to become skillful EFL readers, fostering reading strategies among EFL adult learners to deal with English academic text skillfully should be the goal for all EFL reading classes.

STATEMENT OF THE STUDY PROBLEM:
University of Hail in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia adopts English as a medium of instruction in Tracks of applied medical sciences and engineering. The researcher through the remarks which are derived from the English language teaching at preparatory year thinks that there are many difficulties (problems) faced students when reading online texts.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:
This study aimed to know types of difficulties that reported and encountered when reading academic texts online.

QUESTION OF THE STUDY:
What type of difficulties do students report when they read academic text online?

HYPOTHESIS OF THE STUDY:
The students face many difficulties when they read academic texts online.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:
This paper is working to identify what problems & difficulties that face the students implement when they read online in English for academic purposes. The findings obtained from this study could be used as a guideline for teachers to figure better understand several types of difficulties their students encounter during the online reading process so that they can address them accordingly. Students themselves can also benefit from the findings of this study by reflecting on their own reading experience and realizing some of the hindering factors which impede their reading performance. They can learn more about the effectiveness of reading strategies proficient readers use and apply them to relieve comprehension difficulties.

METHODOLOGY:

In this study, several instruments and approaches will use to collect data: 1) the Online Survey of Reading Strategies (OSORS), 2)TOEFL reading proficiency test scores, 3) Internet use questionnaire, 4) pre- and post-reading interviews, 5) observations through think-aloud sessions, and 6) self-report of online reading strategies.

LIMITS OF THE STUDY

This study is limited to students of the preparatory year at University of Hail (academic year 2018 – 2019- Second semester).

LITERATURE REVIEW:

As one of the most significant technological revolutions in history, the Internet has become a powerful new means of communicacz xtion, information retrieval, transaction processing, and problem solving (Friedman, 2005). In the realm of reading, this technology has enormous potential to make fundamental changes in the way we read on a daily basis. Research indicates that the online reading process is not isomorphic with the offline reading process, and thus proficient readers offline are not necessarily proficient readers online (Coiro & Dobler, 2007; Henry, 2006).

A New Literacies Perspective In an attempt to capture the nature of online literacy, many have begun to use the terms new literacies, which means in fact many different things to many different people. The various definitions of new literacies range from social practices (Street, 1999) or new Discourses (Gee,2003) that emerge with new technologies to new semiotic or cultural contexts made possible by new technologies (Kress, 2004; Lemke, 2002). While multiple perspectives associated with the term new literacies differ from one another, the most recent review (Coiro et al., 2008) concludes that most share a set of common assumptions: (1) new literacies include the new skills, strategies, dispositions, and social practices that are required by new technologies for information and communication; (2) new literacies are central to full participation in a global community; (3) new literacies regularly change as their defining technologies change; and (4) new literacies are multifaceted and our understanding of them benefits from multiple points of view.

For this research, I would like to conceptualize my work within a new literacies theory of online reading comprehension (Castek et al., 2007; Leu et al., 2004). More specifically, to enrich my understanding of online reading, I subscribe to the theoretical work which argues that the nature of literacy is rapidly changing as new technologies emerge (Alexander & Jetton, 2000; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Within this perspective, Leu et al. identify five practices that take place during online reading process: (1) identifying important questions; (2) locating information; (3) critically evaluating information; (4) synthesizing information; and (5) communicating information. Further, they posit that while the aforementioned skills appear to overlap with offline reading practices, traditional reading skills are not sufficient to comprehend online information on the Internet.

Reading Strategy Assessment:

Reading researchers have adopted qualitative and quantitative assessment methodologies to explore how effective strategies are for learning. While every effort has been made to document how learners use strategies, Chamot (2007) argued that using strategies, which are mental processes, cannot be observed. Hence, researchers have relied, to a large extent, on self-reporting verbalization. Despite their lack of veridicality and imperfection, self-reported data still provide useful information about internal cognitive processing (Afflerbach, 2000). Chamot further concluded that self-report may be the single best way to discover learners" mental processing.

In fact, there is a wide spectrum of methods researchers can employ to examine; however, each assessment technique has its own appropriate uses and limitations. Robson (1993) emphasized that whatever method a researcher adopts, he or she must take the main purpose of the study into consideration.

In this section, the following main research methods and procedures used to gather data on reading strategies are discussed: (1) written questionnaires; (2) oral interviews; (3) thinkaloud protocols; and (4) journals.

   a. **Written Questionnaires:** As a self-report method, questionnaires have become the most frequently and widely used measurement in learning strategy research (Chamot, 2007). They are used to elicit learner responses to a set of

questions; thus, it is imperative that the researcher make a decision on question format and research procedures (Cohen & Scott, 1996). Oxford and Crookall (1989) explained that written questionnaires usually cover a broad range of language learning strategies and are typically structured and objective in nature. Put differently, researchers provide little or no freedom to questionnaire respondents who are given limited choice answers.

Question items can range from those requiring "yes" or "no" responses or frequency indication, such as Likert scales to less structured or open-ended questions which ask respondents to describe their use of language learning strategies, for instance. Nunan (1992) posited that written questionnaires allow researchers to collect data which are more amenable to quantification than those gathered from such field notes as participant observing journals or the transcripts of oral language.

While written questionnaires have been proven to be effective for various research purposes, they have also been criticized due to some limitations. This type of data appears to be superficial. Also, there is very little or no examination of whether the responses are honest and serious. Often times, researchers take the view that, although analysis may be easy, interpretation of questionnaire data may be time-consuming as well as problematic (Robson, 1993).

b. **Oral Interviews:** Apart from questionnaires which require learners to write down their responses, researchers can conduct oral interviews in which learners describe what language learning strategies they use and how they use them. Ellis (1994) clarified that a student needs to give retrospective accounts of learning strategies he or she has utilized, which is also considered an applicable elicitation technique.

Characterized by their degree of formality, interviews can be placed along a continuum ranging from unstructured through semi-structured to structured (Nunan, 1992). Regardless of their type, interviews offer personalized information and profound insights into how learners use language learning strategies.

An unstructured interview, which the interviewer exercises little or no control over, is directed by the interviewee's responses. During a semi-structured interview, the interviewer asks a limited set

of questions. This type of interview is flexible enough to allow the interviewer to generate new questions according to the direction of the interview. In a structured interview, the interviewer ensures that the interviewee is presented with a list of predetermined questions.

Nunan further claimed that, due to its flexibility the semi-structured interview appears to be the most popular among researchers, particularly those who work within an interpretative research tradition.

As per its limitations, Robson (1993) commented that this specific type of interview calls for the interviewer's skill and experience. Moreover, it has been criticized for its lack of standardization, biases that are difficult to eliminate, and the time-consuming nature of the interview.

c. **Think-aloud Protocols:** A think-aloud protocol is defined as:
> *"a moment-by-moment description which an individual gives his or her own thoughts and behaviors during the performance of a particular task" (Gerloff, 1987, p. 137).*

In attempts to report detailed observation of the learners" use of language learning strategies, researchers conduct their studies by means of the think-aloud procedures. They believe that, through this method, learners can report what is in their working memory (Ericsson & Simon, 1993; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). Kuusela and Paul (2000) added that reporting which happens concurrently while performing a task offers more and better information than reporting what they did retrospectively.

Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995) advocated for think-aloud protocols by indicating that they provide the most detailed information on how students implement language learning strategies; nevertheless, these protocols are typically used only on a one-to-one basis. Even though the think-aloud procedure, when compared with silent conditions, increases the time for undertaking the task, it does not affect the sequence of thoughts (Ericsson & Simon, 1993). In relation to their limitations, Oxford and Burry-Stock further commented that they not only take a great deal of time but also reflect strategies which are task-specific only.

d. **Journals:** Bailey (1990) defined a diary as:

> *"a first-person account of a language learning or teaching experience, documented through regular, candid entries in a personal journal" (p. 215).*

Reflective journals or diaries have been increasingly employed as a research tool (Cohen & Scott, 1996). They pointed out that journal entries are learner-generated and usually unstructured; thus, a wide range of themes and issues may emerge from these documents. For instance, learners may choose to report cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies they use to deal with language learning tasks on a daily basis. O'Rourke (1998) proposed that writing reflectively about what students learned benefits both teachers who can identify students' learning process and students who develop their critical thinking skills and professional growth. However, as Rubin (2003) remarked, teachers and researchers alike may find that students have difficulty writing reflectively. Rather than reflect on what they had learned, some students simply used journals to keep detailed records of what they did. Further, because of their familiarity with writing descriptively, some students may have difficulty writing reflectively. Thus, Grenner (1989) suggested that it is a wise idea to avoid having students write a journal as an open-ended assignment.

SUBJECT:

A total of 98 Preparatory Year students at University of Hail who completed the OSORS provided responses to the open-ended question. Tshe data were included for 60 and 38 students in the proficient group and less proficient group, respectively. The respondents in both groups were diverse in terms of age, majors, and English proficiency. For the purpose of this research, students with grades of A, B+, and B were categorized as proficient readers whereas those with grades of C+, C, D+, and D belonged to the less proficient reader group.

INSTRUMENTS:

The researcher calculated the responses by using OSORS, pre- and post-reading interviews, Observation through think aloud sessions and Self-report of online reading strategies.

PROCEDURES:

The researcher starts the process of collecting the data for this study four weeks after the beginning of the second semester to ensure that the whole students have built a clear view and ideas about the online materials.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS:

The following section reports the data collection techniques and describes how data were analyzed. As stated above, to yield reliability in the research study, the various sources of data include the Online Survey of Reading Strategies (OSORS), TOEFL reading proficiency test scores, Internet use questionnaires, pre- and post-reading interviews, observations through think-aloud sessions, and self-reports of online reading strategies.

The research hypothesis explored different types of difficulties that were both reported and encountered by the participants in this study. The data gathered to address this question came from multiple sources. First, based on the OSORS, I examined the students' responses to the open-ended question as to what they perceived as their reading difficulties when reading online for academic purposes. Other sources of data include: (1) pre- and post-reading interviews; (2) observations through think-aloud sessions; and (3) self-reports of online reading strategies.

To examine the students' difficulties reported and encountered during online reading for academic purposes, I first calculated the percentage of their responses to the OSORS and investigated whether the reported data from both groups were found to be different from each other. In a later part, I discussed each of the types of difficulty separately by means of their responses to the OSORS' open-ended question in conjunction with the other qualitative data from the students' actual reading tasks.

A total of 98 students who completed the OSORS provided responses to the open-ended question. Because they did not write down their responses to this question, eight students in the proficient group and five students in the less proficient group were excluded from the data analysis. Therefore, the data were included for 60 and 38 students in the proficient group and less proficient group, respectively. The respondents in both groups were diverse in terms of

age, majors, and English proficiency. For the purpose of this research, students with grades of A, B+, and B were categorized as proficient readers whereas those with grades of C+, C, D+, and D belonged to the less proficient reader group.

The following section reports different types of online reading difficulties that were reported by the OSORS respondents. As shown in each figure, the reported areas of difficulty could be separated into these emerging themes: (1) vocabulary difficulties; (2) grammatical structure difficulties; (3) difficulties regarding the length and organization of the text; and (4) difficulties regarding the text evaluation. Figure 4.1 below displays the percentage in each of the four areas of difficulty reported on the OSORS by all respondents in the study.
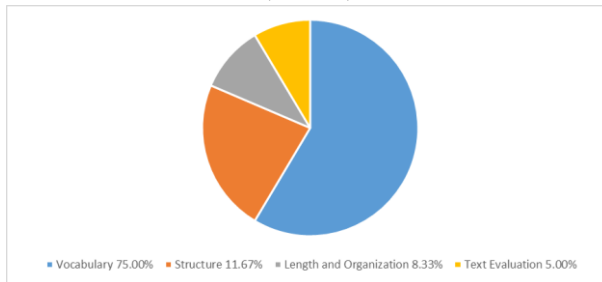
Figure 4.1: Types of Difficulties Reported by All Students (N = 98)
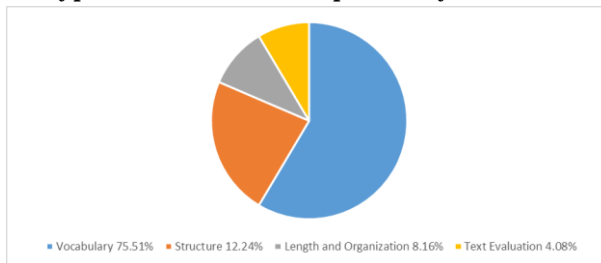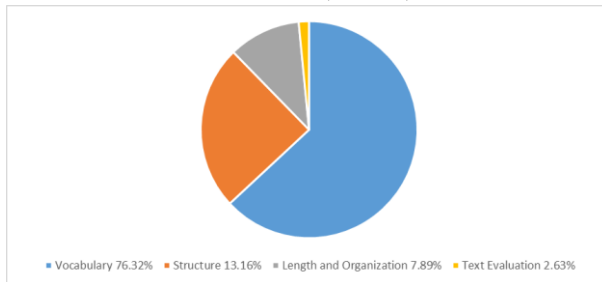

Indicated in Figure 4.1, the most frequently reported area of online reading difficulty is vocabulary difficulties (75.51%). A total of 74 students regarded their limited vocabulary knowledge as the major problem for reading online for academic purposes. Evidently, this specific type of difficulty was much more frequently reported than the other areas. Altogether, twelve students considered grammatical structures their main obstacle to reading comprehension (12.24%). In addition to these two areas, difficulties related to the length and organization of the text and those related to the text evaluation were also reported by eight (8.16%) and four (4.08%) students, respectively. Figure 4.1 above demonstrates the data from all students who responded to the OSORS' open-ended question (N = 98). To gain further insights into similarities and differences in relation to the reading difficulties reported by the two groups of students, Figure 4.2 and 4.3 below begin to look specifically at the percentage in the

reported areas of online reading difficulties among the proficient students and less proficient students, respectively. As stated earlier, due to some missing data, the analyzed data for this research question were collected from 60 students in the former group and 38 students in the latter group.

Figure 4.2: Types of Difficulties Reported by the Proficient Students (N = 60)

Vocabulary 75.00%   Structure 11.67%   Length and Organization 8.33%   Text Evaluation 5.00%

Figure 4.3: Types of Difficulties Reported by the Less Proficient Students (N = 38)

Vocabulary 76.32%   Structure 13.16%   Length and Organization 7.89%   Text Evaluation 2.63%

Taking into account the data revealed in Figure 4.2 and 4.3 above, it was found that both groups' reported reading difficulties were relatively similar to each other. First of all, the majority of students – 45 (75%) proficient students and 29 (76.32%) less proficient students – had difficulty with vocabulary when they academically read online in English. Within each group, grammatical structure difficulties were also reported by seven (11.67%) proficient students and five (13.16%) less proficient students as a major hindrance to reading comprehension. Among the rest of the students in each group, five (8.33%) proficient students and three (7.89%) less proficient students reported struggling with the length and organization of the text. Also,

three (5%) students in the former group and one (2.63%) student in the latter group viewed text evaluation as their difficulty during online reading.

In order to provide a clearer picture of the students' perceived online reading difficulties, the percentages in each of the four areas reported on the OSORS by proficient and less proficient students were summarized in Figure 4.4 below.

Figure 4.4: Differences in Reported Reading Difficulties between Both Groups of Students
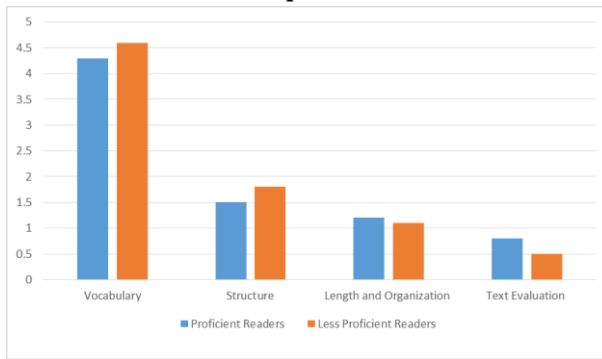
According to the graph above, the perceived types of difficulty among both proficient and less proficient students in this study were ranked in the same order (i.e., vocabulary difficulties, grammatical structure difficulties, difficulties regarding the length and organization of the text, and difficulties regarding the text evaluation). Additionally, the values of percentages as indicated in Figure 4.4 were strikingly similar. In other words, the proficient and less proficient students in this study encountered these areas of difficulty to a very similar extent when they read online in English for academic purposes.

FINDINGS:

1. Most of the students need to orchestrate strategy use to cope with different reading demands, particularly the struggling ones, relied on a fixed set of reading strategies they had been accustomed to regardless of text difficulty level.

2. The students, regardless of their language proficiency, used their schema or background knowledge frequently when reading online.

3. Students' vocabulary knowledge relates strongly to their reading comprehension and academic success. Due to the number and complexity of the English words students were confronted with, the skilled and less skilled readers in this study regarded vocabulary as their greatest concern when they read in English on the Internet.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Based on the finding of the study, the researcher recommends the following:

1. Teachers can model and teach to students so as to help them figure out the meaning of unknown words on their own, they should provide an effective word-learning strategies such as: the efficient use of the dictionary, the use of word parts (prefixes, suffixes, and roots) to unlock a word's meaning and the use of context clues.

2. Teachers should introduce their students to a list of helpful online resources in order to deal with vocabulary difficulty because technical terms have one or more specific meanings that are not necessarily the same as those in common use. Also they should encourage students to pay attention to full-sentence examples showing how idioms are really used so that they not only understand these expressions but also use them with confidence.

3. Teachers should help students to develop strategies for critically evaluating information they encounter on the Internet. During a class session, teachers can have students work individually or in groups to discuss some possible ways in which they evaluate websites they find on the Internet and report to the whole group. Teachers then explain why students need these skills for online reading.

CONCLUSION:

This paper reported the reading difficulties that the students reported on the OSORS and encountered in their think-aloud and independent reading tasks. In conclusion, the reported areas of difficulty could be separated into the following themes: (1) vocabulary difficulties; (2) grammatical structure difficulties; (3) difficulties regarding the length

and organization of the text; and (4) difficulties regarding the text evaluation.

The data from multiples sources revealed that the types of difficulty were ranked in the same order. They mentioned vocabulary difficulties most frequently and difficulties regarding the text evaluation least frequently. In other words, the proficient and less proficient students in this study both reported and encountered these areas of difficulty to a very similar extent when they read online in English for academic purposes.

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