

## Improving Reading Skills Using Reading Strategies: The Case of First Year Students at The World Islamic Sciences and Education University in Jordan

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### الملخص

يعد تعليم الطلاب كيفية استخدام استراتيجيات القراءة بشكل فعال مفيداً بشكل خاص للمتعلمين العرب. تلاحظ هذه الورقة آثار استخدام استراتيجيات القراءة على فهم القراءة لدى الطلبة. تتكون عينة الدراسة من ١٢ طالباً وطالبة جامعيين في جامعة العلوم الإسلامية العالمية في الأردن. فيما يتعلق بأساليب البحث ، استخدم الباحث بروتوكول التفكير بصوت عال ومقابلات مع جميع المشاركين في الدراسة الحالية. أطلع الباحث المشاركين على أهداف الدراسة الحالية للتعبير عن أنفسهم بحرية. خلال جلسات بروتوكول التفكير بصوت عالٍ مع الطلاب، كتب الباحث العديد من الملاحظات حول الذين شاركوا في الدراسة وسجلوا كل جلسة. هذا ساعد الباحث على عدم نسيان أي شيء. كما قام الباحث خلال المقابلات بتسجيل الجلسات بعد أخذ موافقة المشاركين من أجل مراجعة إجاباتهم على الأسئلة. فوجئت بأن غالبية المشاركين لا يعرفوا شيئاً عن استراتيجيات القراءة. وشرح الباحث استراتيجيات القراءة للمشاركين وممارسة بعض هذه الاستراتيجيات مع المشاركين. كان من الواضح أن الطلبة كانوا سعداء في نهاية المقابلة وبروتوكول التفكير بصوت عالٍ لأنهم تعلموا استراتيجيات قراءة جديدة لم يعرفوا شيئاً عنها من قبل. إن استخدام استراتيجيات القراءة هذه جعلهم واثقين أثناء القراءة ويعزز فهمهم للقراءة. أخيراً ، زادت رغبتهم في قراءة النصوص الإنجليزية بعد انتهاء بروتوكول التفكير بصوت عالٍ والمقابلات.

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### Abstract

Teaching students how to use reading strategy effectively is necessary, especially for Arab learners. This paper observes the effects of employing reading strategies on the students' reading comprehension. The sample of the study consists of 12 undergraduate male and female students at World Islamic Science and Education in Jordan. With regard to the research methods, the researcher used think-aloud protocol and interviews with all the participants in the current study. The researcher informed the participants about the aims of the current study in order to express themselves freely. During the think-aloud protocol sessions with students, the researcher documented all notes about the students who participated in the study and recorded each session after taking the permission from the participants. This helped the researcher not to forget anything. During the interviews, the researcher recorded the sessions in order to revise their answers to the questions. It was surprising that the majority of participants do not know anything about reading strategies. The researcher explained reading strategies to the participants and practiced some of them with the participants. It was clear that, at the end of the interview and applying think-aloud protocol, students were happy as they learned new reading strategies that they never known before. Using these strategies enhanced students' confidence and comprehension while reading. Finally, the students' desire to read English texts increased after they had taken part in the interviews and applying think-aloud protocol strategies.

**Keywords:** reading strategies, reading comprehension, improvement in EFL reading comprehension, first year students



## 1.Introduction

Reading is considered the most important language skill that people need in all aspects of their lives. It is required not only for students but also for all people. For example, it is impossible to book tickets online without reading. Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson (1985) argued that reading is not only a skill that we need to learn a language, but also it is a mandatory life skill. It will be impossible for a student to pass his/her courses without being able to read. Without having the ability to read, we will not have the same opportunities that readers may have in their lives. Thus, important and effective reading skills lead to success.

Several researchers confirmed that many Arab learners of English language struggle with reading English texts (AlJuhani, 2015; Al-Khalifah & Al-Khalifa (2011)). According to these researchers, reading difficulties can be attributed to the differences between Arabic and English reading systems. Other researchers confirmed that the lack of employing reading strategies may also lead to reading difficulties (Qrquez & Rashid, 2017). Additionally, the lack of having effective and skillful teachers may result in having less skillful students. Teachers should focus on the use of reading strategies in English classes as this can help students construct meaning and overcome reading difficulties.

### 1.Research Problem:

Reading is the most necessary skill to achieve success in all stages of language learning. There is a strong relationship between the ability to read and success. Without being able to read, professional life will not be successful. Many learners of

the English language struggle because of their deficiency in reading English texts correctly. Even if some of them can read, they struggle with comprehension issues. Being able to understand written material is not an easy task because it depends on using several reading strategies that help overcome reading difficulties effectively (Qrquez & Rashid, 2017).

Hence, the problem of the study clearly emerged, which revolves around the existence of a knowledge gap between improving reading skills and using reading strategies among first-year students at The World Islamic Science and Education in Jordan. The researcher seeks to cover this gap with appropriate research and scientific methods.

## 2. Questions of the Study

Several studies have focused on the importance of reading strategies in improving reading and comprehension skills (Qrquez & Rashid, 2017). Therefore, the current study focused on using reading strategies as a way of improving comprehension. Accordingly, the problem of the current research can be resolved by answering the following main research question: “Would the use of reading strategies improve readers’ comprehension ?” In addition, the following sub-questions helped the researcher find answer to the research problem:

1. What are the reading strategies along with their importance?
2. What do you think students should do in order to improve their reading skills?
3. What do you know about predicting, summarizing and activating prior knowledge?
4. Do you usually use reading strategies in order to improve your reading skills? If so, what are they?

### 3. Research Goals

The current research seeks to attain several goals, which include:

1. providing students with the useful reading strategies that help them improve their reading skills.
2. identifying the effect of using certain reading strategies, such as predicting and summarizing on improving their reading comprehension.
3. identifying the impact of using reading strategies on the students' interests in learning English.

### 4. Research Importance

The importance of the current research can be noticed through the following points:

1. It may help students learn and practice many reading strategies that would help them to improve their reading skills.
2. The study focused on the use of think-aloud protocol and interviews that may help the researcher find clear justification without bias.
3. This research focused on the importance of certain reading strategies and their role in improving students' reading comprehension.

### 5. Research Limits

1. This study was limited to using qualitative research methods (think-aloud protocol and interviews) with the participants.
2. This study was limited to 12 male and female students who are all in their first academic year at The World Islamic Science and Education University in Jordan.

3. This study was applied in the second semester of the academic year 2021-2022.

## 6. Research Terms:

- 1-**Reading strategies:** the term reading strategies is defined as a cognitive technique that may help readers construct the meaning of the written material. The reader can use several reading strategies in order to construct meaning and increase comprehension. These strategies include skimming, scanning, intensive reading, predicting, and summarizing.
- 2-**Think-aloud protocol:** It is considered as one of the best methods that helps researchers find out readers' reading difficulties and the strategies they use in reading. It allows readers to articulate everything they think aloud while reading. Thus, the researcher has to record and analyze what he notices while employing this method.

## 7. Literature Review:

Chamot (2001) defined the term strategy as "the techniques or procedures that facilitate a learning task" (p. 25). Qrgez and Rashid (2017) pointed that that reading strategies help readers to read smoothly and construct meaning as they read. They asserted that the use of reading strategies helps students improve their reading skills and at the same time improves their comprehension. Dhieb-Henia (2003) found that reading strategies positively affect the students' performance in reading. That is, students may use different strategies while reang the same text. For example, they can use summarizing, predicting, activating prior knowledge, skimming, and scanning. In the same vein, Carrell (1998) asserted that "reading strategies are of interest not only for what they reveal about the ways readers

manage interactions with written text but also for how the use of strategies is related to effective comprehension” (Carrell, 1998, p.97).

Moreover, in his description of reading strategies, Abbott (2006) stated, “the mental operations or comprehension processes that readers select and apply in order to make sense of what they read” (Abbott, 2006, P. 637). Readers should be able to use reading strategies before, during and after reading. Therefore, the more strategies used in reading, the greater the increase of comprehension would result. In other words, there is no perfect strategy that suits all kinds of written materials. Thus, it is recommended to use a variety of reading strategies to guarantee you understand written materials perfectly. There will be more discussion about the three different reading strategies that the researcher focused on in the current research.

### 7.1 Predicting:

The purpose of reading is to construct meaning from written materials. As a way to be able to understand written materials, readers should be able to use reading strategies effectively. Teele (2004) emphasized that predicting strategy can help learners construct meaning from written materials. Hutchinson (1987) asserts in his definition of the predicting strategy that it is “a matter of using an existing knowledge of a pattern or system in order to anticipate what is likely in a novel situation” (Hutchinson, 1987, P: 9).

Moreover, Al Azmi (2012) suggested that predicting strategy can improve reading skills in various ways. Readers can use their prior knowledge to predict and construct meaning while reading. The more we use prediction while reading, the more we interact with written materials. This would increase readers’

interest and improve their comprehension as they read. Duke and Pearson (2005) affirmed that without paying attention to the prediction strategy, teachers would find it difficult to improve students' comprehension. Thus, teachers have to practice with their students the way to use predicting while reading and to encourage them to use it effectively. This would help readers not only to understand written materials but also to increase their interest in reading. For example, readers can predict the main ideas of the text before and during the reading. After they finish, they can revise, compare, and discuss their prediction. As mentioned before, the more students activate their prior knowledge and relate it to the written materials, the more they will enhance their comprehension.

## 7.2 Activating Prior Knowledge

Several researchers discussed the effect of activating prior knowledge on reading comprehension (Anthony & Raphael, 1987, Floyd & Carrell, 1987). Teachers can use this strategy with their students as a way to stimulate them to read and to activate their existing schemata , and apply it to written materials. Ausubel (1968, p. ????) reports, "If I had to reduce all of educational psychology to just one principle, I would say this: The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows." Thus, students should use this strategy since it can facilitate reading tasks and increase readers' comprehension. For instance, students can relate what they already know about the topic or the text and try to make a relationship between what is known and what is written. In addition, activating prior knowledge helps many students and learners overcome their reading comprehension difficulties. Qrqrz (2017) explained that to master reading skills a reader is required to interact with the text. Without effective interaction

between the reader and the written materials, it might be difficult to construct meaning perfectly.

### 7.3 Summarizing

Summarizing is the strategy that depends mainly on finding out and taking notes of what is important while reading. This strategy helps readers construct meaning from what they read and remind them of the main ideas. It also helps them keep all important ideas and details after reading the whole text (Adler, 2001). As a first step, readers should be able to distinguish between the main ideas and the supporting ideas in the text. After that, they will be able to write and organize the key ideas together in a way that helps them construct meaning effectively from written materials, even if the written material is very long.

### 8.Action Research Question

To what extent can we rely on reading strategies to increase the interest and improve the reading comprehension of first - year students at The World Islamic Sciences and Education University in Jordan?, and what is the effect of using reading strategies on improving readers' comprehension through the use of think-aloud protocol and interview?

### 9.Methods

According to the researcher's experience as an English instructor, it can be easily noticed that many Arab students struggle with reading English texts. This may refer to various reasons such as the different systems in each language. Additionally, this can be attributed to the lack of using suitable reading strategies that help readers construct meaning and find out the key ideas in each text. To find out the effect of specific reading strategies on enhancing students' comprehension, the researcher conducted the current study employing two different research methods. These methods are think-aloud protocol and

interviews, which were applied to 12 students who are all in their first academic year at The World Islamic Sciences and Education in Jordan.

The present study helps students read English texts using reading strategies in order to improve their level in reading. In order to overcome reading difficulties, the researcher focused on the importance of using reading strategies before, during and after reading. These strategies were all new to the students. The lack of using reading strategies leads to have many reading difficulties. For this reason, the researcher decided to conduct the current research. The methods employed in this study to collect the data were think-aloud protocols and interview.

### **9.1 Data collection instrument and the process of the research**

The main aim of the current research was to find out the reading strategies that the students use in their reading and the effect of using reading strategies on their reading comprehension. Reading strategies were introduced and explained to the participants. Also, the researcher practiced some of these strategies with the participants to be sure they understood them. The results indicated that the majority of students (70%) did not employ reading strategies while reading. They only pronounced words without making inferences between ideas. The researcher asked the participants to think aloud while reading in order to find out the reading strategies they used in their reading. The researcher wrote down notes about each participant. In addition, the researcher focused on the importance of reading strategies on the students' comprehension before, during and after reading task. There were three passages which were written in a simple language. The participants were asked to read. These methods help the researcher understand the students' point of view about reading

skill, reading comprehension, and the strategies they use before, during and after reading.

### 9.2 Sample of the Study

The participants in the current study represented both genders and aged 19 to 23. They belonged to different majors. Eighteen students were asked to participate in the present study, and six students refused to take part. Thus, the participants of the study consisted of 12 students. The objective of the research was discussed with the students, and their participation will remain anonymous. The duration of each interview was between 10 to 16 minutes in order to answer the interview questions. The interview questions were asked in the same order as follows:

- 1.What are reading strategies and their importance?
- 2.What should the students do in order to improve their reading skills?
- 3.How familiar are the students at predicting, summarizing, and activating prior knowledge?
- 4.How well do students use reading strategies in order to improve their reading skills? If so, what are they?

### 10.data analysis:

The current section explains the methods of data analysis through the think-aloud protocol and interviews with 12 students. The researcher used reading strategies with the study participants that included predicting, activating prior knowledge, and summarizing.

Accordingly, it can be summarized that the study sample has a low score in all of the reading strategies that included predicting, summarizing, and activating prior knowledge . This mean score is based on the following categories according to the

Oxford University classification (Al Azmi, 2012), and this classification was used for each of the reading strategies:

| <b>Table No. (1): Classification of grade categories</b> |                                                |                          |
|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| High                                                     | Always or almost always used Usually Used      | 4.5 to 5.0<br>3.5 to 4   |
| Medium                                                   | Sometime used                                  | 2.5 to 3.4<br>1.5 to 2.4 |
| Low                                                      | Generally, not used Never or almost never used | 1.0 to 1.4               |

## 11. Results and Discussion

After conducting think-aloud protocols, interviews, and experiments with the participants, the researcher concluded the following:

### 11.1 Think-Aloud Protocols

The researcher explained to the participants how to think aloud while reading and how to express what they think about while reading in order to find out the main reading strategies they use as they read. Also, the use of think-aloud protocol helps the researcher find out if the participants use reading strategies.

After conducting think-aloud protocol with all the participants, the results of the research indicated that the majority of the students (9 participants) lack the ability to activate their prior knowledge while reading. Moreover, the study revealed that only 3 participants used reading strategies, even if the rest of the participants knew reading strategies. While reading, they only care about pronouncing words correctly and neglect the meaning of each word or sentence, which improves their comprehension. In addition, the researcher encouraged them to use the previously mentioned strategies as a way to increase their comprehension. After that, there was a

different result. They started to find the main ideas and ask the researcher if they understood the text correctly. They attributed their deficiency in reading to the reason that they did not read on a daily basis. As the majority of them (9 participants) stated that they spend their time on social media and neglect learning. Also, only 2 participants attributed their failure in reading to their teachers in school. They affirmed that their schoolteachers focused only on grammar and taught them vocabulary without practice. That is why they have difficulties in reading and writing as well.

In addition, they declared that they did not know anything about reading strategies, and they were surprised how these strategies helped them construct meaning from written materials. The researcher guided each participant in using every strategy to be sure he/she overcomes his/her reading difficulties and construct meaning as he/she reads. However, after practicing these strategies with them, the participants showed real improvement in their reading comprehension. The results indicated that using reading strategies effectively (predicting, summarizing, and activating prior knowledge) leads to extend and improve their reading comprehension. Using the think-aloud protocol was helpful; it allowed the researcher to find out the students reading difficulties and the strategies they use before, while and after reading. It also indicated how the participants' reading comprehension improved when using reading strategies. The participants were so happy they learned these strategies because they allowed them to construct meaning effectively from written materials.

## 11.2 Interviews

The researcher explained to the participants the goal of the current study. They understood that their participation would remain anonymous in order to let them answer freely and express what they had. Thus, the researcher recorded the answer of each participant in order to be analyzed after the end of all interviews.

With regard to the results of the interview questions, the majority of the participants (9 students) declared that they are not familiar with reading strategies. Only three participants declared that they know “reading strategies”, but they do not use them while reading frequently. This indicates that the majority of the participants’ comprehension is limited due to neglecting reading strategies. Additionally, this goes in line with what the researcher found in the think-aloud protocol, where participants pronounce words and sentences without trying to build relationships between them. This definitely leads to have limited understanding of the text and affects negatively their overall comprehension.

Regarding the answer of the second question in the interview, the participants answered the questions differently. One of the participants declared, “Students should read more and more in their free time in order to enhance their reading”. It is a well-known fact that the more you read, the more proficient and skillful you will be. Another participant confirmed that “students should learn reading strategies that help them improve their level in reading”. Also, 3 participants believed that their teachers in school are the reason for their reading difficulties, as they did not encourage them to read and to use reading

strategies. Their teachers at school focused only on helping them answer the questions that follow each reading task. They did not care about their students' comprehension ,and this led to struggles while reading English materials. Thus, students do not use reading strategies and they only try to find out the common words which help hem understand the main ideas of the text.

The researcher asked the participants about specific reading strategies, which are predicting, summarizing , and activating prior knowledge. The question was designed to find out their existing knowledge about these strategies. It is a well-known fact that students who do not know reading strategies will have limited comprehension. The participants answered the question with answers that are well-known to most of us. Their answers were in line with the results of think-aloud protocol. Unfortunately, the participants knew the meaning of each strategy, but they did not know how to apply their knowledge while reading. For instance, one of the participants asserted that he knows the meaning of predicting, but he does not know how to use it as a reading strategy. During the think-aloud protocol, the researcher explained to the participants different kinds of reading strategies. Some of the participants declared, "I know summarization, but what is the relationship between reading comprehension and summarization". Regarding "activating prior knowledge, all of the participants emphasized that they had never heard anything about this strategy before. After the researcher explained to them how to activate their knowledge and how to relate it to their prior knowledge, the participants were surprised and said that their focus while reading was on how to guess the meaning of each word and how to pronounce it

correctly. This negatively affects their reading comprehension , and as a result they considered learning English as an impossible issue.

The last question in the interview focused on if the participants use reading strategies in order to improve their reading skills. Correspondingly, their answers were 100% similar to what the researcher noticed during the think-aloud protocol activity sessions. Students did not know anything about reading strategies, but they usually use some of them even if they did not know them. For example, one of the participants used skimming in the think-aloud protocol; she affirmed that she uses it by instinct ,but no one of her teachers taught her about it. Another student stated that he only knows scanning. He said, “My teachers at school taught us that if you want to answer the questions that follow reading passages, you have to scan the text by your eyes in order to find the answer”. The same student affirmed that they are used to answering the questions even if their comprehension is too limited. Thus, the only strategies they used in the think-aloud protocol were only skimming and scanning. The results were not surprising as they were in line with what the researcher found in the think-aloud protocol.

These results help the researcher determine the reasons behind the participants’ reading comprehension difficulties. Their teachers are one of the reasons, on the one hand, and the participants themselves on the other hand. Their teachers did not teach them how to read English text effectively with full comprehension. Also, their teachers did not teach them anything about reading strategies. On the other hand, the participants

themselves do not read in their free time as they consider reading as a useless activity. Also, they consider learning English as an impractical thing because they learned it, but they do not use it in their everyday activities in their daily life.

## 12. Conclusion:

Reading in English is a difficult issue especially for Arab students in their first year at university. This unfortunately leads to a struggle with being unable to read English texts smoothly and construct meaning. In addition, there were several studies which suggested that reading strategies help readers have better understanding as they read. Thus, there is a strong relationship between reading fluently and comprehension on one side and employing reading strategies on the other . The participants in the current study emphasized that they know nothing about reading strategies even if they use some of them (e.g., skimming and scanning) without knowing the names of these strategies. In addition, the results show that knowing nothing about reading strategies leads to being unable to understand English materials perfectly. As a result, it affects negatively their ability to learn the four language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). However, after the researcher explained some reading strategies and how to use them in order to improve their comprehension, the participants' comprehension changed positively as they started to link the ideas together and find out the main ideas in each written text. Thus, it is recommended to use a variety of reading strategies to guarantee the student understands written materials perfectly.

### 13. Implications:

In future research, different reading strategies should be taken into account; different reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, predicting, and activating prior knowledge can help readers extend their knowledge and have a better understanding as they read. Also, other researchers may include both teachers and students in their research as a way to have better understanding from both parts. Researchers can extend their samples to include more participants from different levels. It is recommended to have bigger samples in order to have a better understanding of reading comprehension and the use of reading strategies. This research can be applied by more than one researcher with different samples in order to compare between the results they may find. Finally, researchers can employ several techniques in order to find out their results, such as by classroom observation or a questionnaire.

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