

Investigating ESL reading difficulties at undergraduate level

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate reading difficulties faced by ESL learners at undergraduate level. Reading is the method of looking at a sequence series of words, sentences and paragraphs in order to get meaning of the written material. It is right to say that reading has fundamental importance in any language of the world. Reading is a necessary expertise in order to learn any language. The present study is an attempt to investigate the problems involving Reading Comprehension in an ESL Classroom at undergraduate level. Data is collected by adopting quantitative approach. The entire study is based on 130 samples collected from English Department of Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University, Shaheed Benazir Abad through simple random sampling. In order to assemble, analyses and organize the quantitative data, SPSS 20th version is used. The findings of the research will be extremely supportive tool for the teachers and students of English Language and Literature. It addresses their constant language issues in a rather practical fashion. They will be able to find the reasons and remedies of language deficiencies. It will also serve as the initial prints for the academicians and policy designer to reallocate and revise the syllabus and teaching/learning methodology at undergraduate level.

Keywords: reading strategies, reading motivation, reading comprehension, reading process

1. Introduction

Reading is one of the core elements of language. Reading is the method of looking at a sequence series of words, sentences and paragraphs in order to get meaning of the written material. Practice of reading boosts up and enriches learners' language the learners accumulate vast vocabulary and become accustomed to grammatical structure. Reading competency may open many avenues to enrich readers in terms of reading comprehension. Reading decreases the ratio of misspelling and it improves the pronunciation of words. Reading is the most appropriate method to memories and inculcates the proper spelling of words. Reading is an aid to vocabulary learning seems to be strong, In order to supply the different context of text which is necessary to explain and expand the richness of knowledge (Nobert Schmitt & Roland Carter, 2000).

1.1 Research problem

The world of knowledge and understanding can be unlocked smoothly with the key of reading, it makes the readers to alter their approach, perception, ideas and source of inspiration. The understanding of reading/text is important for ESL learners in a classroom. For that reason, the core aim of present research was to found the issues which cause the reading comprehension difficulties among the ESL undergraduate learners in a university in the Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University in Pakistan.

1.2 Objectives

The following objective was formulated for the present study: To investigate the problems faced by L2 learners in reading comprehension at SBBU.

1.3 Research questions

Based on above objective, the following research questions were designed for this study.

What are the problems faced by L2 learners in reading comprehension at SBBU?

2. Literature Review

According to view point of De Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delport (2005, p. 123), the main purpose of literature is to lead us towards the vibrant understanding of the research problem that has been recognized and to give us clear understanding of meaning and nature of that problem..

A lot researches have been done in the field of reading comprehension in the past three decades. And these researcher have reached on a conclusion and agreement that reading comprehension should be progressive and multi-componential in nature. (Almasi, 2003; Brown *et al.*, 1996; Carrell, 1988b; Dole *et al.*, 1991; Koda, 2004; Pressley, 2000, 2002) [3, 1, 4]. An increasing ratio of studies have been inquired that how students from almost English speaking Countries, from different linguistic system, educational and cultural background experience, survive and succeed within various dialects. Studies that have pronounced upon an academic experiences of international students from several aspects and contexts. It has been summed up that language and culture both are big huge hindrances for immigrant students' successful assimilation.

The problem of reading comprehension problems of the EFL/ESL learners acknowledged some attention in the Arab world and many studies were conducted on this topic. In Jordan, Al Khawaldeh (2012) conducted the study in which he investigated the problems and difficulties faced by the

secondary school students and the most challenging areas for a learners, which were identified through a paper survey were: unfamiliarity with new words and vocabulary, ineffective teaching methodology, absence of association between intensive and extensive reading practices. In Yemen, Balfakeh (2009) concluded that dealing with new words was the major problematic area among secondary school learners, a findings that reveal same things those found in other nan Arab countries just like turkey (Kayaoglu & Turgut, 2011) and china (Lin, 2002).

In Omani context, there are some studies that were conducted on related problem and Al Khamisi (2014) talked about the very poor and pathetic reading comprehension level of students in Omani schools where English is being taught as foreign language. She reported on pitiable results of test in a national reading exams where results of grade four leaners were tantamount to F category in the Ministry of Education grading system (p.72).

2.1 Research Gap

Generally, studies reviewed in this section have either looked at reading problems or reading strategies. On a similar vein, studies have either examined these issues in a secondary school context or a college context. To the best of researcher’s knowledge there are no studies that investigate the problems in university context especially in Sindh. This research intends to fill in this gap by investigating the reading problems of ESL learners of SBBU at undergraduate level.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

“A strategy or outline of how an individual proposes to conduct the research is called Research design” (Babbie, 1992). This study adopts quantitative research design. The “investigation was a descriptive case-study” of Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University and it precisely concentrated on the students of English department using English as a SL. The case study approach has been used by the researcher, because in the view point of Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh (1990) the “case study attempts to describe the subjects’ entire range of behaviours and the relationships of the behaviours to the subject’s history and environment.”

3.2 Research Instruments

As this research is quantitative in nature, for this purpose, a questionnaire was designed divided in two parts. The first part, dealing with sample’s demographics like gender, university, department and degree they are seeking for. The second part comprised of 15 items/statements investigating the reading comprehension difficulties by using a five-point Likert scale that ranged from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”.

3.3 Participants and Sampling

The population of this study consisted undergraduate level ESL Leaners who were enrolled in the English department of Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University, SBA. The researcher opted for Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University, because it had more than 2000 learners and 50 teachers and it was the place where the researcher work as a teacher.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Problems related to language knowledge (1st part of the scale)

In order to answer research question “What are the problems faced by undergraduate ESL learners in reading comprehension at Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University, Shaheed Benazir Abad Pakistan?”. The data given by the participants are analyzed on key variable in reading process. The deigned questioners is consist on the items (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) which aimed to investigate the problems related and illustrated with help of given below tables.

Table 1: Frequency & Percentage of item one. I am weak in vocabulary usage so I cannot understand what I’m reading.

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	51	39.2
Agree	41	31.5
Doubt/Undecided	15	11.5
Valid		
Disagree	17	13.1
Strongly disagree	6	4.6
Total	130	100.0

Table analyzes whether lack of vocabulary is one of the issues in the process of reading comprehension or not. It shows 39.2 % students strongly agree, 13.9% disagree while 11.5% students doubts with the statement.

Table 2: Frequency & Percentage of item two. I cannot understand what I am reading because I am not familiar with the sentence structure.

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	33	25.5
Agree	37	28.5
Doubt/Undecided	37	28.1
Valid		
Disagree	12	9.2
Strongly disagree	11	8.5
Total	130	100.0

Table analyzes due to the unfamiliarity with sentence structures whether students understand what they are reading or not. It shows 28.5 % students agree, 28.1%% students are in doubt while 9.2% disagree with the statement. It concludes that majority of the students do not understands the text because of their unfamiliarity with sentence structures.

Table 3: Frequency & percentage of item three. I don’t know the text organization because I cannot connect ideas while reading a text.

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	33	25.4
Agree	37	28.5
Doubt/Undecided	13	9.2
Valid		
Disagree	35	28.2
Strongly disagree	12	8.5
Total	130	100.0

Table analyzes whether students know about text organization which could be understood by connecting ideas

or not. It shows 28.5 % students agree, 28.2% students disagree while 9.2% doubts with the statement. It concludes that majority of the students are not familiar with the text organization and because of that they connect the ideas during comprehension.

Table 4: Frequency & percentage of item four. I am weak in English grammar so it causes misinterpretation of the reading text.

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	50	38.5
Agree	35	26.9
Doubt/Undecided	14	10.8
Valid		
Disagree	27	20.8
Strongly disagree	4	3.1
Total	130	100.0

Table analyzes whether weak grammar causes misinterpretation of the text among ESL learners or not. It shows 38.5 % students agree, 20.8% students disagree while 10.8% doubts with the statement.

Table 5: Frequency & percentage of item five. Technical terms in an academic text always puts me in trouble since I don't know the meaning.

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	37	28.5
Agree	58	44.6
Doubt/Undecided	12	9.2
Valid		
Disagree	17	13.1
Strongly Disagree	6	4.6
Total	130	100.0

Table analyzes whether technical terms in academic text always puts learners in trouble or not. It shows 44.6 % students agree, 13.1% disagree while 9.2% are in doubt with the statement

Problems related to reading motivation (2nd portion)

In order to answer first research question " What are the problems faced by undergraduate ESL learners in reading comprehension at Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University, Shaheed Benazir Abad Pakistan?". The response of research participants was analyzed on key variable (reading motivation). The deigned questioners is consist on the items (6, 7, 8, 9, 10) which aimed to investigate the problems related and illustrated with help of given below tables.

Table 6: Frequency & percentage of question eleven. I don't like reading book.

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	15	11.5
Agree	25	19.2
Doubt/Undecided	13	10.0
Valid		
Disagree	42	32.3
Strongly disagree	35	26.9
Total	130	100.0

Table analyzes whether ESL students like reading the books or. It shows 32.3 % students disagree, 19.2%% students agree while 10.0% doubts with the statement.

Table 6: Frequency & percentage of question twelve. I think the reading problems come from the instructions and materials which affect my interest in reading

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	30	23.1
Agree	45	34.6
Doubt/Undecided	22	16.9
Valid		
Disagree	24	18.5
Strongly disagree	9	6.9
Total	130	100.0

Table analyzes whether the interest in reading could be affected by the instructions and material given to them or not. It shows 34.6 % students agree, 18.5% students disagree while 16.9% doubts with the statement.

Table 13: Frequency & percentage of question thirteen. When the text is too difficult and uninteres ting, I fail to read.

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	55	42.3
Agree	54	41.5
Doubt/Undecided	10	7.7
Valid		
Disagree	6	4.6
Strongly disagree	5	3.8
Total	130	100.0

Table analyzes whether students fails to read when text is too difficult and uninteresting or not. It shows 41.5 % students agree, 7.7%% students doubts while 4.6% agree with the statement out of 100%. It concludes that majority of the students can not tackle when the text is difficult and uninteresting and it serve as a failure in their process of reading comprehension.

Table 14: Frequency & percentage of question fourteen. When I have no interest in the topic discussed in the reading material m I find it even more difficult.

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	44	33.8
Agree	56	43.1
Doubt/Undecided	10	7.7
Valid		
Disagree	13	10.0
Strongly disagree	7	5.4
Total	130	100.0

Table analyzes whether students find it more difficult to read when the discussed topic is not of their interest or not. It shows 43.1% students disagree, 10.0% students disagree while 7.7% doubts with the statement. It concludes that for majority of the ESL students cannot read the text when they are not interested in the discussed topic during the process of comprehension.

Table 15: Frequency & percentage of item fifteen. When the text is too boring, I fail to read.

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	55	42.3
Agree	54	41.5
Doubt/Undecided	10	7.7
Valid		
Disagree	6	4.6
Strongly disagree	5	3.8
Total	130	100.0

Table analyzes whether ESL students fails to read when text is too boring or not. It shows 41.5 % students agree, 7.7% students' doubts while 4.6% agree with the statement out of 100%. It concludes that majority of the students find boring text as an obstacle in their process of comprehension.

Problems related to background knowledge (3rd portion)

In order to answer first research question "What are the problems faced by undergraduate ESL learners in reading comprehension at Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University, Shaheed Benazir Abad Pakistan?". The response of research participants was analyzed on key variable (background knowledge).

The deigned questioners is consist on the items (11, 12, 13, 14, 15) which aimed to investigate the problems related and illustrated with help of given below tables.

Table 16: Frequency & percentage of item sixteen. When I read a passage, I tend to connect its content with my own previous knowledge related to the topic, and this is sometimes different from what the author intended in the passage.

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	31	23.8
Agree	63	48.5
Doubt/Undecided	16	12.3
Valid		
Disagree	12	9.2
Strongly disagree	8	6.2
Total	130	100.0

Table analyzes whether ESL students tend to connect previous knowledge related to topic or not which is sometimes different from what the author intended in the text. It shows 48.5 % students agree, 12.3% students' doubts while 9.2% disagree with the statement out of 100%. It concludes that majority of the students try to connect the content of passage with their background knowledge and it is different from what the author intended in the text.

Table 17: Frequency & percentage of question seventeen. Some culture-loaded words usually mislead my comprehension of a reading material.

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	28	21.5
Agree	64	49.2
Doubt/Undecided	17	13.1
Valid		
Disagree	15	11.5
Strongly disagree	6	4.6
Total	130	100.0

Table analyzes the misleading of cultural words in the process of comprehension in second language. It shows 49.2% students strongly agree, 13.1% students' doubts while

11.5% agree with the statement out of 100%. It concludes that majority of the student's comprehension get affected by some cultural-loaded words in a text during the process of comprehension.

Table 18: Frequency & percentage of item eighteen. Because of my limited background knowledge, I find difficulty in understanding the whole passage.

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	39	30.0
Agree	55	42.3
Doubt/Undecided	14	10.8
Valid		
Disagree	15	11.5
Strongly disagree	7	5.4
Total	130	100.0

Table analyzes whether ESL students due to their limited background knowledge find difficulty to understand the passage during the comprehension or not. It shows 42.3 % students strongly agree, 11.5% students' disagree while 10.8% remained uncertain with the statement. It concludes that majority of the student's belief that their limited background knowledge is an obstacle for understanding a passage during the process of comprehension

Table 19: Frequency & percentage of item nineteen. Sometimes even if i know every word in a passage, I still find difficulty in grasping its central idea because of my limited background knowledge.

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	39	30.0
Agree	55	42.3
Doubt/Undecided	14	10.8
Valid		
Disagree	15	11.5
Strongly disagree	7	5.4
Total	130	100.0

Table analyzes ESL student's difficulty to grasp the central idea of the text It shows 42.4 % students agree, 11.5% students' disagree while 10.8% remain uncertain with the statement. It concludes that majority of the students' remain unable to grasp the central idea of the text and their limited background knowledge is an obstacle for grasping the idea of text in the process of comprehension.

Table 20: Frequency & percentage of item twenty. I lack in context clues because of limited background knowledge so I fail to read.

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	28	21.5
Agree	64	49.2
Doubt/Undecided	17	13.1
Valid		
Disagree	15	11.5
Strongly disagree	6	4.6
Total	130	100.0

Table analyzes ESL student's lacking in context clues which could fail their process of comprehension. It shows 49.2 % students disagree, 83.8% students' doubts while 11.5% agree with the statement. It concludes that majority of the students

fail to read and lack in context clues because of their limited background knowledge.

5. Conclusions

This research study investigated the English reading comprehension problems reported by the ESL undergraduate students of SBBI, SBA and unveiled the strategies which ESL students use to overcome the problem of reading comprehension. The results of this study confirmed that problems related to language knowledge, lack of reading strategies, motivation, and background knowledge and reading process are major obstacles to learning and improvement for ESL undergraduate students. From the findings of this study, it was identified that reading materials are viewed as the most noteworthy variable to impact students' 'interest' and 'background knowledge'. As a result, the instructor ought to consider the reading materials which are proper for students' levels and intrigue. He or she should likewise actuate students' experience information before giving any 'reading tasks' with a specific end goal to build up students' reading expertise and eradicate the challenges in reading the scholastic writings.

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