

# The Causes of Reading Difficulty: The Perception of Iranian EFL Post-graduate and Under-graduate Students

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**Abstract**—This study investigates the causes of the reading difficulty as perceived by under-graduate and post-graduate EFL learners. 34 post-graduate and 36 under-graduate students at the University of Isfahan took part in this study. In particular, this study tries to know whether there is any difference between the perceptions of these two groups of learners. A questionnaire synthesized Eskey (1986), and Bernhardt (1991), cited in Lin (2002), was used as the main instrument for analysis of knowledge categories affecting reading comprehension. The questionnaire considered three general categories of linguistic, conceptual and socio-cultural knowledge as the building blocks of reading. It consists of four multiple-choice questions, all accepting multiple responses. The results of the frequency analysis showed that post-graduate students, with higher level of language proficiency, attached less importance to linguistic knowledge as the factor helping reading comprehension success, but most importance to socio-cultural and conceptual knowledge. With the decrease of linguistic knowledge; however, under-graduates attached better reading comprehension to linguistic knowledge rather than socio-linguistic and conceptual knowledge.

**Index Terms**—conceptual knowledge, linguistic knowledge, socio-cultural knowledge, post-graduate students, under-graduate students

## I. INTRODUCTION

Reading is the primary source of language input for most of EFL learners since they are living in a context in which English is not spoken. They mostly start learning English through reading books, texts, articles, etc. Considering the great importance of reading for EFL learners, knowing about what constitute reading skill and what can end in difficulty for EFL learners in the course of reading a text deem to be crucial. To find the problematic areas of reading for EFL learners of varied proficiency levels, different classifications of reading sub-skills or sub-sections must be taken into account.

Reading is not a single-factor process; it is a multivariate skill involving a complex combination and integration of a variety of cognitive, linguistic and non-linguistic skills ranging from low-level processing abilities to high-order knowledge of text representation and integration of ideas with global knowledge. (Nassaji, 2003). Hirsch (2003) believed that at least three principles have useful implications for improving students' reading comprehension; the first one is fluency which allows the mind to concentrate on comprehension, second, breadth of vocabulary increases comprehension and facilitates further reading and finally, domain knowledge, the most recently understood principle, increases fluency, broadens vocabulary and enables deeper comprehension. He continues that knowledge of reading comprehension requires knowledge of words and the world.

Eskey (1986) categorized the knowledge crucial to reading into two types; knowledge of form and knowledge of substance. Knowledge of form is linguistic in nature and includes graphophonic, lexical, syntactic and semantic knowledge. Knowledge of substance, on the other hand, entails cultural and pragmatic knowledge. Bernhardt (1991) identified two types of knowledge; domain-specific knowledge and culture-specific knowledge.

A number of studies examined the role of so-called low-level processes including lexical, syntactic or grammatical knowledge in reading comprehension. Quian (2002) in a study of investigating the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and academic reading performance concludes that using a combination of vocabulary depth and size measures results in a greater ability to predict reading performance. Van Geldern et al. (2003) have shown that grammar is as important as or even superior to vocabulary in predicting reading performance.

Shiotsu and Weir (2007) in a study of relative significance of syntactic knowledge and vocabulary breadth found that syntactic knowledge was a better predictor of text reading comprehension than vocabulary. Furthermore, the relative significance of syntactic variable was not limited to the readers of lower ability alone. Mecarty (2000) concluded that

lexical and grammatical knowledge correlate significantly with reading comprehension; however, only lexical knowledge explains reading comprehension. Investigating the role of lexical knowledge on general reading comprehension, Hawas (1990) concluded that the participants who did not know the meaning of some of the words in the passage were unable to answer the corresponding reading comprehension questions.

By reviewing studies mentioned here and other studies (Alderson, 1993; Berry, 1990), it can be understood that both lexical and syntactic knowledge are crucial to reading comprehension. Purpura (2004) even goes further in defining grammatical knowledge so that it includes knowledge of phonological, lexical and cohesive forms along with their meanings.

Regarding the socio-cultural and cognitive knowledge influencing reading comprehension, Lin (2004) in a study of cross-cultural barriers in reading English concluded that mastering linguistic knowledge of vocabulary, phonetics and grammar is helpful in decoding words' symbols, however, in the process of reading, many Chinese students already possessed the above knowledge, but still could not comprehend the text completely so understanding the cultural content of what is being read is a crucial factor in reading comprehension.

Abu-Rabia (1998) investigated the social and cognitive factors influencing reading comprehension and concluded that students scored higher on tasks of reading comprehension with the texts from their own cultural setting than texts from unfamiliar setting. In other words, culture familiarity improves learners' performance on reading comprehension. Anderson and Gipe (1983) investigated the effects of cultural background on reading comprehension of cultural texts using texts that were either related or unrelated to the participants' cultural background. The result shows a significant correlation between cultural background and reading comprehension.

In a study on the perception of the role of prior knowledge in reading comprehension, Lin (2002) mentioned that:

"So far as EFL reading comprehension is concerned, it seems that the more EFL vocabulary, syntax and formal structures are learned, the less importance is attached to them and greater importance is attached to conceptual and socio-cultural knowledge." (p. 186)

Considering the classifications presented, it can be concluded in general that the knowledge needed for a successful reading comprehension or in other words, the knowledge that may cause difficulty for EFL learners in comprehending a reading text if it is not extant in learners' mind, can be divided into three broad categories, namely, linguistic, conceptual (related to the content of what is being read) and socio-cultural knowledge.

The present study is trying to find out what the areas of reading difficulty are in the mind of Iranian under-graduate and post-graduate students while dealing with a reading text in English. On the basis of the classifications presented, the study is to find out:

1. What knowledge has been considered to be the most important and at the same time difficult for Iranian under-graduate and post-graduate students in reading English texts?
2. Do the ideas of learners vary as their proficiency varies?

## II. METHOD

### A. *Participants*

To address the questions, a survey was conducted among 70 EFL students, 34 post-graduate (MA) and 36 under-graduate, junior students, at the University of Isfahan. The subjects were culturally and linguistically homogeneous, in the sense that they were all Iranian, but their proficiency level varied as they were under-graduate and post-graduate learners. The age range of post-graduate students was 22 to 35 and under graduate ones was 20 to 22. They were all students of English. The post-graduate (MA) students were TEFL major and the under-graduates were English literature junior students.

### B. *Instrumentation*

The current research deployed a questionnaire synthesized Eskey (1986), Bernhardt (1991) analysis of knowledge categories affecting reading comprehension. The questionnaire made by and cited in Lin (2002) used as the instrument by the researchers in the present study. The questionnaire considered three general categories of linguistic, conceptual and socio-cultural knowledge as the building blocks of reading comprehension. It consists of four multiple-choice questions, all accepting multiple responses. One of the choices was "other factors" to let students openly express their own ideas regarding the question. To validate the questionnaire in context of Iran, it was presented to one of the lecturers at the University of Isfahan and two post-graduate students to comment on the questions and choices. They considered it suitable for the purpose of the present research. There was no need to translate the questionnaire into students L1 since the wording was quite comprehensible to students, at the same time; they were allowed to ask any question in case they required to.

### C. *Procedure*

A brief introduction to the purpose of the survey and questionnaire was given to the two groups of learners, under-graduates and post-graduates, separately. The students were asked to rank the choices from the most important to the least important and use numbers for ranking. They were also told that in the last choice they could add their own ideas. There was no time limitation and the students were allowed to think carefully and then rank the choices.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. *The Ranked Multiple Responses to Question 1*

1) The major factors that cause difficulty in reading comprehension are (You may choose more than one factor. Please rank the factors you choose in order from most important to least important.)

- A) Unknown EFL vocabulary
- B) Too complicated syntax and /or formal structure
- C) Unfamiliar content
- D) Lack of necessary socio-cultural background knowledge
- E) Other factors such as (please specify)

The frequency of the ranking of the choices by both under-graduate (junior level students) and the post-graduate (MA level students) is summarized in table 1 as follows:

TABLE 1:  
RANKED MULTIPLE-RESPONSES TO QUESTION 1

| response     |      | A  | B  | C | D  | E  |
|--------------|------|----|----|---|----|----|
| MA level     | rank |    | 4  | 6 | 14 | 10 |
| Junior level | rank | 16 | 10 | 8 | 2  |    |

In the question of the major factor of difficulty, as the table shows, choice C was ranked as the highest for MA level students and choice A was the highest in rank for the junior level students. In other words, unfamiliar content was assumed to be the major factor of difficulty for post-graduate students and unknown vocabulary was considered the most important to under-graduate ones.

B. *Ranked Multiple Responses to Question 2*

2) The English text, which contains no new words, might not be comprehensible, mainly because of the following factors; (You may choose more than one factor. Please rank the factors you choose in order from most important to least important.)

- A) Unable to decide on the sense in which a word is used when the word may be used in several different senses.
- B) Unable to understand the idioms in the text
- C) Unable to understand the subject content
- D) Lack of necessary socio-cultural background knowledge
- E) Unable to understand the syntax and formal structure used in the text
- F) Other factors such as (please specify)

Table 2 summarizes the difference between the perceptions of the two groups regarding the incomprehensibility of a reading text.

TABLE 2:  
RANKED MULTIPLE RESPONSES TO QUESTION 2

| response     |      | A  | B  | C | D | E | F |
|--------------|------|----|----|---|---|---|---|
| MA level     | rank | 14 | 10 | 2 | 2 | 6 |   |
| Junior level | rank | 16 | 4  | 2 | 8 | 6 |   |

As the table shows, for post-graduate and under-graduate students, the fact that a word can have multiple senses makes a text incomprehensible. The least important factor was lack of content knowledge for junior students, while content knowledge along with socio-cultural knowledge were both the least important for MA students.

C. *Ranked Multiple Responses to Question 3*

3) The major factors that could cause poor performance in reading comprehension are (You may choose more than one factor. Please rank the factors you choose in order from most important to least important.)

- A) Nervousness
- B) Difficult or boring content
- C) Shortage of time
- D) Lack of necessary socio-cultural background knowledge
- E) Other factors such as (please specify)

TABLE 3;  
RANKED MULTIPLE RESPONSES TO QUESTION 3

| response     |      | A  | B | C  | D  | E |
|--------------|------|----|---|----|----|---|
| MA level     | rank | 2  | 6 | 10 | 16 |   |
| Junior level | rank | 10 | 6 | 14 | 6  |   |

As the table shows, lack of socio-cultural knowledge was selected to be the factor that caused poor performance for MA students while shortage of time was the crucial factor for junior level learners. Nervousness could not affect the performance of MA students comparing with the junior levels. But content and socio-cultural factors are not important for junior level learners.

#### D. Ranked Multiple Responses to Question 4

4) Suppose you read an English text or sentence for the first time. If you find it easy to understand, it is mainly because of the following factors (You may choose more than one factor. Please rank the factors you choose in order from most important to least important.)

- A) Absence of unknown EFL vocabulary
- B) Simple EFL syntax
- C) Familiar socio-cultural background
- D) Other factors such as (please specify)

TABLE 4:  
RANKED MULTIPLE RESPONSES TO QUESTION 4

| response     |      | A  | B  | C | D |
|--------------|------|----|----|---|---|
| MA level     | rank | 20 | 8  | 6 |   |
| Junior level | rank | 4  | 30 | 2 |   |

Referring to table 4, absence of unknown EFL vocabulary makes reading comprehension easy for MA, post-graduate students and a simple syntax makes the comprehension easier for juniors. Socio-cultural background is the least related to the easiness of a text from the viewpoint of both groups.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

To find the answer to the questions of the study, a closer examination of the questionnaire results is crucial. The first question was a general one; it was designed to identify the causes that subjects believed might lead to difficulty in reading comprehension. Among the six choices, a, and b concerned readers' linguistic knowledge, while choices c and d concerned content knowledge and socio-cultural knowledge respectively. The factor that makes a reading text difficult for post-graduate students was lack of content knowledge, while under-graduate learners thought of unknown vocabulary to be problematic. Since post-graduate students are of a higher proficiency level than junior students, it is quite logical to think that unknown vocabulary or syntax is not a factor that may cause difficulty; in other words, the importance of basic knowledge of English vocabulary or syntax maybe diminished for them while juniors are still struggling with the lexical meaning in a text. The findings of this question are in line with Lin's study (2002) in which higher level students attached greater importance to conceptual and socio-cultural knowledge. And also in line with Lin's research (2004) in that the content is a crucial factor in comprehending a text. The findings for under-graduate candidates were in line with Mecartty (2000) and Hawas (1990) asserting that only lexical knowledge explained reading comprehension and that the participants who did not know the meaning of some of the words in the passage were unable to answer the corresponding reading comprehension questions.

The second question was intended for investigating how the subjects perceived factors other than vocabulary. It is not uncommon that EFL learners cannot understand a text that contains no unknown words, this frequently happens in the researchers' own classes. While it is common that EFL readers can recognize the entire individual words in a text, we found them unable to produce a meaningful interpretation of the text. So the second question seeks to find the major causes of such failures. Both under-graduate and post-graduate students agreed on the fact that words with multiple senses make a text incomprehensible. This agreement approved the aforementioned claim that EFL learners may not comprehend a text since every English word has more than one meaning and knowing all of them is sometimes impossible for EFL students, because living in a non-native context takes the chance of having more contact with English in different contexts; the fact that can be clearly seen in EFL reading classes.

The third question was set to investigate the major factor that might cause the EFL readers impaired performance in reading. The choices did not concern the linguistic knowledge. Choices a and c refer to the psychological and time limitation pressures on students while reading a text; choices b and d, however, refer to content and socio-cultural knowledge respectively. Lack of socio-cultural knowledge was the factor attributed to poor performance by post-graduate students, while shortage of time was the crucial factor for junior level learners. The findings for junior students were in line with Lin (2002) in which the middle-school and tertiary level EFL majors agreed on ranking time pressure as the top choice in impaired reading comprehension. MA students, thanks to their higher proficiency level, can manage their time, so to them lack of a cultural background causes reading impairment.

The fourth and also the last question concerned the opposite of what the first three questions addressed. It intended to find out the factors that might make a text easy to understand. The first two choices addressed the linguistic knowledge, while the second two choices addressed the conceptual and socio-cultural knowledge respectively. Absence of unknown EFL vocabulary makes reading comprehension easy for post-graduate students whereas a simple syntax makes the comprehension easier for juniors. The findings of this question were in line with Shiotsu and Weir (2007), Van Geldern et al. (2003) and Alderson (1993) for under-graduate students in which the syntactic knowledge was the better indicator of successful reading comprehension; however, only lexical knowledge explains reading comprehension as Mecarty (2000) concluded and post-graduate students perceived.

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