



A Survey of the Causes of Reading Difficulty of the Iranian EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT This survey investigated the causes of the reading difficulty in reading comprehension of the Iranian EFL learners. The study has classified the causes of the reading problems into three groups of 1. Lack of the application of reading comprehension strategies to the EFL reading 2. Complicated syntax and structure in new text 3. Inadequate linguistic competence of the EFL learners for practicing reading skills.

Introduction

Many EFL students struggle when they read course materials required in class and it takes time for many of them to overcome the difficulties (Zhang, 2001, in Sitthitikul, 2007). Zahedi and Dorrimanesh (2008) point out that "in general, there is little strategy training taking place at present, especially for EFL students, and the training that is taking place is blind training" (p.172).

Mehrpour, Sadighi and Bagheri's (2012) study revealed that the majority of Iranian EFL were not familiar with the concept of strategy and its application in both L1 and L2. "A linguistic threshold exists which must be crossed before first-language reading ability can transfer to second-language reading contexts" (Alderson, 2000, p. 39). Therefore, reading strategies learned in EFL students' L1 may not be transferred to EFL students' foreign language learning processes.

Molavi vardanjanis (2013) study revealed that Iranian EFL learners' poor English ability was mostly due to poor foundational knowledge (45%), inefficient ways of learning (35%), and weak motivation (17%). The factors contributing to reading comprehension problems in Iranian EFL learners have been grouped here into three main categories:

1. Lack of the application of reading comprehension strategies to EFL reading

"Comprehension strategies are effective working hypothesis about the correct meaning and structure of the text" (Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983, p. 11). Molavi vardanjanis (2013) study revealed that around 70% of the teachers in her study do not teach strategies in their classes. When EFL readers do not use reading strategies, they are not able to monitor their progress in comprehension of the text.

Fan (2009), Zahedi and Dorrimanesh (2008) claim there has been little strategy reading training for EFL students. Reading activities in EFL classes are mostly stressing on learning new words or linguistic structures which is usually conducted by the teachers and makes learners less motivated and involved and as a result identifies a submissive role for the EFL learners in reading sessions (Ebrahimi & Rahim, 2013). Researchers such as (Aghaie & Zhang, 2012; Zhang & Zhang, 2011) emphasize that reading comprehension strategies should be taught explicitly in EFL / ESL classes and should be applied by the readers as they read a text. Explicit instruction of reading strategies can enhance learners' consciousness about how they use

strategies and what strategies they need to use during the reading process (Wright & Brown, 2007; Chalak & Nasr Esfahani, 2012) and helps learners to build a positive attitude towards reading.

1. a. Lack of schema activation by the teachers in reading classes

'Prior knowledge plays a supportive role in comprehending a written message' (Keshavarz, Atai, & Ahmadi, 2007). Maghsoudi (2012) believes that "the schemata needed for reading comprehension in a second language are often non-existent or contain inaccurate information in L2 settings" (p. 197). Yin (1985) affirms that despite of the very important role of schema activation, it is often neglected in analysis of reading texts. When there is a breakdown in understanding a text two factors contribute to the situation, either the text does not have enough clues to let the reader to employ his top-down strategies to extract meaning, or the reader does not own the proper schema regarding the subject of the text. As a result, in both cases the EFL/ESL readers have to face the challenge of texts which usually are overloaded with materials and contents that are either culturally unfamiliar to them or replete with new vocabularies and complex syntax (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983).

1. b. Lack of regular practice of summarization strategy in reading classes

Another factor that contributes to EFL learners' problems in reading comprehension is lack of using summarization strategy in reading classes. Summarizing "considered the ability to construct from one's reading and understanding of the gist of a text" (Xu, Carifio, & Dagostino, 2013, p. 331). Research by (Armbruster, Anderson, & Ostertag, 1987; Rinehart, Stahl, & Erickson, 1986) has proved the effect of summarization on improvement of reading comprehension. Teachers may view summarization strategy as boring to teach and tedious to grade. "However if they become aware of the numerous advantages for students, and of effective methods of teaching it, they might be persuaded to embrace summarization as a crucial skill that their students should practice as often as possible" (Karbalaei, & Rajyashre, 2010, p. 42).

1. c. Lack of familiarity with skimming and scanning strategies and absence of application of them in reading classes

"Skimming is defined as getting the main idea or gist of a selection quickly and scanning as a high speed search for the answer to a specific question or the location of a specific fact" (Maxwell, 1973, p. 48). Khosravi's (2000) study

with Iranian EFL indicated that scanning could significantly improve the students' both reading rate and reading comprehension, while skimming accounted for significant improvement of the reading comprehension of the subjects.

Maxwell (1973) says "that it is not easy to persuade the learners to use skimming and scanning since both the instructors and the learners have biased attitudes against the mentioned strategies" (p.47), this resistance for change in reading behavior originates from the habit of reading every word and reciting material. She proposes that teachers should remind the learners that not every word in the sentence carries essential meaning, and most of them just help the writer to elaborate the writing style.

1. d. Lack of familiarity with Inference technique and absence of application of it in reading classes

In reading, inference means activation of relevant background knowledge for prediction and understanding what is implied in the text. Poor inference skills could result from inadequate background knowledge, lack of contextual vocabulary, semantic knowledge, or unsophisticated prediction. Researcher by (Shimizu, 2005; Jafarigohar & Morshedian, 2014; Chikalanga, 1992) showed that making inferences during reading is essential for successful reading comprehension.

Research results by (Frantzen, 2003, Nassaji, 2003) showed that EFL learners make lexical inference during reading, but their inferences mostly are incorrect. Frantzen (2003) thinks that the reason to the issue could be the "context itself, (b) the students' behavior, [or] in a minor way (c) the story's glossing" (p.168).

In EFL context most of the teachers are not aware of inference efficacy in developing reading comprehension skills and those few teachers that have some familiarity with this strategy usually use it to generate predictions about the topic of the text. Sometimes, illustrations in the text are used as an incentive to encourage learners to make use of inference during reading sessions.

2. Complicated syntax and structure in new text

Duncan and Duncan (1983) states that phonological differences between the reader's L1 and L2 constitute some of the causes that make reading difficult. Panos and Ruzic's (1983) state that Arabs write from right to left in reading; recognition of letters and words in English will be a very slow and time-consuming process for them. Linguistic complexity can affect EFL reading comprehension in other ways. For example, there are differences in sound and alphabetical system of English and EFL learners, therefore, the EFL learners in countries such as Iran cannot use the strategy of prediction of letter. "Readers are very sensitive to the predictability of letter sequences. Letters don't occur haphazardly. In English, for example, combinations like *th*, *st*, *br*, and almost any consonant and vowel pair are more likely to occur than combinations like *tf*, *sr*, *bm*, *ae*, or *ao*. The knowledge that readers acquire about these differing probabilities of letter combinations is demonstrated when words containing common letter sequences are more easily identified than those with uncommon sequences" (Smith, 2004, p. 127). "Another problem for EFL readers is that in English language spelling doesn't represent the exact pronunciation" (smith, 2004, p. 128). When EFL learners come across complex sentences the comprehension of the text can be expected to be more difficult. "Syntax is the primary means by which we can specify the intended relation among words, and syntactic competence is an

important dimension of linguistic competence in general" (Adams, 1971, p. 16).

Text structure (cause and effect, chronological order of events, compare, and contrast) can also affect Iranian EFL reader's comprehension. Elmiانvari and Kheyraabadi's (2013) study with Iranian EFL revealed that teaching explicitly the rhetorical structure of the text was an effective tool to help them overcome some of their difficulties of reading in a foreign language.

3. Inadequate linguistic competence of EFL learners for practicing reading skills

3. a. Vocabulary

Knowledge of vocabulary is an essential predictor of reading ability and comprehension of the texts in second language learning (Rouhi & Mousapour Negari, 2013). "Reading comprehension is the most important source for L2 learners in EFL academic setting. [So] language learners receive little natural exposure to the target language outside their course materials" (Shatalebi, Zarei, 2010, p. 277). Therefore, for foreign language learners in countries such as Iran, reading is usually seen as a means of mastering new vocabulary and grammatical structures. In EFL contexts, learners who do not have a suitable range of vocabulary or who do not use effective word-learning strategies often have problems with comprehension of new texts.

The result of research by Jamalipour, Khomeijani, and Farahani's (2015) study with Iranian EFL learners revealed that there is strong relationship between the vocabulary knowledge and reading performance. They suggest that teaching of vocabulary learning strategies to the learners will help them to employ those strategies as they read a text. Pazhakh and Soltani (2014) believe that most of the Iranian EFL learners in the process of learning new vocabulary sit idle, and only listen and sometimes repeat after the teacher. So, the flow of learning new vocabulary is always from the teacher towards the learners.

Shatalebi and Zarei's (2010) study indicated a significant contribution of vocabulary knowledge to reading comprehension and lexical inferencing of Iranian EFL readers.

The EFL teachers should allocate time to help their students to acquire wider and deeper vocabulary knowledge. The students should know that success in reading is related to most extent to mastering the vocabulary of the target language (Rouhi & Mousapour Negari, 2013).

3. b. Motivation

Motivation is an internal drive which encourages someone to do things in order to achieve a goal. Research by Sayadian and Lashkarian (2010), Ghazvinia and Khajehpoura (2011), Ushida, (2005) has demonstrated that achievement in a foreign language is related to measures of attitudes and motivation. In Iran, for many EFL learners there are no immediate needs for learning English except appearing in final examinations at school or university. Having low instrumental and integrative motivation, most of the Iranian EFL readers face challenges as they want to read in English language.

"Instrumental motivation refers to using language to get instrumental goals such as getting a job, reading technical texts, translation and etc" (Davatgari Asl & Elyasi Lankaran, 2015, p. 182). Integrative motivation, on the other hand, is "motivation of a particular type, characterized by a will-

ingness to be like valued members of the language community" (Gardner & Lambert, 1959, p. 271). (Sayadian & Lashkarian, 2010; Aliakbaria & Monfared's, 2014) study found that many Iranian learners learn English for instrumental reasons, but integrative motivation is also an effective motivational orientation for them. According to Sayadian and Lashkarian (2010) "Apart from raising Iranian learners' levels of integrative motivation, teachers can improve the contents, teaching methods, and classroom activities to raise learners' interests and motivations in language learning" (p. 144).

3. c. Extensive reading

"Extensive reading is reading a large volume of material with less emphasis on comprehension. Primary intent of ER is having students read more in order to increase their exposure to syntax, lexis and perhaps culture of the target language" (Robb, 2002, p. 146). According to Krashen's pleasure hypothesis (1994) "those activities that are good for language acquisition are usually perceived by acquirers as pleasant, while those activities that are not good for language acquisition are not consistently perceived as pleasant, and are, in fact, often perceived to be painful" (p. 299). Given that these hypotheses are working for extensive reading, one supposes that in extensive reading programs the EFL learner should select those reading texts which are relatively close and comprehensible for her linguistic ability; therefore, it will boost her grammatical and lexical capabilities. The researcher results by Iwahori (2008), Takayasu-Maass, Taguchi, and Gorsuch, (2004), Pazhakh and Soltani (2014) confirm the efficiency of extensive reading and its positive contribution to EFL reading.

Due to lack of time, extensive reading and specifically longer texts are usually ignored by teachers in EFL classes and learners at home. Since it is easier to handle short texts which can be studied in the class, longer texts are prone to get forgotten in the classroom. Xhaferi and Xhaferi (2008) say that "providing a number of encounters [through extensive reading] with a word promotes word retention and particularly if the word is learned using different strategies" (p.75). Extensive reading is beneficial for the following reasons: a) Improves learners' vocabulary and grammar b) It can be geared according to individual needs and proficiency level of the learners (Nation, 2001) c) It will cause the learners to develop positive attitudes toward EFL reading (Day, 2003). d) It develops automaticity, enhances background knowledge, and improves comprehension skills (Grabe, 1991).

Conclusion

To sum up, this survey has tried to review problems relating to and contributing towards reading skills in context of Iran, which were categorized as a) inadequate linguistic competence of EFL learners. b) Misunderstanding of the reading process. c) Complicated syntax and structure.

The literature on reading problems in English suggests that in order to solve problem of reading comprehension in Iran, it is necessary to analyze the learners' problem and reading materials and also consider pedagogical solutions provided by teachers and administrators. Problems of reading in EFL contexts cannot be solved overnight; they need to be handled through constant practice and be supported by training and solid policies.

The survey also reveals that explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies in Iran is an issue worthy of attention. The survey also reveals the importance of giving a

greater role to self-exploration and participation of learners in learning the strategies, and more stress on the process of training to make learners become independent readers. The Iranian EFL teachers can help the Iranian EFL readers to find their problems of reading comprehension and help them to come up with solutions. They also could help the learners to develop their reading strategies repertoire and meta-cognitive awareness to enhance their command over their own reading process.

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