An Investigation Into the Iranian English Language Students’ Reading Problems: A Case Study

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Abstract
Reading is the fundamental skill upon which all formal education depends. Nowadays, more and more university students throughout the world are required to learn EFL in order to read textbooks and professional journals which are written in English. On the other hand, efficient reading is not only a hard work; it is an extremely complex and challenging mental task. Hence, in order to provide support to readers to handle this task, it is necessary to identify their specific areas of difficulty and their strength and weaknesses. Therefore, based on the metacognition and self-assessment conceptualizations, this research was conducted to further our understanding of the Iranian students’ self-reported reading difficulties. The data were collected by asking 20 M.A. English teaching students from a university in Kermanshah city to have a self-reflection and write about their difficulties in English reading skill. The reported statements were codified and analyzed, and the frequency of each reported difficulty was calculated accordingly. Results, at the word level, indicated that students mostly mentioned limited vocabulary knowledge and difficulty in retrieving a word that they have already stored in memory (dysnomia) as their topmost reading difficulties. At the text level, lack of fluency in reading, lack of familiarity with the subject matter, difficulty level of the text (readability) and lack of use of proper reading strategies were mentioned as topmost reading difficulties.

Keywords: Reading Difficulty; Iranian English Language Learners; Self-Reflection; Metacognition; Self-Assessment

1. Introduction
The emergence of English as a global language has had a major effect on educational systems throughout the world and the demands for reading in a
second language. In countries around the world, school systems require students to learn English for access to information and for the final ability to compete in economical and professional environments. For good or for bad, this situation reflects a reality of the early twenty-first century (McGroarty, 2006). Reading is a skill that is integrated with our daily life. Actually we do have a lot of reading practices during a day, ranged from reading advertisements to reading of academic text books. As many people can read, and even some of them can read in other languages, it might seem that reading is not a subject needed to be investigated. For many of us, when we sit down to read something, our eyes move across and down the page and we understand the message that the text contains without apparent effort. Such an unconscious process seems simple, but in fact, like many other mental activities we do, reading is complex when examined in all its detail. The fact is that it involves a great deal of precise knowledge which must be acquired or learned and many processing strategies which must be practiced until they are automatic, (Birch, 2002; Grabe, 2009; Westwood, 2009).

The knowledge base is essential in a reading process; however it alone is not sufficient for reading because it cannot interact directly with the text without some kind of processing mechanism. The processing component consists of a variety of strategies that the reader has acquired or learned. These strategies allow the reader to take the text as a source of information and, drawing on the knowledge base as another source, make sense of what is on the printed page. It also calls upon precise bits of knowledge about language, writing, and processing strategies that permit our minds to turn squiggles on the page into meaningful symbols. There is a need to have a good command of English vocabulary knowledge, too. (Birch, 2002; Grabe, 2009; Westwood, 2009). A model of the reading process with some sample processing strategies and types of knowledge is presented in Figure 1. Emphasizing the importance of reading, Grabe (2009, p. 6) stated that:

Citizens of modern societies must be good readers to be successful. Reading skills do not guarantee success for anyone, but success is much harder to come by without being a skilled reader. The advent of the computer and the Internet does nothing to change this fact about reading. If anything, electronic communication only increases the need for effective reading skills and strategies as we try to cope with the large quantities of information made available to us.
Figure 1. A hypothetical model of the reading process with some sample processing strategies and types of knowledge (adopted from Birch, 2000, p. 3).

A lot of different factors affect the way we read. Among them are: the purpose of reading (Alderson, 2000), the experience in reading a type of a text (Adams, Bell, & Perfetti, 1995; McNamara & Kintsch, 1996) and the genre of the text. Considering the importance and complex nature of reading, the definition of this term seems necessary. Reading is often defined in simple statements much like the following: "Reading is the process of receiving and interpreting information encoded in language form via the medium of print" (Urquhart & Weir, 1998: 22), or, "Comprehension occurs when the reader extracts and integrates various information from the text and combines it with what is already known" (Koda, 2005, p. 4).

Grahe (2009, p. 14) provided a more comprehensive definition of the term, which is: reading is

1. A rapid process
2. An efficient process
3. A comprehending process
4. An interactive process
5. A strategic process
6. A flexible process
7. A purposeful process
8. An evaluative process
9. A learning process
10. A linguistic process

Using the writing of self-reflective is one kind of self-assessment. It is believed that self-assessment has an important role in language teaching because it leads to autonomous learning. More learning takes place when students are trained to be autonomous and when they are given freedom to negotiate meaning (Altan & Trombly, 2001), and “self-assessment accuracy is a condition of learner autonomy” (Blanche & Merino 1989, p. 313). Research on language pedagogy especially recommends that teachers should provide opportunities for students to assess their language level to help them focus on their own learning (Blanche, 1988, Blue, 1994, Dickinson, 1987; Harris, 1997; Oskarsson, 1985).

It is worth mentioning that, Corder (1967) believed that the concept of difficulty is a subjective judgment. The notion of ‘difficulty’ has received different interpretations from different perspectives. For example, Tajino (1997) argues that it has been treated as a matter of the difference between learners’ first language (L1) and second language (L2), a matter of learners’ errors, and a matter of the notion of markedness and, thus, any examination of difficulty must incorporate students’ perceptions of difficulty. Teachers need to know the specific problems their learners are facing so that they can plan their lessons and courses accordingly. In addition, one of the teachers' duties is to diagnose their students' learning problems. As Strevens (1980, p. 28) stated, “The best teachers know their pupils, encourage them, show concern for them, find out their interests, discover their learning preferences, monitor their progress with a sympathetic eye, unravel their difficulties, cherish them as a human being engaged in a collaboration of learning.”

The ways in which students negotiate their conflicting goals often lead them to make choices dictated by problems the teacher never see them. Their negotiations led to logic and a text that apparently "failed" to meet some assignment demands, when in fact students were choosing to negotiate a different, and to them, more compelling problem. Both sets of goals are necessary, but when teachers uncover the logic of these negotiations, they become more effective at diagnosing the students' writing problems and teaching to students' real needs. Understanding the logic of learners is equally important when older students are attempting a difficult task. Understanding a student's logic does not mean replacing the instructional
goals of a class with those of each student. However, it means teaching to the genuine conflicts that students face and to the process of negotiating multiple voices, expectations, and demands that all writers must juggle (Flower, 1994).

2. Review of Literature

Helping students to become more aware of their processing strategies and difficulties means helping them develop their metacognitive skills. Flavell (1979) has regarded self-knowledge as an important component of metacognition. She divided metacognition into metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive experiences. The former consists of personal, task and strategy variables, while the latter refers to any kind of conscious experience involved in cognitive enterprise. Self-knowledge includes knowledge of one's strengths and weaknesses. It is much more important to have accurate perceptions and judgments of one's knowledge base and expertise than to have inflated and inaccurate self-knowledge (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002).

This study is based on the notion of metacognition which is the process of thinking about thinking. It has to do with the active monitoring and regulation of cognitive processes. The term is most often associated with John Flavell (1976, 1979, 1987) who has described the term as follows, "metacognition refers to one's knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes or anything related to them, e.g., the learning-relevant properties of information or data." In other word, it refers to acquired knowledge about cognitive processes, knowledge that can be used to control cognitive processes. It consists of both metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive experiences or regulation.

Flavell (1979) acknowledged the significance of metacognition in a wide range of applications, which included reading, oral skills, writing, language acquisition, memory, attention, social interactions, self-instruction, personality development and education. This theory emphasizes on helping students to become more knowledgeable of and responsible for their own cognition and thinking. However, Hacker (1998) offered a more comprehensive definition of metacognition, to include the knowledge of one's own cognitive and affective states and processes as well as the ability to consciously and deliberately monitor and regulate them. Furthermore, Butler and Winnie (1995, as cited in Hacker et al., 1998) reported that "Theoreticians seem unanimous—the most effective learners are self-regulating" (p. 13) and that "accurate self-assessment of what is known or not known" leads to effective self-regulation (Schoenfeld, 1987, as cited in
Hacker, et al., p. 13). There are different sources of difficulty mentioned for reading skill. Some of them will be presented below.

One source of difficulty is the difference between learners' first language (FL) and the foreign language they are learning. This can be true for true Iranian learners since the Persian alphabet is different from the Roman alphabet. The prior one is written through the lines from the right to left, but the former one is written from left to right. This makes the adaptation to the opposite direction a problem for readers, especially will attempt fast reading. Another area of difficulty can be the difference between the sound systems of the two languages (Avery & Ehrlich, 1987). This case is true for Iranian learners. As an instance Iranian learners have difficulty in pronouncing words with (th) in them. Also distinguishing and pronouncing dark and light/clear (L) causes them difficulty. A third source of difficulty in this regard can be related to English spelling/sound system. The problem is that English has around 43 sounds for only 26 letters. Results of research indicate that good knowledge of spelling system have positive effect on reading ability (Moretz, 1971).

When participants were asked about their reading problems, the majority of them mentioned lack of vocabulary knowledge as their main problem. This problem can be more elaborated on by having a look on a driving example. A driver who drives in her hometown will not have that much difficulty in driving since she is familiar with the roads, location of different driving signs, traffic lights, etc. Using these kinds of knowledge, she can drive fast, smoothly and comfortably. However, when she enters a new town, because of lack of knowledge about the above mentioned components, she will have more difficulties in driving. This problem happens for students in their reading process. Since they do not possess vocabulary knowledge they have to focus on the phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic clues to be able to understand or guess the meaning of the words.

Fluency in reading is an important component since there seems to be high correlations between oral reading fluency and comprehension (Klinger et al., 2007). There appears to be an optimum rate of fluency in reading that allows for accurate processing of information. Automaticity in reading, based mainly on smooth and effortless word identification and contextual cueing, allows the reader to use all available cognitive capacity to focus on meaning. Students who read very slowly or too fast—often comprehend poorly.

Slow reading tends to restrict cognitive capacity to the low-level processing of letters and words rather than allowing full attention to be
devoted to higher-order ideas and concepts within the text. But very fast reading may result in inaccurate word recognition, and important details being overlooked. Sometimes, attention to rate of reading needs to be a specific focus in students' literacy programs, particularly in terms of increasing fluency and expression of those who read much too slowly (Allington, 2001).

As an instance of the participants' pointing out this difficulty, participant 6 wrote: My major point of difficulty in reading is my lack of background knowledge regarding some issues, which makes some texts difficult to decipher.

It is much easier to read with understanding if the reader already possesses some prior knowledge of the topic (Gersten et al., 2001; Kemple et al., 2008).

As an instance of the participants' pointing out this difficulty, participant 6 wrote: The first problem that I have in reading is my low speed. Sometimes, it takes me half an hour to cover a full page of an article or a book. The difficulty level of the text and the subject matter fact it, too.

Readability plays an important role in the successful reading process. Text that is complex in terms of concepts, vocabulary, sentence length and structure is difficult for readers to process. For this reason, expository text—with its facts, detailed descriptions, explanations, dentitions, sequences, cause and effect relationships, and comparisons—is much more difficult to process than narrative text (Gersten et al., 2001; Thomas et al., 2008).

The experience of the present researchers indicate that one way to assist struggling readers is to ensure that the difficulty level of the texts they are required to read is compatible with their current reading ability. In other words, it has always been accepted that the weaker the reader, the easier the book needs to be to ensure success. Books that are too difficult will cause a reader to make too many errors.

However, a few recent research studies have yielded information suggesting that using books a little above the reader's present reading level can be useful for advancing reading skills if the student's attempts are effectively supported and if they are given help with interpretation (Cramer & Rosenfeld, 2008; Thomas et al., 2008). Pressley (2006) argues that the goal of literacy teaching should be to develop fully self-regulated readers who are skilled and strategic in reading for meaning. He challenges the belief held by many teachers that students improve in comprehension ability if they simply do massive amounts of reading and answer comprehension tests.
Prossley suggests that strategy training to enhance comprehension and study skills should be an essential part of any balanced approach to teaching. Unfortunately, there is evidence that reading is not being taught as a thinking activity and many teachers do not spend much time (sometimes no time) instructing students in the use of comprehension strategies (Blanton et al., 2007; McKown & Burnett, 2007).

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were 20 Iranian M.A. adult students (both male and female), studying TEFL at Razi University in Kermanshah. The rationale behind deciding to work with this group of participants was twofold. First, we had decided to work with M.A. students since they had considerable experience in reading in English materials.

On the other hand, adult learners were chosen because older readers are more likely to do "knowledge transform"; in part, because they deliberately adopt ways of thinking that encourage this kind of reflective activity. In addition, Victori (1995) stated that metacognitive strategies were usually regarded as strategies mastered by adults. In other words, adults have the capability to control the whole writing process.

3.2. Data Collection Procedure

The data for this research was collected mailing an open-ended questionnaire to 24 M.A. students from a university in Kermanshah city. The questionnaire contained the following question to be answered: "what causes you difficulty in reading in English? (What are your problems in reading in English?)" Participants were given a two-week time interval to think and elaborate critically on the question and answer the question based on their experience of reading in English. After the interval time, of course with some delay from some participants, 20 of the participants mailed back their answers. Some of their ideas will be presented in the following paragraphs.

Participant 1: "I think the most important problem is unknown words specially those that I cannot guess their meaning. For me the next difficulty with reading comprehension is complex structures that make the understanding of text very time consuming. Sometimes the lack of background knowledge about the content of the text makes it difficult to get the meaning, it makes reading boring for me."
Participant 6: "The first problem that I have in reading is my low speed. Sometimes, it takes me half an hour to cover a full page of an article or a book. The difficulty level of the text and the subject matter affect it, too. Another problem is unknown vocabularies in the text. The strategy that I use, now and then, is guessing them from the context. However, sometimes this guessing from the context does not satisfy me to understand the text well; therefore, I have to consult a dictionary."

Participant 9: "Sometimes, comprehension is my problem since I had no schemata of that matter, e.g. in discourse and sometimes technical register and obsolete word make the text difficult to grasp. Also punctuation is another problem in reading."

Participant 18: "Sometimes, I have a problem in reading and that is related to lack of concentration. Sometimes when I'm reading a text I forgot the previous line or lines so I have to read again and it causes to spend much time, I know maybe lack of concentration is not related to reading ability directly, but it's a common problem among people. I don't have any other problem in reading."

3.3 Data Analysis Procedure

For analyzing the data, participants' written texts were read carefully to find the items mentioned as barriers in reading, and they were ordered by cumulating the frequencies of the stated difficulties by the participants. Results of the computing the related frequencies of the ideas are shown in Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulties in reading in English</th>
<th>Frequencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limited vocabulary knowledge</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dysnomia</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty level of the text (readability)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of familiarity with the subject matter</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of fluency in reading</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of use of proper reading strategies</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex structure of texts</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of ability to connect ideas together</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of concentration while reading</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Conclusion and Implications

To sum up, this article has set out in broad terms how learners perceive the difficulties that they face in reading in a foreign language. These difficulties vary according to text and task. Learners need to practice a variety of different reading skills and vocabulary learning strategies if they are to maintain a high rate of success as they move from graded text towards academic English.

By asking learners to identify and report the reading difficulties that they experience, many useful insights can be gained, not least of which is that over the course of one academic year the students become remarkably articulate and reflective in explaining how they read. This increased awareness also involves a heightened degree of effective and independent strategic control on their part. At the bare minimum, these learner surveys point to some central questions about reading development in a foreign language.

Furthermore, reading comprehension problems can be minimized by providing students with texts at an appropriate level of difficulty (or if a more difficult text must be used, by providing all necessary support), preteaching any difficult vocabulary, ensuring that word recognition and decoding skills are mastered, devoting sufficient time to reading practice, and teaching effective comprehension strategies.

Here, at first sight, it seems that vocabulary comes up as the major difficulty. However, again, we can note an interesting result. Vocabulary difficulties can be almost evenly split between discipline-specific vocabulary (i.e., content) and expository text-specific vocabulary (i.e., argument structure/text or metrganization). Further, at the sentence-level, sentence length/syntax and background knowledge clearly feature as almost equally relevant difficulties. This indicates that the problem cannot be solved through an exclusive focus either on top-down or on bottom-up processing. Instead, these results point to the validity of an interactive model of the reading process in the foreign language for first-year students reading academic text.

5. Limitations of the Study

Where self-reports are used as a primary source, differences may occur between reported and actual performance, so some sort of control for what Brown (1988) terms "extraneous variables" is recommended (pp. 29-41). Note also that no explicit control was carried out. Brown also discusses the
possibility of "subject expectancy" where the "research subjects" may make their best efforts to provide what they perceive as the desired answers to the researcher, thus making the data unreliable.

References


