

*The Alleviation of Reading
Comprehension Problems of
ESP Arab Students:
A Case Study*

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Abstract

In this study, the researcher intended to investigate the reading comprehension problems of Jordanian university students both in Arabic and in English and to pinpoint the most important areas of difficulty that might influence their reading both on the fluency level (speed) and the efficiency level. Therefore the student's performance on four reading comprehension passages (two in Arabic and two in English) was compared and the fluency (speed) was checked against the average speed of two groups: group one consisted of native speakers of the language concerned, and group two consisted of three judges who estimated the time required by students to finish the tasks.

The findings of the research proved that the subjects of the experiment (a random sample of 45 first-year students) were categorized as slow readers in comparison with both native speakers of English and Arabic and with the judges estimated time. They needed 219% of the time required to finish the tasks by native speakers (postgraduates) and 133.3% of the time estimated by the judges. According to the researcher's observations and discussions with the students, one of the main reasons responsible for this type of weakness is the students' habit of reading 'word by word' despite the purpose of reading stated in the tasks.

Another important finding is that students' linguistic competence did not play a significant role in differentiating between the students' reading comprehension ability. In other words, the achievement of the linguistically less experienced group (G-1) and the more experienced group (G-2) did not differ significantly. Consequently, the researcher would claim that most of the students' problems are reading problems rather than linguistic problems. But there is one crucial reservation: the readers must have at least passed the threshold in the FL. Generally speaking, students' interaction with the texts, especially texts given to test students' ability to locate specific information, was not adequate.

Finally, the present research asserts to a large extent the claims of some researchers that good reading habits in the native language if transferred to the FL can positively affect the readers' efficiency in that FL and vice-versa.

1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is one of the most important skills needed by post-secondary-school students especially those whose field of specialization requires the use of English as a language of instruction and who are dealing with English as the Language of the majority of their textbooks and references.

Reading comprehension problems can be attributed to a number of factors which can be studied separately or collectively as integrated factors. Our experience in the field of teaching EFL at the University level has shown that many students fail to learn to read effectively in a foreign language. They read with less understanding than expected; and they also read much slower than in their mother tongue. It has also been found that although many students understand the words and structures of the text, they are unable to understand what they read in the FL.

Some researchers in this field, e.g. Jolly (1978), claim that success in reading in a FL depends crucially on one's first language reading ability rather than upon the student's level of English. He asserts that reading in a FL requires the transference of old skills not the learning of new ones. Moreover, Coady (1979) asserts that reading in a foreign language is a reading problem rather than a language problem. Goodman, on the otherhand, claims that the reading process will be much the same for all languages.

Yoria (1971) takes a contrary view. He claims that reading problems are due largely to imperfect knowledge of the foreign language (L2) and to native language interference in the reading process.

2. The Purpose of the Study:

The present research attempts to explore areas of difficulty facing Jordanian University students in reading comprehension both in Arabic (their native language) and in English (their only foreign language) both on the fluency level (speed) and the accuracy level. For this purpose two main types of reading were studied: reading for general information and reading for specific information. Another important aim of the study is the investigation of reading strategies of Arab students. Generally speaking, the research addresses itself to two main issues:

1. Whether or not Jordanian Arab students are fluent readers.
2. Whether or not their problems are due to linguistic difficulties of to reading difficulties

The final aim of the study is to suggest some guidelines for suitable reading materials in the light of the results of the research.

3. Description

The subjects of this case study were first year University students taking Eng. III

and II2¹ as obligatory University requirements. They had all studied English at school for at least 8 years. The subjects were divided into two groups.² The first group consisted of 20 students enrolled in course III which is the first English course they take at the University. The second group consisted of 25 students enrolled in course II2 which is their second English course at the University level.

Each group was given 4 reading comprehension passages which were selected specially to suit their linguistic and educational levels. A set of questions was especially designed for each passage in the light of the objectives of the research as stated above. Then both the passages and questions were given to six experts in the field of applied linguistics: 3 native speakers of English and 3 native speakers of Arabic.

These judges were asked to read the passages and answer the questions, and then record the time they required to complete the tasks. Then they were asked to estimate the time needed to complete the tasks if these passages were to be given to students

3.1 The Reading Passages

The judges reported that the passages selected were suitable for the two groups of students chosen as our subjects both in terms of the degree of difficulty and the subject matter. They also recommended some changes in the types of questions designed for these passages which dealt with equally specified aspects of reading comprehension.

There were four reading passages: two passages in Arabic (A1 and A2) and two in English (E1 and E2). A1 and E1 were given to explore the students' ability to read for general information and to measure their speed in reading both in Arabic and in English. Therefore five pre-reading questions were written for each passage and students were asked to read the questions and understand them before they read the passage.

The questions designed for these two passages were of the following types:

1. Identifying differences/ similarities.
2. Identifying important points related to a general topic or subtopic.
3. Identifying general opinions.
4. Identifying causes and effects.
5. Identifying suggestions or recommendation given by the writer.

The questions were designed to be simple, direct and in order according to the layout of the article since the main purpose of this test was to measure students' reading speed and to identify the reading strategies they use to deal with this type of test.³

The other two passages, A2 and E2 (approximate length 1600 words) were in-

tended to investigate the students accuracy in answering questions requiring specific information and interaction with the text. Moreover, it was intended to measure students reading speed and to explore their methods of dealing with more complex tasks and texts. For this reason, students were asked to read the passage carefully but as quickly as possible, as if they were going to have an exam on this passage the following day. Then they were asked to pick up the questions as soon as they had finished the reading.

The questions designed for these two passages were of the following types:

1. Understanding classification and exemplification.
2. Making specific deductions.
3. Identifying conclusions and suggestions .
4. Understanding reference words.
5. Understanding reference phrases.
6. Deducing specific effects for given causes.
7. Realizing ideational/logical relationships.
8. Matching ideational headings with reference to paragraphs or subsections.
9. Summarizing the content of a paragraph or sub-section.

4. Discussion of Results

4. 1 Students reading speed:

The calculation of time required by students to read each passage and answer the questions related to it showed all subjects to be slow readers. An examination of Tables 1 and 2 shows that students required much more time to finish the tasks than the average time estimated by the judges and the time required by native speakers. Concerning the first English passage (reading for general information), the students required 37% more time than the originally estimated time by the judges and 206% of the time required by native speakers of English. Moreover, they needed 30% more time to complete E2 (reading for specific information), 43% more time to complete A1 and 27.5% more time to complete A 2. This shows clearly that those students are slow readers both in their L1 and L2. The results show that most of the subjects do not differentiate between types of reading and the related strategies which they must use. Whether the stated purpose required a skimming strategy, as in E1 and A1 or a type of related reading strategy (searching for specific information), as in E2 and A2, the students followed one single procedure which is the reading of text word by word. It could be concluded that these students have not established the required reading habits suitable for academic studies neither in their native language nor in their foreign language.

Table 1

Time needed to complete the tasks by Native Speakers, judges and students.

Number of passage	Time Needed by NS	Time estimated by judges	Time needed by students		
			G1	G2	average%
E.1	17	38	54	50	52
E.2	30	50	67	63	65
A.1	18	38	40	40	40
A.2	30	40	51	51	51
Total	95	156	212	204	208

Table 2

Time needed by students compared with times estimated by judges in percentage

Number of passage	Time Needed estimated by judges	Average time needed by students	
		average in minutes	%
E1 (General information)	38	52	137
E2 (Specific information)	50	56	130
A1 (General information)	28	40	145
A2 (Specific information)	40	51	127.5
	156	208	133.3

4.2 — Students Reading Efficiency:

In measuring students' efficiency in reading comprehension, it was intended to point out areas of difficulty faced by Arab students in comprehending written texts both in Arabic and in English. In addition, it was hoped to measure their general ability in understanding questions and in locating related information.

For these reasons, two reading texts were selected, one in Arabic (A2) and one

in English (E2), and special questions were written to be answered from each text according to different types of tasks (see 3. 1 above). The results of the study (as specified in Tables 3,4,5, and 6) reveal some interesting points. First of all, although the difference in fluency (speed) between group one and group two was marginal, there were some important differences on the efficiency level. Group 2 was expected to achieve better results on at least the two English passages because students in G2 (studying course 112 now) have already studied course 111 which concentrates on basic skills, in addition to some training in reading comprehension and writing. Consequently, it was predicted that G2 would achieve better results because their linguistic competence is supposed to be more adequate than that of G1 who have not studied course 111 yet. However, to the researcher's surprise, G2 achieved more or less the same results as G1. In fact, the average of G1 was a little bit higher than that of G2 (see Table 5). Moreover, although G2 achieved higher scores on E2, the difference was not significant (G1: 33%, 41%) (see Table 6). In any case, the achievement of both groups on E1 and E2 was not satisfactory. The average score of both groups on E1 was 66.7% and their average score on E2 was 37%.

A second important point is related to students' achievement on A1 and A2. Although it was expected that both groups would achieve higher scores on the Arabic texts than the English ones, the researcher was surprised (if not disappointed) by what was achieved. Taking the first purpose of the research (reading for general information) into consideration, the average scores of both groups on E1 and A1 did not differ very largely (compare E1 65.4% A1 75.5%). As for the second purpose of the study, checking students ability to read for specific information, both groups achieved lower scores on both E2 (37%) and A2 (55%).

The general conclusion which can be deduced from the previous discussion is that these students were not good readers either in their native language or in the foreign language. More specific conclusions can also be arrived at in relation to reading problems of the subjects with reference to the different types of skills tested here.

Table 3:

Students achievement of Arabic 1
(Reading Arabic for general information. Raw score out of 10)

Groups	Questions					Average
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	
group 1	9.1	8.8	8.2	6.7	6	7.3
group 2	8.6	8.6	8.6	5	8.2	7.8
Average	8.8	8.7	8.4	5.8	7.1	7.55

Table 4:

Students achievement on A2 (Reading Arabic for specific information. Raw score out of 10).

Groups	Questions									Average
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	
group 1	6	7	3	5	5	8	5	4.5	3	5.4
group 2	6.6	8.3	7.2	4.4	7.2	6.1	2.8	3.6	5.5	5.7
Average	6.3	7.7	5.1	6.1	4.7	7.5	3.9	4.1	4.25	5.5

Table 5:

Students achievement of Arabic E1
(Reading English for general information). (Raw score out of 10)

Groups	Questions					Average
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	
group 1	5.5	6.2	8	5.7	8.3	6.74
group 2	4.6	6.8	7.3	6.4	7	6.44
Average	5	6.5	7.7	6	7.7	6.59

Table 6:

Students achievement on E2.
(Reading English for specific information) (Raw score out of 10).

Groups	Questions									Average
Group No.	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	
Group 1	4	4.5	2	5	2.5	2	2.5	5.2	1.8	3.3
Group 2	4	5.1	2.6	5	3.8	3.6	3.4	6	2.3	4.1
Average	4	4.8	2.3	5	3.2	2.8	2.9	5.6	2	3.7

5. Specific areas of weaknesses

In addition to the general weakness the students demonstrated on the four

types of tasks discussed above, the data revealed a number of difficulties that faced them in reading comprehension. In this research specific areas of difficulty are going to be grouped under two main categories according to the purposes of the tasks; difficulties related to reading for general information and difficulties related to reading for specific information.

5.1 - Areas of difficulty related to reading for general information (these are discussed in relation to E1 and A1) (see section 3.1) In average, both groups did not perform adequately with regards to question 1,2 and 4. In other words, most students were not able to point out differences and similarities between concepts described or discussed, they were not able to understand cause and effect relationships and finally they were not able to list points of information related to the same idea.

5.2 - Areas of difficulty related to reading for specific information (with reference to E2 and A2):

The overall achievement of both groups on this test was much lower than the first test (see Tables 4 and 6). While the average score of both groups on E1 and A1 was 70.7% their average score on E2 and A2 was only 46%. Students demonstrated obvious weakness in almost all areas tested especially task types 3,5,6,7,8, and 9 (see Tables 4 and 6 and section 3). In other words they were especially weak in extracting conclusions and understanding suggestion; understanding relationships between words and phrases and their reference, understanding cause and effect relationships, realizing logical relationships, and in identifying the topic of a paragraph and summarizing.

5.3 — Comparing students' performance in both languages:

In order to make the study more conclusive and to arrive at more comprehensive conclusions, students' performance in Arabic (A1 and A2) on one hand, should be compared with their performance in English (E1 and E2) on the other hand. When calculating their average performance in each language; we found that it was 65.3% in Arabic, while in English it was only 51.2%.

Generally speaking, the figures show that students' achievement in English was much lower than that in Arabic. Nevertheless, as university students, their performance in Arabic (their native language) was not satisfactory. This leads the conclusion that our students' problem was a reading problem rather than a linguistic problem.

6. Conclusion

Having discussed the students weakness in reading comprehension, both on the fluency level and the efficiency level, I would like to point some of the most important factors underlying these weaknesses.

First of all, it has been found that those two groups of students have not yet developed good reading habits in their native language, Arabic. Therefore, positive transfer to the FL is very unlikely to occur. Secondly, both groups employed the same strategy, reading word by word, in both languages and for all reading purposes. Thirdly, both groups demonstrated special weakness in understanding discourse relationships and in comprehending the gist of some sections or parts of the texts. Fourthly, the researcher's discussion with students revealed that most of them depend to a large extent on their memories to recall information rather than using other sub-strategies such as note-taking. This was a main factor in reducing the students speed to finish the tasks because they had to reread the passages of even the whole text when attempting to answer the questions. Fifthly, the research indicated that in the absence of good reading habits or strategies, the linguistic competence of the learner plays minor role in differentiating between the reading comprehension ability of the two groups. In other words, the achievement of the linguistically less experienced group (G1) and the more experienced group (G2) did not differ significantly with reference to all types of reading under examination. Therefore we are led to conclude that most of the students problems are likely to be reading problems rather than language problems.

7. Recommendation and Suggestions

Having described the situation of E A P Jordanian readers and having attempted to diagnose to a considerable extent the type of problems they face and the type of strategies they already employ both in their native language and in the foreign language (English), I would like to suggest the following in order to help teachers and material designers benefit from the results of the present research to be able to help students overcome their reading problems.

A : Assumptions

1) Reading strategies

- a. First year University are likely to be slow readers because they employ a word-by-word style of reading.
- b. They depend to a large extent on their memories to store information rather than on note-taking, summarizing or other means of recording information.

2) Required types of reading:

- a. Students need to be trained to become search readers, which requires them to be highly sophisticated in their way of processing information given in the text.
- b. Moreover, they need to develop appropriate ways of evaluating and summarizing texts.

3) Types of weaknesses:

Students demonstrated special weakness in the following areas:

- a. Understanding relationships between sentences.
- b. Understanding coherent and cohesive relationships e.g. reference words and phrases.
- c. Making relationships between pieces of information and ideas given in different parts of the text.
- d. Drawing conclusions and understanding writers inferences, implications and attitudes.
- e. Using appropriate techniques of reading according to the purpose of the reading (or the tasks stated).

B. Aims of proposed reading comprehension syllabus:

- 1 - To help students differentiate between different purposes of reading and different types of reading strategies e.g.:
 - a. Reading for specific and general information.
 - b. Reading for relevant information.
 - c. Reading to identify main ideas.
 - d. Interpreting.
 - e. Summarizing.
 - 2 - To help students develop certain useful reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, search reading etc.
 - 3 - To help students develop their abilities of deducing meanings of words or phrases in context.
 - 4 - To help students understand suggestions, opinions, conclusions and attitudes.
 - 5 - To help students develop their abilities to predict and expect information which might be dealt with in the text.
 - 6 - To help students realise how academic writers present their ideas, arguments and discussions with special reference to the following functions:
 - a. Sequencing
 - b. Defining (types of definition: real definition and nominal definition).
 - c. Comparing and contrasting.
 - d. exemplifying
 - e. confirming
 - f. expressing cause and effect
 - g. describing (form, substance, shape, structure, properties, functions, methods, techniques, equipment).
 - h. generalizing (degrees of generality)
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- i. classifying
 - j. hypothesizing
- 7 - To help students realize and understand how the following functions are expressed in the language concerned:
- a. expressing probability
 - b. expressing possibility
 - c. expressing certainty
 - d. expressing frequency
 - e. expressing quantity
 - f. expressing quality
- 8 - To help students build up an adequate discourse sensitivity and adequate linguistic and lexical competence.

C . General Criteria

- 1 - Texts should be graded both on the level of difficulty and length.
- 2 - Texts must be related to students' field of specialization. The following areas should be taken into account:
- a. The reader's background
 - b. The role of general knowledge.
 - c. Utilization of familiar concepts.
 - d. The individual differences in learning between successful and less successful learners.
- 3 - Texts should be interesting and motivating.
- 4 - Reading tasks should vary and they must encourage students to interact positively with the text.
- 5 - Texts and tasks should be designed in such a way that reading is shown to be an integrated process which demands the development of more than one skill: lexical syntactic, rhetorical and global skills that can help develop communicative competence.

NOTES:

- 1. These are two intermediate science oriented courses aiming at improving students' use of English for academic purposes. E 112 is more advanced than E 111.
 - 2. The objective of dividing the subjects into two groups, one group from each course, was to check whether or not students' Linguistic competence plays a significant role in their reading comprehension performance.
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3. In order to minimize the effect of slow writing of some students, the questions were designed to require short, direct and sequenced information.

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