

Improving Reading Skills of Saudi English Learners



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ABSTRACT: This study aimed at investigating the underlying reasons that can cause Saudi EFL learners to have lower English performance. This study follows a qualitative method through interviewing three college students at Jouf University and one professor. The self-constructed interviews were basically targeted four items; 1) students' related issues, 2) teachers' related issues, 3) curricula- related issues, and 4) assessment related issues. The finding of this study have indicated that the primary reasons of Saudi EFL learners were due to their lower internal and intrinsic motivation. The conceptualized learning English as an academic course to pass, and not an actual language communication. The recommendations suggested by this study were trimmed into the following: increasing English language practice, learning authentic communicative language.

KEY WORDS: Saudi EFL; English Language: Reading Skills; Improving EFL learning; Second Language Reading.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the most important skills in acquiring any language. When learning a foreign language (FL), the focus on reading skill must be intense because of its importance in building a solid foundation in language learning and proper practice. As a foreign language taught in our schools as a core subject and in our universities as a major or an additional subject, however, learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia still face an increasing number of challenges and learning difficulties (Abker, 2020; Alkhaleefah, 2017; Alshammari, 2021; Alzinaidi & Latif, 2019). In general, learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia, even if they have been exposed to English for more than six years, still perform less than expected. More specifically, they face many language challenges when it comes to a single language skill such as reading. These language learners have reading difficulties (Alkhaleefah, 2017; Alshammari, 2021) however their language learning difficulties are not limited to reading, but they experience challenges in other language skills (Abker, 2020). Most of the previous search results were related to the following; students-related; teachers-related; curricula and assessment-related issues. This current study attempts to bridge the research gap as it explores the difficulties of learning reading comprehension for learners of English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia based on the revealed perceptions from language instructors as well as language learners. Furthermore, this study attempts to shed some light on the classroom's practices that could be consulted in improving Saudi EFL learners. Additionally, this current study tries to highlight that even we have increased number of studies (Abker, 2020; Alkhaleefah, 2017; Alshammari, 2021) who investigated poor reading skills of Saudi EFL learner, the dilemma continues, and the problem is expanding rather vanishing.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW / BACKGROUND

Here is a study (Alharbi, 2015) investigated how two different reading strategies affect the reading comprehension of EFL students. To achieve his goal, Alharbi implemented a questionnaire and two IELTS reading sections of different levels of difficulty. The sample of his study is 75 Saudi students studying in the English Department. The participants were randomly divided into two groups: the oral reading group (n = 37) and the silent reading group (n = 38). The results showed a difference in the reading strategies oral reading and silent reading strategies, which did not give any results. The results also showed that the performance of the visual learners was not significantly different from the two groups.

There is another study investigated the poor reading performance of Saudi EFL learners (Alenizi, 2019). Moreover, the main purpose of this research is to explore issues related to reading teaching from the perspective of teachers and learners, so as to adopt the best teaching strategies to achieve the expected results. (Alenizi, 2019) adopts the descriptive approach to assess the participants' opinions through questionnaires. He assesses the current prevailing situation of learning to read English as a foreign language, and indicates that learner difficulties are not properly resolved because teachers are not well trained or pay less attention to reading skills. Descriptive methods were used as samples for teachers of different nationalities speaking English by non-native speakers (n = 60) and Saudi learners (n = 146). Survey results show that teachers' lack of understanding of teaching strategies leads to poor educational

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outcomes. Their responses also indicated that their strategy did not take into account the difficulty of the learner in a particular place which caused the learner to fail to obtain the expected results. The research findings show how culture and background knowledge play an important role.

The main purpose of (Yaghi & Abdullah, 2020) is to explore possible online reading behaviors of EFL when reading online materials. In order to achieve the goal of this research, a mixed method approach was used. The results of the quantitative data indicate that students tend to show the consequences of reversal as the most common behavior. Consistent with the quantitative data, five students were interviewed to gain insight into these arrangements. By doing so, new insights were derived from students' responses, such as analogies with online reading, online reading arrangements, and alternatives to online reading arrangements.

This study (Ali Al Shra'ah, 2021) aims at the effect of developing reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition among Saudi students using Kahoot. The sample in this study is seventyseven Saudi students in the Deanship of Preparatory Programs at Imam Muhammad bin Saud

Islamic University. They were divided into two groups, the first group with the number of students (38), and the second group with the number of students (39). The researcher used the Kahoot to teach the first group, while he used the traditional method to teach the second group during the second semester of the academic year 2018-2019. In this study, three tools were used: a reading comprehension test, a vocabulary test, and a questionnaire. The results of this study showed that there were statistically significant differences between the two groups, in favor of the first group. This indicates that using Kahoot as an instructional strategy has a positive effect on improving students' reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition.

Here is another study aimed at exploring poor reading performance of Saudi EFL learners (Khan et al., 2020). The main purpose of this research is to explore the reading problems of elementary school students and the reasons for their lack of reading ability. By following appropriate and random sampling techniques; This mixed-method obtained quantitative data from 290 elementary school students and qualitative data from 9 teachers and supervisors. Quantitative data from reading tests and checklists and qualitative data from interviews show that students' reading ability is relatively low, mainly due to poor vocabulary, incorrect pronunciation, incorrect spelling, slow reading speed, and grammatical defects. These five aspects account for more than 90% of the challenges that learners face in reading skills. Based on the evidence from this study, we recommend that policymakers, educators, and students focus on these five areas to solve problems related to reading skills.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. *Methods*

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology through collecting interviews.

3.2. *Research Questions*

This research has two questions; one is primary PRQ and one is secondary research question SRQ as follow:

PRQ: What are the possible reasons that cause Saudi EFL learners to have low reading skill?

SRQ: What recommendations can be given to help improving the reading skill of Saudi EFL learners?

3.3. *Participants/ Respondents/ Sample*

There will be 4 participants recruited to collect data for this research. All of the assigned participants were divided into two primary groups as follow: One University professor and three Saudi EFL learners. All participants were male. All of the three EFL students participating in this research haven't joint any sort of private schools nor studied English abroad and they are currently study BA in English seventh semester at Jouf University.

3.4. *Instrument*

There is one instrument; Interviews To demonstrate the internal construction of the interviews, look at the following table:

	Number of Questions
1. Students' related issues	3
2. Teachers' related issues	2
3. Curricula related issues	2
4. Assessment related issues	2

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4. RESULTS

Table 1: Interview Responses for Question No. 1

Interview Question No 1-) Do you revise your language classroom lesson in home? if yes choose (1-2-3-4-more) hours per day	
Participant 1	Yes, 2 hours.
Participant 2	No
Participant 3	No
Participant 4 (Professor)	Absolutely not
Note	According to responses the students one of them who read two hours in a day and the others no while Professor said absolutely not

Table 2: Interview Responses for Question No. 2

Interview Question No 2) Do you like learning English?	
Participant 1	Yes
Participant 2	No
Participant 3	Yes
Participant 4 (Professor)	Surely
Note	One of the participants answered no and the others yes. The professor said I like teaching and learning.

Table 3: Interview Responses for Question No. 3

Interview Question No 3) Do you think learning English is important?	
Participant 1	Yes
Participant 2	Yes
Participant 3	Yes
Participant 4 (Professor)	Yes
Note	All participants agreed with that learning English is very important for a successful future.

Table 4: Interview Responses for Question No. 4

Interview Question No 4) Do you think English teachers are responsible for the poor reading skills of the Saudi EFL learners? How?	
Participant 1	No
Participant 2	No
Participant 3	Yes
Participant 4 (Professor)	No

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Note	One of the participants said sometimes when reading some words the teacher does not correct the correct pronunciation or convey the meaning of the word completely, and this may affect poor reading skill.
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Table 5: Interview Responses for Question No. 5

Interview Question No5) Do you think teacher can help improving the reading skills of Saudi EFL learners? Explain?	
Participant 1	Yes
Participant 2	Yes
Participant 3	Yes
Participant 4 (Professor)	Yes
Note	All participants said yes the teacher can improve reading skill. The second participant said that when the teacher analyzes the sentences and gives some examples, it helps more in understanding the text.

Table 6: Interview Responses for Question No. 6

Interview Question No 6) Do you think the current English curricula is difficult for students to understand? How?	
Participant 1	No
Participant 2	No
Participant 3	No
Participant 4 (Professor)	No
Note	According to the students' answers, it is not difficult to focus on reading. But it should include a focus on knowing how to pronounce and fully understand difficult words in order to develop Saudi EFL learners

Table 7: Interview Responses for Question No. 7

Interview Question No 7) do you think we could improve English curricula? How?	
Participant 1	Yes
Participant 2	Yes
Participant 3	Yes
Participant 4 (Professor)	Yes
Note	All participants answered yes, it is possible to improve and develop the curriculum. The professor suggested setting aside some time for the students to read the stories.

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Table 8: Interview Responses for Question No. 8

Interview Question No 8) Do you think the current reading assessment practices in English classroom are valid?	
Participant 1	No
Participant 2	No
Participant 3	Yes
Participant 4 (Professor)	Yes
Note	Two said no and the other said yes

Table 9: Interview Responses for Question No. 9

Interview Question No 9) How could we improve the reading assessment practices in order to help improving the Saudi EFL learners?	
Participant 1	By learning reading strategies.
Participant 2	Reading Novels.
Participant 3	Reading a lot of Novels and Stories.
Participant 4 (Professor)	By reading out loud
Note	Two participants agreed that reading the novel helps to develop reading skill, while the other participant believes that learning some reading strategies helps in developing reading skill. The professor said by reading aloud in the classroom because it helps the reader focus and comprehension.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This section discusses the results retrieved from the three Saudi EFL participants as well as the one university professor. For the purpose of clarity, we divided the discussion interpretations into four primary sections based on the internal construction of the instrument used to collect data as follows: 1) discussing questions related to Students (Questions numbers 1,2,3), b) discussing questions related to language teachers (Questions numbers 4,5), c) discussing questions related to curricula (Questions numbers 6, 7), and d) 1) discussing questions related to assessment (Questions numbers 8, 9).

Clearly, the responses gathered in answer to questions about the students highlighted some interesting points. Saudi EFL learners are less likely to review or learn English at home, preferring to focus on English subjects in class. Because they are limited to little chunks of the linguistic subject without any additional training or practice, this can suggest low educational performance. Finally, this could relate to one of the main reasons why EFL learners struggle with the English language. Even a university professor can recognize the importance of regular exposure to learn English in and out of the classroom in order to improve their language skills. This could indicate that learners who do not practice English at home are missing out on a valuable language tool that needs to be improved.

Through looking at questions two, we can find out that 75% of the participants had a positive responses regarding that they like learning English, and with a percentage of 100% regarding their perceptions toward the importance of learning English as a second language. More interestingly, the participants insured that learning English is important but they still lack the basic English language performance. This can be interpreted into two main categories: a) Saudi EFL learners prevented forcefully from improving their English performance due to some un-controllable factors. Those un-controllable factors can be associated to the socioeconomic, cultural, religious, etc. along with internal factors as it is proposed by (Alkhaleefah, 2017; Elsayed & Puteh-Behak, 2017; Khan et al., 2020). All of the rest questions follow almost similar distribution of the former ones.

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According to this study, the majority of reasons for reading in EFL were related to the learners own internal motivation. Intrinsic motivation has also been claimed in a growing body of literature to effectively speed second language learning. As a result, this study sheds some light on learners' individual abilities while also looking at a lot of external factors such as the short duration of reading in the classroom. However, learners of EFL in Saudi Arabia may be less motivated due to a lack of time to practice reading English in or even outside the classroom. The following are the study's recommendations; 1) increasing students' exposure time to reading original English language materials into or out of the classroom, 2) increasing the level of actual English practice by focusing on reading knowledge and skills, 3) enriching students' knowledge of how to master reading strategies by the use of available technology and online sources, and 4) increasing learning a collaborative language.

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Appendix (a)

	Number of Questions	
1. Students' related issues	3	1) Do you revise your language classroom lesson home? if yes choose (1-2-3-4-more) hours per day. 2) Do you like learning English? 3) Do you think learning English is important?

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2. Teachers' related issues	2	1) Do you think English teachers are responsible for poor reading skills of the Saudi EFL learners? How? 2) Do you think teacher can help improving the reading skills of Saudi EFL learners? Explain?
3. Curricula related issues	2	1) Do you think the current English curricula is difficult for students to understand? How? 2) do you think we could improve English curricula? How?
4. Assessment related issues	2	1) Do you think the current reading assessment practices in English classroom are valid? 2) How could we improve the reading assessment practices in order to help improving the Saudi EFL learners?