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MEASURING FACTORS AFFECTING EFL LEARNERS' READING COMPREHENSION AT UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL: A SURVEY

Md. Arif Khan Pathan

Assistant Professor(English), Department of Languages, Bangladesh Agricultural University, Mymensingh, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

The importance of reading for a language learner is enormous. Reading benefits a language learner in many ways from developing vocabulary to enhance overall language competence. Unfortunately, EFL learners encounter a lot of difficulties during reading that prevent them from developing their reading skills and eventually negatively affect their overall language learning process. The goal of the present study was to evaluate the factors that affect EFL learners' reading comprehension at undergraduate level. By using a Likert-scale survey sheet, the study conducted a survey among 298 undergraduate students at Bangladesh Agricultural University and found that many factors are responsible for EFL learners' poor reading comprehension at undergraduate level. Among them, some factors are very intensely affect the learners' reading comprehension while some affect moderately and some have comparatively less effect. By assessing the factors that affect the learners' reading comprehension, the study basically attempted to make the learners aware of those factors they face in reading, so that, they can overcome them, improve their reading skill, and become proficient readers.

KEYWORDS: *Affecting Factors, EFL Learners, Reading Comprehension, Reading Skill*

INTRODUCTION

Reading is the key to improve one's foreign language skills. There are a lot of benefits of reading in learning a foreign language. For example, reading in target language develops learners' vocabulary of that language. We all know that learning vocabulary through isolated word list is not a very effective way. The best way to learn a new word is to encounter it in different contexts. Reading provides learners with opportunities to encounter a particular word in different contexts. In addition, reading makes learners aware of varieties of language use by recurrently encountering them with different types of language patterns and structures. It is the most available, cheapest, and most reliable form of contact with the target language. Furthermore, reading enhances learners' overall language competence. Through reading, learners not only become proficient readers, but also develop all language skills as studied by Hafiz and Tudor (1989) and by many others. Indeed, reading helps learners to acquire a language more effectively by extensive exposure to that language, and makes them more efficient language users by letting them notice all types of grammatical structures in use. Reading also develops learners' general knowledge, boosts their motivation and confidence level, and helps them grow a more positive attitude towards language learning.

However, while reading in English, the EFL learners typically encounter a lot of difficulties that evidently hamper their reading comprehension as well as hinder develop their reading skills, and eventually negatively affect their language learning process. Here, it is certainly important to understand the difficulties that the learners face in reading in order to help them to develop their reading skills as well as improve their overall language competence. The achieved findings will also contribute to the more effective teaching and learning of reading skills in the language classroom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading is simply defined as the act of understanding and interpreting what is being read. It is 'the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language' (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Harris and Hodges (1995) defined reading as the construction of meaning of a written text through a reciprocal interchange of ideas between the reader and the message in a particular text. According to Wixson and Peters (1984) as in Anthony et al. (1989), reading is the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction among the reader's existing knowledge, the information suggested by the written language, and the context of the reading situation. Anthony, Pearson, & Raphael (1989) said that reading involves interpreting text and constructing meaning in light of the background knowledge, and within a social context that helps to determine the reader's goals, purposes, and expectations. Pardo (2004) defined reading as a process in which readers construct meaning by interacting with text through the combination of prior knowledge and previous experience, information in the text, and the stance the reader takes in relationship to the text. According to Block (2004) and Graves, Juel, and Graves (1998) as in Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016), reading is a complicated process in which readers have an important role in making meaning from the text through applying existing skills. According to Hermosa (2002) and Meniado (2016) as in Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016), reading is a series of cognitive activities that include a lot of dimensions like the understanding of words and their meanings, mindful reaction, and integration.

In fact, reading is a very complex cognitive process. There are a lot of factors that markedly create obstructions in the reading process. Lack of sufficient vocabulary knowledge, for example, is one of the most important factors that hampers reading process significantly. As mentioned in Iqbal et al. (2015), students who have problems in reading comprehension have poor or limited vocabulary (Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Rupley & Nichols, 2005). According to Koda (2007), fluent and successful reading requires rapid and effortless access to the knowledge of individual word meanings. A number of studies (e.g., Alderson & Urquhart, 1985; Anderson &Freebody, 1983; Carroll, 1971; Davis, 1968; Koda, 1988; Qian, 1998) as cited by Koda (2007) reported consistently high correlations between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. Besides vocabulary knowledge, however, phonological knowledge, morphological knowledge, syntactic knowledge, knowledge of discourse markers, and text-structure knowledge are some other components of reading as mentioned by Koda (2007), the lack of them can considerably create obstacles in the reading process.

The other factors that affect learners' reading comprehension skill as stated by Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016) are readers' prior knowledge, complexity of the reading text, environmental influences, anxiety during reading, interest and motivation, etc. According to the findings of some studies (e.g., Aebersold & Field, 2005; Carrell, Devine, & Eskey, 1988; Hudson, 2007; Vacca & Vacca, 2008) as mentioned by Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016), readers' previous knowledge plays a vital role in the comprehension of text and the lack of it can impact reading comprehension negatively. The study of Carrel and Wise (1998) as mentioned by Iqbal et al. (2015) also found that students can perform better if prior knowledge and topic interest is higher than students whose topic interest and background knowledge are low. However, regarding

complexity of the reading text, a number of studies (e.g. Crossley & McNamara, 2008; Leow, 1997; Yano, Long, & Ross, 1994) as in Eslami (2014) indicated that L2 readers better understand simplified texts in comparison with the unmodified versions of the same texts. Other studies (e.g., Baumann & Bergeron, 1993; Buss, Ratliff, & Irion, 1985) as mentioned in Koda (2007) also found that explicit demonstrations of text organization generally improve text comprehension. Now, regarding environmental influences, Dennis (2008) said as in Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016) that readers will lose their concentration in understanding a text when there are noises like televisions or radios. Jennings et al. (2006) nicely explained how environmental factors are associated with reading disability. They said that students live and grow in several different environments (home environment, school environment, social environment, and cultural environment), and each environment has a strong influence on a student's desires and abilities to learn and can affect his reading. On the other hand, talking about anxiety during reading, several studies (e.g. Vazalwar, 2011; Madsen, Brown, & Jones, 1991; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993) as in Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016) were carried out to investigate the effect of anxiety during reading and found that anxiety negatively affect the development of reading comprehension. However, regarding interest and motivation, a number of studies (e.g. Gottfried, 1990; Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997; Guthrie & Wigfield's, 2000; Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Wang & Guthrie, 2004; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004 as in Guthrie et al., 2006; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Seymour & Walsh, 2006; Hairul, Ahmadi, & Pourhosein, 2012; Dornyei, 2006; Grabe, 2009; Morgan & Fuchs, 2007) as in Ahmadi (2017) said that motivation and reading comprehension are correlated and revealed that motivation increases learners' reading comprehension.

One more important factor hampering learners' reading comprehension is unawareness of metacognitive and other reading strategies. According to Meniado (2016), reading as a cognitive process implies that metacognition or awareness and regulation of one's thinking during the reading process could lead to better comprehension. Several studies (e.g. Yuksel & Yuksel, 2012; Pressley et al., 1998; Ahmadi, Ismail, & Abdullah, 2013; Al-Sobhani, 2013; Tavakoli, 2014; Magogwe, 2013; Hong-Nam, 2014; Zhang & Seepho, 2013; Memis & Bozkurt, 2013; Phakiti, 2006; Kummin & Rahman, 2010) as mentioned by Meniado (2016) revealed that awareness and use of metacognitive reading strategies have positive and direct relationship with reading comprehension performance; thus, students who use these strategies perform better in reading proficiency tests/courses.

To conclude, some other factors that affect learners' reading comprehension as in Meniado (2016) are oral reading method (Alshumaimeri, 2011), extensive reading (Mermelstein, 2014), use of technology (Alshumaimeri & Alasmari, 2012), collaboration of a student and family and socio-economic factors in the family (Geske & Ozola, 2008); and in Adaba (2016), confidence, linguistic competence, and cultural knowledge (Nunan, 1998).

RESEARCH PURPOSE

For a language learner, reading as well as listening is considered to be the gateway of all sorts of language input. It helps the learners to improve their language knowledge and develop their communication skill. Although, in a country like Bangladesh, every language learner's academic life starts with learning how to read, yet a large number of EFL learners are found even at undergraduate level facing a lot of difficulties during reading in English that markedly hamper their reading comprehension as well as hinder develop their reading skill, and consequently negatively affect their language learning process. The purpose of the present study is to identify and assess the factors that affect EFL learners' reading comprehension at undergraduate level. The study also tends to make the learners aware of those factors they face in reading, so that they can overcome them, and develop their reading skill.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of the present study were the undergraduate level EFL students belonging to different faculties (Faculty of Veterinary Science, Faculty of Agricultural Economics & Rural Sociology, and Faculty of Fisheries) of Bangladesh Agricultural University. A total of 298 students participated in the survey. They were basically selected through the purposive sampling method on the basis of convenience and availability.

Data Collection

The data for the present study were collected using a Likert-scale survey sheet (Appendix-1). The survey sheet was distributed to the students in their reading classes, and the students were only required to put tick marks on appropriate options. The students expressed their views through the survey sheet, and the researcher, in return, obtained a clear picture of the factors that affect their reading comprehension.

Data Presentation

Table 1

	Factors that Affect Reading Comprehension	Always	Very Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1.	Poor Vocabulary	72 (24.16%)	110 (36.91%)	110 (36.91%)	6 (2.01%)	0 (0%)
2.	Lack of phonological and morphological knowledge	47 (15.77%)	73 (24.50%)	139 (46.64%)	37 (12.42%)	2 (0.67%)
3.	Insufficient grammar knowledge	27 (9.06%)	63 (21.14%)	136 (45.64%)	67 (22.48%)	5 (1.68%)
4.	Complex sentence structure	28 (9.40%)	67 (22.48%)	134 (44.97%)	54 (18.12%)	15 (5.03%)
5.	Deficient knowledge of discourse markers	21 (7.05%)	47 (15.77%)	145 (48.66%)	59 (19.80%)	26 (8.72%)
6.	Unfamiliarity with different reading strategies	115 (38.59%)	63 (21.14%)	79 (26.51%)	26 (8.72%)	15 (5.03%)
7.	Lack of background knowledge	34 (11.41%)	99 (33.22%)	126 (42.28%)	33 (11.07%)	6 (2.01%)
8.	Inadequate cultural knowledge	61 (20.47%)	72 (24.16%)	122 (40.94%)	37 (12.42%)	6 (2.01%)
9.	Particular genre (like poem)	113 (37.92%)	89 (29.87%)	81 (27.18%)	11 (3.69%)	4 (1.34%)
10.	Environmental issues like noise	80 (26.85%)	46 (15.44%)	83 (27.85%)	51 (17.11%)	38 (12.75%)
11.	Uninteresting text	55 (18.46%)	56 (18.79%)	118 (39.60%)	44 (14.77%)	25 (8.39%)
12.	Unstable mental condition	41 (13.76%)	27 (9.06%)	101 (33.89%)	67 (22.48%)	62 (20.81%)
13.	Financial hardship	10 (3.36%)	7 (2.35%)	50 (16.78%)	57 (19.13%)	174 (58.39%)
14.	Weak family and social relationship	8 (2.68%)	14 (4.70%)	49 (16.44%)	48 (16.11%)	179 (60.07%)
15.	Anxiety/fear during reading	39 (13.09%)	34 (11.41%)	87 (29.19%)	72 (24.16%)	66 (22.15%)
16.	Lack of confidence	71 (23.83%)	44 (14.77%)	90 (30.20%)	59 (19.80%)	34 (11.41%)
17.	Lack of motivation	27 (9.06%)	50 (16.78%)	106 (35.57%)	65 (21.81%)	50 (16.78%)

	Table 1: Contd.,					
18.	Inadequate reading habit	38 (12.75%)	63 (21.14%)	102 (34.23%)	51 (17.11%)	44 (14.77%)
19.	Absence of technology	26 (8.72%)	26 (8.72%)	74 (24.83%)	71 (23.83%)	101 (33.89%)
20.	Mention any other factor below:	____	____	____	____	____

Data Analysis

According to the results of the survey, poor vocabulary knowledge is one of the most prominent and very significant factors that affects EFL learners' reading comprehension. About 24.16% of the total participants' reading comprehension is always affected by poor vocabulary knowledge while 36.91% of the participants very often and the same percentage of the participants sometimes face this problem. Out of 298 participants, although there are only 6 (2.01%) participants who rarely face this problem, no participant is found whose reading comprehension is never affected by poor vocabulary knowledge. That means everybody faces this problem.

Particular genre (like poem) is another major factor that affects EFL learners' reading comprehension. 37.92% of the total participants always face difficulties in reading and comprehending specific genre like poem/legal language. Although only 1.34% of the participants never face any problem in reading any specific text, and only 3.69% rarely face this problem; a significant percentage of the participants very often (29.87%) and sometimes (27.18%) encounter difficulties understanding particular genre.

Unfamiliarity with different reading strategies is another very significant factor that affects EFL learners' reading comprehension. 38.59% of the participants believe that since they are not familiar with various reading strategies, so they always face problems in their reading. Although this causes no problem at all for only 5.03% of the participants, and only 8.72% rarely face this problem; a considerable percentage of the participants very often (21.14%) and sometimes (26.51%) encounter this problem in their reading.

According to the study, the factors that moderately affect ELF learners' reading comprehension are insufficient grammar knowledge, complex sentence structure, deficient knowledge of discourse markers, lack of background knowledge, inadequate cultural knowledge, environmental issues like noise, uninteresting text, lack of confidence, lack of motivation, and inadequate reading habit. We see, for these factors, majority of the participants have marked that they sometimes encounter those difficulties in their reading. That means, for most of the participants, these factors do not always or very often create obstacles in reading comprehension.

Finally, the study has revealed that unstable mental condition, financial hardship, weak family and social relationship, anxiety/fear during reading, absence of technology are some factors that have comparatively less effect on the learners' reading comprehension. With very few exceptions, majority of the participants are of the view that these factors never create any obstacles in their reading.

CONCLUSIONS

Reading is an important language skill that helps a language learner to improve his/her language knowledge as well as communication skill. However, it can also become a reason for the learners to worry in language learning process if the learners face such difficulties during reading that hamper their reading comprehension. Being an English teacher of a university, I find every year a lot of students having a lot of problems in reading. After reviewing related literature, I

pointed out several impediments that hamper the EFL learners' reading comprehension and then conducted a survey to assess the influence of those obstacles. I basically tried to make the learners aware of those factors they face in reading, so that they can overcome them, improve their reading skill, and become proficient readers. I believe that the implications of the findings of the present study will contribute to the more effective teaching and learning of reading skills in the language classroom.

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APPENDIX-1

	Factors that Affect Reading Comprehension	Always	Very Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1.	Poor Vocabulary					
2.	Lack of phonological and morphological knowledge					
3.	Insufficient grammar knowledge					
4.	Complex sentence structure					
5.	Deficient knowledge of discourse markers					
6.	Unfamiliarity with different reading strategies					
7.	Lack of background knowledge					
8.	Inadequate cultural knowledge					
9.	Particular genre (like poem)					
10.	Environmental issues like noise					
11.	Uninteresting text					
12.	Unstable mental condition					
13.	Financial hardship					
14.	Weak family and social relationship					
15.	Anxiety/fear during reading					
16.	Lack of confidence					
17.	Lack of motivation					
18.	Inadequate reading habit					
19.	Absence of technology					
20.	Mention any other factor below:					