

Reading for Detail, Vocabulary Acquisition, and Making Inferences as Vital Variables in Inspecting EFL Undergraduates Reading Comprehension

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Abstract. This article inspects the importance of vocabulary acquisition, inference capacity, and reading for detail as sub-skills in reading comprehension for EFL learners. Reading is seen as an activity with an ultimate goal, viz. comprehension, which is the core of the process. Reading without comprehension is, absolutely, an ineffectual activity. Yet, the extent of understanding depends upon many factors, such as, the nature of the reading task, the clarity of the expression, the reader's purpose, interest, and his background and past experience. Comprehension takes place on three levels: literal meaning or construction of meaning, interpretation of meaning, and evaluation of meaning. These processes are emblematically known as 'reading on the lines', 'reading between the lines', and 'reading beyond the lines'. A group of 23 undergraduates of first year has been sampled in the Department of English, College of Education at Shabwa, University of Aden to carry out this study and a battery of three comprehension tests and three cloze tests designed of the same texts were administered. All these tests are set to inspect the readability and comprehensibility of the EFL learners and to check their problems in vocabulary, inference and reading for detail. Results, anyway, have shown that subjects are confronted with problems in reading comprehension ability along with inadequate vocabulary acquisition, reading speed, and the lack of insufficient abilities of making inferences in reading process.

Review of Literature

Reading as a cognitive process is, undoubtedly, a complex one which comprises many physical, intellectual, and emotional activities and reactions. The reader is indulged in a process in which he utilizes his visual abilities to recognize the printed symbols and relates them to their corresponding sounds. Not only that, but also these small units are systematically compiled to form larger groups of sounds in larger units, i.e. words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. The reader uses his mental ability to bring meaning to what he reads and further more he reacts emotionally to what is read in the sense that he might reject the ideas of the writer, appreciates them or sympathizes with them.

Reading, generally, is seen as an activity with an ultimate goal, viz. comprehension, which is the core of the process. So, reading without comprehension is a meaningless activity. Whether one is reading for

knowledge and information or for sheer pleasure, in Srivastava's view expressed in (1979: p. 11) demand for meaning is central. The degree of understanding depends upon many factors, such as, the nature of the reading task, the clarity of the expression, the reader's purpose, interest and his background and past experience. Comprehension takes place on three levels: literal meaning or construction of meaning, interpretation of meaning, and evaluation of meaning. Edger Dale (quoted in Srivastava, 1979: p. 11) properly describes them as 'reading on the lines', 'reading between the lines', and 'reading beyond the lines'.

The priority of meaning is an unquestionable issue in the process of reading comprehension. Constructing meaning is an important aspect of all kinds of reading. But reading, in Jenkinson's view (1973: p. 45) is also a form of thinking, problem-solving or reasoning, which involves analyzing and discriminating, judging, evaluating and synthesizing. All these mental processes are founded on past

experiences, so that the present context of the reading matter must be inspected in the light of the reader's own experience.

There are some crucial questions posing themselves such as whether word recognition is related to reading comprehension? And do we recognize every word while reading? Such decisive questions have been tackled thoroughly by scholars, but our main concern here is the importance of vocabulary to comprehension in reading.

Anyway, the relationship between reading comprehension and word recognition is too strong. Points of view of scholars like that of Cunningham (1990) and Segalowitz *et al.* (1991) are summarized as:

- Incomplete word recognition skills lead to poor reading comprehension among beginning readers or less skilled readers.
- Development of reading comprehension is largely due to the development of word recognition skills and a lower process such as recording.
- There is a strong relationship between word recognition speed and reading ability.
- Defects in word recognition sub-processes are important sources of variability achievement in college level adults.
- Word recognition skills and linguistic comprehension consistently make significant independent contributions to reading comprehension of learners.

As for recognizing every word while reading, many researchers like Rayner and Bertra (1979) and Just and Carpenter (1980) have been arguing that we process visual information (i.e., letters and words) accurately while reading. These arguments are summarized as follows:

- Efficient reading is dependent on a detailed sampling of the visual information contained in each of the individual letters that are within foveal vision.
- Even minimal errors within a word have an effect on subjects' reading behavior.
- Readers fixate about eighty percent for the context words of a text. Function words receive fewer fixations, but the impression that readers skip a lot of words is strongly disconfirmed.

Berg (1971: p. 7) characterized a successful reader as one who has a purpose, can concentrate, comprehends what he reads, remembers what he reads, has a good vocabulary and can read rapidly but with a rate depending on the material. This, to him, is also a flexible reader who knows how to skim for previewing an article or comprehension passage

before reading and has the ability to scan for specific information in a selection. He understands from his preview skimming whether the text needs rapid reading, average reading or slow reading.

However, an efficient reader is generally considered as a reader who interacts with various types of texts, and has got the ability to adopt the appropriate strategy depending on the text type. Skilled readers, indeed, scan a text to locate specific information in a printed material and skim it to extract general information.

Regarding learners' language competence, in her investigation of the relationship between general language competence and second language reading proficiency, Devine (1988: p. 261) argues that "despite the emphasis on similarities in the reading process in all languages, even during the heyday of the psycholinguistic period of second language reading, most researchers remain sensitive to the role of language competence in second language reading success". This, still, has evidence from literature of reading research best represented in the observations of Clark and Silberstein:

"Our students' efficiency in using reading skills is directly dependent upon their overall language proficiency – their language skills"
(Clarke and Silberstein, 1977: p. 145)

The vital interaction between language proficiency and reading ability is now, by and large, well established. A good number of researchers and classroom educators, in fact, take it for granted that L2 readers should attain a certain level of L2 competence before they can effectively read in that Language. Eskey and Grabe (1988: p. 226) argue that "reading requires relatively high degree of grammatical control over structures that appear in whatever readings are given to the students". Moreover, Yorio (1971) in his study asserts that the reading problems of language learners are due largely to imperfect knowledge of the foreign language and to native language interference in the reading process. Yuill and Oakhill (1991) attribute construction processing skills in poor readers to insufficient practice in a training program that included training in inference making skills and the ability to deduce meaning from text. Regular assessment, on the other hand, in comprehensive skills is the best method that can help in diagnosing some comprehension difficulties.

Teaching reading comprehension may lack the emphasis on how to make learners capable of skills in order to perform well in the tasks of comprehension.

One of the important ways of teaching reading is to equip the learners with the skill of understanding discourse in texts which include structural devices. These devices which students must learn and understand according to Ellis and Tomlinson (1980: p. 141) are:

1. Basic sentence structure of statements and questions.
2. Concept of reason, result, contrast, condition etc. as signaled by subordinators and coordinators.
3. Connectives like 'on the other hand', 'moreover', 'in addition', 'furthermore', etc.
4. Structural devices which enable the writer to refer back to some previously mentioned item.

Having mastered these skills of deriving meaning from these grammatical structures, students will be able to answer the comprehension questions more easily. On the contrary, failure to keep up with these structures in a text will lead to more serious problems of comprehending than will an ability to grasp individual lexical items. Therefore, reading instruction should account for the understanding of the meaning rather than on the correction of grammatical mistakes. Unfortunately, grammatical accuracy is the principle objective of structural lesson, not comprehension lesson.

Skills such as guessing the meaning of unknown words, identifying anaphoric references, identifying the main idea and inference should be given priority in the teaching of reading comprehension for EFL learners.

The importance of vocabulary, for instance, was stressed by many experts as being the core of reading problems. Yorio (1971) in his study on the Spanish SL learners of English finds that vocabulary is the main problem for the learners, while grammar and sentence structure constitute a less serious problem for them. Furthermore, Schoonen, Hulstijn and Bossers (1998) argue that FL vocabulary is an important predictor of FL reading comprehension. Barnett (1986) and Strother and Ulijn (1987) in Grabe (1991: p. 392) point out the importance of vocabulary as an essential indicator in reading ability in general.

It is not so true that difficulties faced by FL learners exist only on the level of unknown words (Mackay, 1979: p. 84). Rather, it is because of the relationships between lexical items in a certain text. Mackay further suggests the following measures for solving such difficulties:

"I believe that the responsibility for the solution of the difficulties encountered by unknown words at the advanced level lies with

the learner rather than with the teacher. The students must make the same effort as the native speakers when faced with a new field involving a new vocabulary, that is, guess intelligently, use an appropriate dictionary, and develop the memory sufficiently to allow recognition of the word when it is met subsequently." (Mackay, 1979: p. 84)

Method

Subjects and design

The subjects of this study were drawn from the population (i.e., English Language students at the undergraduate level in Aden University) in a simple random sampling method or what so called 'probability' or 'chance' sampling, which enabled the researcher to make sure that "every item of the universe has an equal chance of inclusion in the study. It is, so to say, a lottery method in which individual units are picked up from the whole group not deliberately but by some mechanical process" (Kothari, 1990: p. 73). He further argues in favor of the reliability of this technique that this sort of sampling ensures the law of Statistical Regularity which demonstrates that if on a standard the sample selected is a random one, the sample will bear a resemblance to the universe in all features. This is why random sampling is regarded to be the best technique of sampling (Kothari, 1990: p. 74).

Twenty-three subjects of the first year of the Department of English in the College of Education at Shabwa, University of Aden were chosen from a total number of 100 students in the rolls of the department. For sampling purposes, each student was assigned a particular number. These numbers, certainly, were written on small slips and then each was folded in the same way and put in a small container and mixed together thoroughly. As mentioned above, 23 students from first year students were drawn by a seven-year-old child in a lottery manner to eliminate bias and to ensure that each member of the population would have the opportunity to be included in the study. Needless to say, after every pull the whole slips were reshuffled again to make selection go on at the same manner of randomness.

Materials

Cloze tests

Cloze tests are very practical in several circumstances because they are uncomplicated to arrange and score; their validity as tests for reading is, somewhat, contentious. Cripwell (1976) argues that "cloze tests are comparatively easy to construct. And

also, in these tests student has to make up his mind”, and this is why this test, unlike most of other tests, is creative rather than a failing test.

Regarding scoring cloze tests, Oller (1973) suggests that “the most frequently used with native speakers is the counting of ‘exact word replacement’ as correct”. Yet, with non-native speakers there are some other methods among which is the ‘acceptable word scoring method’, which is, according to him, an acceptable and quite significant. Alderson (2000: p. 207) argues that in some scoring measures, credit may also be given for supplying a word that makes sense in the blank, even if it is not the word which was originally deleted.

In the present study, cloze tests were used to assess the learners’ readability and comprehensibility by selecting some passages from particular texts and they were developed for testing the cloze test items. These tests helped the researcher, to a great extent, to investigate the learners’ problems of reading in particular. Cloze tests, generally, can possibly be used to check the level of readability of a particular text, as said above. This factor is much related to the present study of assessing difficulties faced by foreign language learners reading an English prose text. If, however, learners show some difficulties in reading, then it might be necessarily momentous to concentrate on those areas in which the learners’ experience reading problems and in the process assist them arrive at an understanding of the text.

Comprehension tests

Comprehension tests are of different types: multiple choice questions (MCQ), open-ended questions (OEQ), true/false questions (T/F), or ordering task questions (OTQs=). For further details on these types see Alderson (2000: p. 211), Ingram (1974: p. 322), and Nuttall (1996: p. 186).

Whatever technique is followed to measure reading, the main focus is to check the learners’ comprehension of a certain prose text. It is to measure their ability in certain sub-skills such as ‘inferring’ or what is commonly known as ‘reading between the lines’. The passages sampled for this study were selected from different texts to measure the students’ ability in inference, their reading for detail, and their ability for handling vocabulary. Different techniques were used in achieving these goals such as MCQs, in which some questions in all the three passages were designed. OEQs were also used especially for the measuring students’ reading for detail. Further, T/F and OTQs were used as techniques to elicit information about the learners’ reading comprehension in the present study.

Procedure

In the present study, the data collection was done in a period of well over a month in the Department of English, College of Education at Shabwa, University of Aden. Three cloze tests and three comprehension tests were administered; each test took 40 minutes to be done, and these tests were carried out in a frequency of every other day and sometimes a gap of three to four days was left due to the full class schedule of the department and the two-day weekend.

Firstly, three comprehension tests were given to the subjects. Clearly stated instructions were the first thing to begin in each session of these tests so that students can begin confidently and naturally, and their responses are well done.

Secondly, three cloze tests were administered in the same manner, as far as frequency is concerned. Those three cloze tests were designed and developed from the same texts tested for the three comprehension tests. Regarding time, cloze tests sessions were approximately done over an 80-minute period for each.

In sampling the passages for testing the learners’ reading ability in this study, a careful selection was followed. The three texts, of which these passages have been chosen, however, were once upon time used for reading classes in the Department of English, College of Education at Shabwa, University of Aden. These passages were carefully chosen to suit, as far as possible, the level and the background knowledge of the examinees, i.e. to tackle topics which seem to be common to the learners and within the scope of their level of learning and background knowledge.

Results

Comprehension tests in the present study were set to examine the ability of the test-takers on how to guess the meaning of words and their formations in one passage, to comprehend the main ideas in another passage, and, further, to check the subjects’ ability to infer meanings from a third one, as has been noted down earlier. The following Table 1 gives a detailed survey of descriptive statistics of the tests administered.

Failing to understand the main idea of a text, students are not taught appropriately to give a special attention to the general meaning while reading. Vocabulary, furthermore, is an essential factor in reading comprehension. Vocabulary building and vocabulary mastery as well depend on the reading habit, text genre, and quantity of material. If an

extensive reading is being practiced definitely students will acquire a wide range of varied vocabulary. Vocabulary is commonly believed to be the main issue of reading difficulties.

Table 1a. Comprehension tests descriptive statistics

Measures	Test Type		
	Detail Test	Inference Test	Vocabulary Test
M	47.6	55.58	57.4
SD	20.25	20.15	17.4
Maximum Mark	100	100	100
Maximum Obtained Mark	80	90	95
Minimum Obtained Mark	20	10	35

Table 1b. Cloze tests descriptive statistics

Measures	Test Type		
	7th Word Deleted Test	6th Word Deleted Test	5th Word Deleted Test
M	43.47	40.97	27.93
SD	11.59	10.54	12.85
Maximum Mark	100	100	100
Maximum Obtained Mark	65.5	57	50
Minimum Obtained Mark	27.5	22.5	7.5

Let us have a closer look at the students' performance in each of the three passages. The passages were, however, to examine their reading for specific information (detail), their inference, and their vocabulary.

Statistically, the subjects attained 47.6 as M with SD = 20.25 in the passage that tested for detail and a maximum obtained mark, Max.OM = 80 out of 100 and a minimum obtained mark, Min.OM = 20 (see Table 1a). They, however, attained 55.58 as M with SD = 20.15 for the passage that tested for inference. The Max.OM for them in that passage was 90 out of 100 and Min.OM was 10. Finally, if we are to compare the subjects' performance in vocabulary test and the other tests, we get the following figures: M = 57.4 with an SD = 17.4, whereas the Max.OM = 95 and Min.OM = 35.

The above analysis of the figures entails the conclusion that the subjects performed better in the test of vocabulary than the other two tests. The difference, yet, was not too great, but still subjects did

not seem to be satisfactorily performing well, which shows that there were problems related to their reading sub-skills.

We can say that the performance of the subjects in the skill of extracting details from texts was lower than their performance in both inference and vocabulary. They were definitely unable to get the gist of the main ideas in the given passages. Inference as well seemed to be lower in the profile of the reading comprehension of the subjects. Similarly, their performance in vocabulary tests showed that vocabulary constitutes a serious reading problem too. Mastery of lexis, in general, is an essential factor in learning a foreign language. Students with a wide and varied vocabulary are able to infer meaning from a text in a certain context. Expanding students' vocabulary, as mentioned above, could be achieved through setting up extensive reading programs and exposing the learners to varied printed materials. The figures revealed above and in the following graph showed that these sub-skills of reading might not be given an adequate share in the teaching of reading to the EFL learners in this department. Figure 1, for instance, reveals that the Mean Error Percentages (MEPs) of subjects in reading for detail was above 60% and in inference and vocabulary tests were above 40%. These are, anyway, very high negative scores which show the students' ineffectiveness in these sub-skills of reading comprehension.

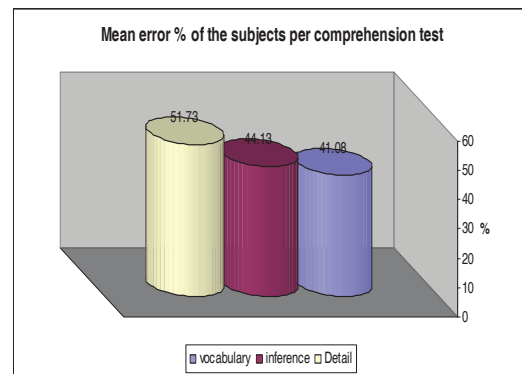


Fig. 1. Mean error % of the subjects per comprehension test.

Along with other skills, if vocabulary building and expanding, inferring practicing, and reading for detail have been practiced systematically in classroom, students reading performance would have been far better more than in the current situation.

Now it is the turn to put on show the subjects' performance in cloze tests. Cloze tests are usually intended to measure the reader's comprehension ability by deleting certain words from a selected text. Every n^{th} word is deleted and the test-taker has to

retrieve the deleted words. The reader may provide either the exact word or an acceptable word that can make sense in the space.

The performance of the subjects in those cloze tests was definitely very poor, which revealed the difficulty of the process and the inefficiency of the learners as well. A cloze test depends critically on the learner's knowledge of the language and his repertoire of vocabulary. Students reading much and in various genres in English will find it much easier to fill the gaps in a certain cloze test.

Now, we compare the performance of the subjects in the three passages. The following figures obtained in passage one (every 5th word deleted); $M = 27.93$ and $SD = 12.85$. In passage two (every 6th word deleted), subjects' scores were: $M = 40.97$ with an $SD = 10.54$. Finally, in passage three (every 7th word deleted), the following figures were obtained: $M = 43.47$ with $SD = 11.59$. For more details on the Max.OMs and Min.OMs see Table 1b.

To make it more explicit, the Mean Error Percentages (MEPs) of the subjects for each passage were calculated. MEPs are 74.78, 59.45, and 55.54 in passages one, two and three, respectively (Fig. 2).

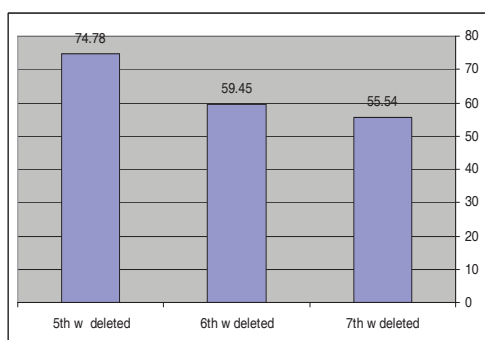


Fig. 2. Mean error % of the subjects per cloze test.

Again, as in the comprehension tests, subjects seemed to be ahead in the cloze test three. However, the performance in cloze tests generally fell into what so called traditionally the "frustrational level of reading".

To achieve a full and a well understanding for the students performance in these sub-skills of reading, particularly in the comprehensibility of the cloze tests, percentages and means of both grouped content words and grouped functional words were calculated as in the following figures.

Figure 3 gives a clear idea about the mean error percentages (MEPs) of the subjects in the cloze test administered to check their performance in which every 5th word was deleted. All the content words have been grouped and the mean error has been

calculated for each and the percentage is given. Although the difference is not too big among the four content categories, still we can see that the learners face more difficulty regarding verbs and adjectives retrieval in the above mentioned cloze test.

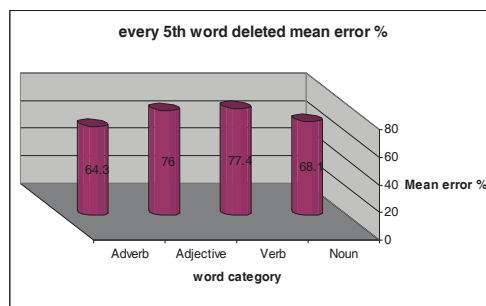


Fig. 3. Content words mean error % for every 5th word deleted cloze test.

In Fig. 4, we can see that the mean error percentages of the subjects in the second cloze test, in which every 6th word is deleted, are less than the previous one. The highest MEP is 66% for the adverbs category, and the least is for verbs which is 54%.

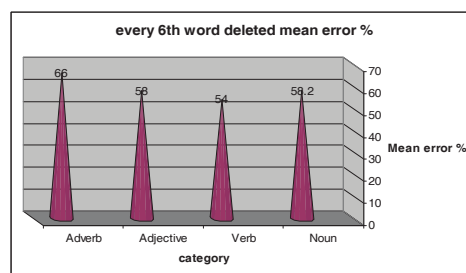


Fig. 4. Content words mean error % for 6th word deleted cloze test.

In Fig. 5, we can see that the highest MEP is 59.8% for adverbs again and the least is for verbs, 53.4%. Comparing the students' performance in the three tests, we find that there is a similarity between the last two tests (every 6th and every 7th word deleted).

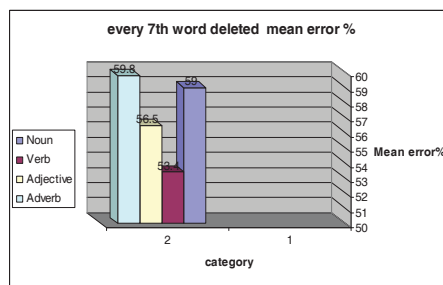


Fig. 5. Content words mean error % for every 7th word deleted cloze test.

Table 2 gives a summary of the three figures above and we see that the MEPs for the three passages in each category have been given. Although there is no significant difference in the percentages, but still we can infer that adjectives and adverbs got more MEPs than nouns and verbs, and this might be related to the frequency of these two categories. They are probably more frequent than adjectives and adverbs in a given text.

Table 2. Grouped content words total mean error %

Categories			
Noun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb
61.7	61.6	63.5	63.3

Figure 6 gives an idea about the functional words MEPs. It shows that determiners have got the highest MEP and pronouns have got the least. Determiners might be confused by the subjects in retrieving the deleted words in the every 5th word test.

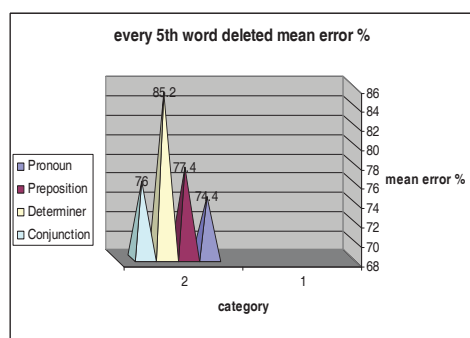


Fig. 6. Functional words mean error % for every 5th word deleted cloze test.

In comparing Figs. 6 and 7, we can see that there is no systematic relationship between the retrievals of the deleted words in the two passages as far as functional words are concerned.

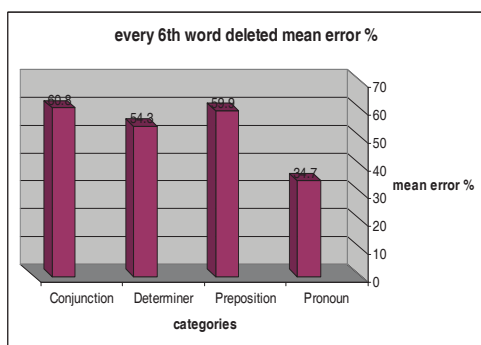


Fig. 7. Functional words mean error% for every 6th word deleted cloze test.

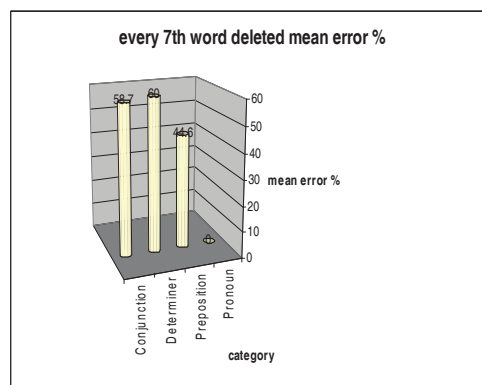


Fig. 8. Functional words mean error % for every 7th word deleted test.

Table 3 gives a total calculation for the MEPs for the three passages regarding the functional words retrievals. According to this table, we might order the functional categories according to the difficulty in retrieving them: Determiners, conjunctions, prepositions and finally pronouns.

Table 3. Grouped functional words total mean error%

Category			
Pro	Pre	Det	Conj
54.3	60.6	66.5	65.1

Discussion

Subjects were almost not familiar with the skills of taking hold of the overall meaning of a paragraph and then a text without being too much bound to the smallest units of a reading material. They were commonly stuck to the bottom, and did not think about the main idea of certain paragraphs and how a sentence might contribute consequently to the development of the central idea of that paragraph. They faced problems in reconstructing passages they read even at the level of word classes in the cloze tests students performed poorly (see Tables 2 and 3). In the same way, as was seen in the questions that tested for detail and inference, they exhibited very disappointingly. It means that they were confronted with reading problems especially in extracting or even mastering the skill of understanding some detailed information from the passage. This entails their inefficiency in understanding the writer's opinions expressed in a text.

Students, as shown in Tables 2 and 3 and Figs. 2 – 8, performed inefficiently in cloze tests and this also finds a support in literature as Kamyab and

Tahririan (1989: p. 51) argue that the “poor performance of the learners of the subjects in doing cloze tests underscores the importance of language skills for effective reading”. They further assume that this supports the convention of grammar lessons and vocabulary as activities in English language instruction. Grammar should not be overstated in reading and meaning should be adequately dealt with in this regard. Text understanding, actually, is a too much debated matter, and cloze tests procedure, for instance, in which omitted words are to be retrieved by the learners, is believed to be depending on the message understanding of a text. Those deleted words sometimes can best be understood locally rather than globally. Contradicting the tradition of measuring readability, Agnihotri (1990: p. 58) argues that “yet retrieval of items deleted at random did not reveal much either about the nature of a text or about the process involved in understanding a text”. Troike (1979) finds that “there is a high correlation between reading and achievement and knowledge of grammar”, whereas Rivers (1981) believes it’s significant in reading instruction to discriminate between recognition and production grammar.

Anyway, a good reader utilizes his prior knowledge experience to assess the material that he is reading. This ability is a motivation for him to read better and to evaluate which part of a text should be given a considerable weight in attention and which one to be skimmed rapidly. In this way, the reader will have the capacity to make sense of what he reads and will acquire the fundamental skills of reading comprehension.

In the present study, there was a little difference between handling open words and close words or what is also known as functional and content words, which revealed almost the same level of difficulty. Sim and Bensoussan (1979) argue that “function-word questions to appear to be as difficult as content-word questions”. This, however, supports the results of our study. Yet, in the teaching of reading skills decoding or interpreting function words is no less important a lexical skill than content word decoding or interpreting. The ability in interpreting the interaction of the two kinds of words is necessary for effective comprehension of the text in which they operate. The analysis of the data in the present study revealed that there was a general phenomenon common to all the tests; it was the lower scoring of the subjects. The scores of the students in cloze tests seemed to be the least of all tests just because tests used for measuring readability and comprehensibility were of very much frequency in words deletion.

The ability to extract meaning, ideas, or facts by the learners from the passages in this study was low. They actually were not taught enough to practice these skills (see Fig. 1). This revealed that the students’ performance, according to the average comprehension level, was too poor. The difficulty was clearly shown in the scores of the learners. This actually made it clear that students ought to master the ability to retain information and recall it when required. They were not able to remember some reasonable parts of the factual information or the ideas expressed in a passage. There are several questions in the three passages of the comprehension test types needed the learners to make their own interpretation of information, ideas, and to infer from what has been read in those passages. It is observed that the learners were incapable of making distinction between major facts and ideas from minor ones. The retention of information improved as a result of being tested on what the learners read, especially when parts of most tests consists of questions which could not be answered unless they have remembered well what they have read.

As has been discussed earlier, in doing their cloze tests, comprehension tests and as observed in the actual teaching of reading, students, in majority, spend too much time in reading. Research suggests that low language competence may hinder the L2 reader by restricting reading speed. Cohen *et al.* (1988) find that ESL readers often took up to six times as long as native readers to complete a text. Probably at least some of that time was spent trying to process difficult syntax; indeed, the readers in Devine’s (1988) study evidenced inability to process syntactic cues critical to text comprehension. As Eskey and Grabe (1988) argue that reading time spent on cloze decoding is, more often than not, reading time misspent. However, reading speed depends on the difficulty and nature of the material (Srivastava, 1979: p. 16). It is true that some materials are to be read rapidly, and some others are to be read slowly. Reading speed, then, should be adjusted to the purpose of reading. Coady (1979: p. 12) adds that “degree of speed to be used should vary according to the complexity of the material read, the purpose for reading the material, and the readers’ background knowledge. Thus it is not a matter of simply increasing reading rate but rather of increased flexibility in rate of speed for reading. In short, comprehension is achieved by reading neither too fast nor too slow”.

Additionally, Steffenson and Jog-Dev (1984: p. 60) give an evidence for reading speed in the cultural background of readers. Comparing both Indian and

American readers, they find that Indian subjects read the Indian culturally-oriented passage more rapidly than the American culturally-oriented passage (276 seconds vs. 304) and American subjects read the American text more rapidly than the Indians (168 seconds vs. 213). American subjects, however, read faster than their Indian counterparts. This was expected since the Indian subjects were reading in a foreign language, English. This is really parallel to what Carrell (1988: p. 245) has noticed; that is, "some students' apparent "reading problems" may be of insufficient background knowledge". These findings seem to be tallying with our findings. Subjects of this study are, of course, foreign language readers of English texts.

Efficiency in reading speed will be achieved through a balanced adaptation of reading, the nature of material read and the purpose of reading it.

There are, obviously, some reasons Yemeni Arab learners read English slowly. Firstly, the letters of Roman alphabets are not so familiar to the Arab readers to recognize. They are accustomed to read Arabic characters and it is easier for them to visually identify Arabic characters than the combination of the letters of the Roman alphabets (see Habtoor, 2004). It is possible, then, that if they pay close attention to the individual words, their eyes' span is narrower and they cannot grasp the whole phrases. Arab learners of English as foreign language may tend to see one word at a time, while the native speakers of English can recognize a word without considering the combination of letters. It is also possible that they, native speakers, can recognize a group of words with one fixation of the eye, and theoretically, they can process four or five words at a time (for further details see Shimron and Sivan, 1994, and Gholamain and Geva, 1999).

As far as fixation and reading instruction are concerned, it is probably longer fixation that may slow reading in the case of EFL learners. This may suggest that longer fixation is needed to process the semantic and syntactic information (Robinett, 1980: p. 356) with which the reader is being attacked. These findings may tend to dispel the oft-held belief that foreign language students need practice in developing the habit of making fewer fixations per line of writing. Yet, Smith (1985: p. 20) further argues that you cannot speed up reading by speeding up the movements of the eyes. The limitation is not on the rate at which the eyes can pick up information, but on the rate at which the eyes can pick up of that information.

Secondly, another factor that might contribute to the Yemeni Arab learners' inadequate reading speed

of this study is the conventional way they are used to in reading Arabic text, i.e. right-to-left reading, which may hinder their speed of left-to-right reading of English text. In literature, this factor finds a support in a study by Yoshida (1985) cited in Kitao and Kitao (1995) done on Japanese EFL learners reading English more easier if words or phrases are put vertically on a computer screen as it is the case of their mother tongue, Japanese (for more details see Wade-Wooly, 1999, and Habtoor, 2004).

Thirdly, word order of English sentences is different from that of Arabic. While the structure of Arabic sentence permits both SVO and VSO, English allows only one option, SVO. Even adjectives and adverbs modifying nouns and verbs, respectively, are also different in order in these two languages. Consequently, it takes more time for Arab learners to make a full recognition and comprehension of such sentences and they lose the flow of the paragraph and the text as a whole. This probably, in short, is a time consuming activity for them (Habtoor, 2004).

College students in Yemen, majoring English language in particular, have limited vocabulary. This limited vocabulary definitely makes it difficult later on for those learners to handle English texts, especially materials that are of technical nature. In the passages that tested for vocabulary, students were asked to give the meanings of some lexical items, give synonyms for some others, or to choose from four-alternative multiple-choice what some of those words meant in those contexts of the passages.

It is obviously accurate that the learners faced problems in vocabulary acquisition. One of the reasons behind these problems is, almost, that they were not taught how to relate words to each other. They did not look familiar with practice and deriving meanings and finding connections between synonyms and antonyms.

Although the mean error percentages for the subjects seemed to be less than the other two tests, viz., test of detail and test of inference, still their scores looked very low in vocabulary (see Fig. 1). Even in correlation analysis, the vocabulary of the learners seemed to be too influential factor on their proficiency in other tests such as composition.

Learners' performance in cloze tests is another evidence of being in shortage of adequate and necessary vocabulary, if they were to apply their minds and look for textually acceptable lexical items to be supplied in the gaps. Yet, it remains obvious that it is a matter of vocabulary knowledge to be skillful in retrieving words in a cloze test, but it is also a matter of syntax, semantics, and probably discourse capabilities in a foreign language (see Figs.

2 – 8). Learners were almost equally poor in mastering both open and close (content and functional) words. Their performance showed that they suffered a lot at the level of vocabulary and this seemed to go along with studies on EFL learners in reading such as that of Yorio (1971).

Another factor that might have contributed to the poor vocabulary acquisition of the subjects in this study was their custom of reading with the help of their teachers, that is, they were always instructed by their teachers in the reading class and even in choosing reading materials. Been (1979: p. 91) argues that the students have difficulties in understanding texts because they suffer from a paucity of vocabulary, they are not used to read independently, and they do not have an appropriate mental set, in the sense of a special kind of readiness, to be able to cope with the demands made of them. For teaching vocabulary in EFL reading classes productively, Been (1979: p. 91) also suggests that this can best be done through contextualized material. Yet, the tendency to teach reading mainly for the purpose of teaching vocabulary likewise conflicts with more general aims of reading understanding.

Cooper (1984), in his study, emphasizes the role of the attitudinal factors in examining the performance of what he called “practiced” and “unpracticed” nonnative readers of English enrolled at the University of Malay. “Practiced” readers were those students who pursued much of their earlier education in English, and had demonstrated the ability to cope with university-level texts in English; “unpracticed” readers, on the other hand, although they had studied English, had been educated in their native language. Cooper examined features of English that might be possible sources of reading difficulties for the unpracticed readers: the meaning of affixes, word meaning in context, syntactic meaning (tense, aspect, modality, etc.), grammatical and lexical cohesion, and intersentential relationships. Cooper asserts that:

“Unpracticed readers differed primarily from practiced readers in their ability to use the linguistic clues in the longer context to determine meaning. They found it especially difficult to deduce word meaning from context, to understand lexical cohesion, and to understand the meaning relationships between sentences” (Cooper, 1984: p. 133).

Cooper further asserts that unpracticed readers were seriously hindered by their inadequate knowledge of English vocabulary. Significantly, the vocabulary deficits of the unpracticed readers were primarily of two types: They were uncertain of the meanings of common sentences cohere, sentence

connectors, and their sub-technical vocabularies were generally very poor. These findings are very much adequate support in literature for our study’s findings. Students of this study were very much like Cooper’s “unpracticed” readers since they were taught in their earlier education in Arabic. English for them, however, was just a subject in the syllabus in both primary and secondary levels. It is only in the college level they were exposed to English as their language of instruction. Anyway, vocabulary is a very important aspect in the acquisition of foreign language. Williams and Dallas (1984), in this regard, argue that the vocabulary difficulties encountered by FL learners in their content area educational textbooks are considerable; that such difficulties are a major stumbling block to the acquisition of knowledge and thereby to the passing of all-important examinations. Considerable attention should be paid to the unfamiliar vocabulary presented in textbooks.

In dealing with vocabulary, Hosenfeld (1984: p. 233) asserts that there are differences between learners with high proficiency scores and those with low proficiency scores in strategies employed when encountered by unfamiliar words. Those with high scores tended to keep the meaning of the passage in mind, read in broad phrases, skip inessential words, and guess meanings of unknown words from context, whereas those with low scores tended to lose the meaning of sentences as soon as they decoded them, read word by word or in short phrases, rarely skip words, and turn to the glossary when they encountered new words.

As far as the three main models of reading are concerned, vocabulary has been given a considerable weight in the instruction of reading. However, the interactive model probably is giving the most significant value to the vocabulary than do the other two models, viz., bottom-up and top-down models. For interactive model not only a large vocabulary is important; rather, it is a prerequisite to fluent reading skill. The importance of vocabulary does not lie on the number of words, but on the number of times words are recycled. Top-down models, also, assume that poor readers are word-bound, that they do not know how to use context, or are afraid to try to use context even through transfer of reading skills would suggest that they should be able to do so (for further discussion on this topic and on interactive models see Grabe and Eskey, 1988).

Conclusion

To conclude, the study attempted to bring to the fore reading comprehension and the factors that

contributed as vital variables in EFL learners' comprehension, namely; vocabulary acquisition, reading for detail, and making inferences. The findings of the study revealed that a general observable fact, common to all the tests, was the lower scoring of the subjects. The scores of the subjects in the cloze tests seemed to be the least of all the tests used for measuring these three variables because the test used for measuring readability and comprehensibility were probably of very much frequency in words deletion. To improve teaching and learning reading in EFL contexts it is recommended that:

- Classroom activities to teaching reading have the advantage of motivating learners with a variety of activities presented to them. Since reading, as a receptive skill, seems to be the most accessible skill for practice in EFL situations, compared to the other four basic language skills. A full engagement of the learners will help greatly in acquiring the language. The findings of this study carried out at the College of Education at Shabwa shows that reading activities in classroom do not give enough space for student engagement in reading. Teaching reading in Yemeni situation, as Habtoor (2004) argues, is observed to be teacher-centered and needs to be more motivating and engaging the learner not only in the activity performance, but in choosing and designing the activities, for instance. In other words, to make teaching reading more leaning towards a democratic approach which will foster the learner's motivation and makes him feel stress-free.
- It is observed in this study that reading in the College of Education at Shabwa, University of Aden is taught intensively. At the beginning of each semester, a book of reading comprehension passages is selected for this purpose and the teacher will go through it in a systematic way from cover to cover and no other additional activities are recommended to assign some tasks which leads to reading extensively. This may lead to the lack of learners' mastery of vocabulary and inference capability as the study suggests. An extensive reading program should be seriously thought of and implemented if the quality of reading as well as the learners' proficiency is to be improved. Learners should be guided from learning to read to reading to learn and this alone will be achieved through an exposure to a variety of English texts. As discussed in this study, ERP is, in short, a must to boost the learners' language acquisition. As a

prerequisite to the ERP, the library of the college or probably the library of the department should be updated and new books, novels, stories, abridged classical novels, magazines, newspapers, and different types of references in English language should be introduced and made public at the learners' demand.

- It is observed, while collecting the data and through my experience of teaching reading in the above mentioned department, that reading is more teacher-centered than it should be. A drastic shift from teacher-centered approach of teaching to learner-centered approach, which would ensure a reasonable development in the proficiency of learners, in general, is indispensable. In any educational program, the learners' interests and motivations are essential, and the only way to enhance these things is to get learners involved in the learning process through implementation of learner-centered methods of teaching reading and the other language skills. This can be well achieved through the practice of pair and group activities in reading class and other classes of English.

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القراءة من أجل التفاصيل واكتساب المفردات والاستدلال كمتغيرات هامة في التحقق من فهم القراءة لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بمرحلة البكالوريوس

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ملخص البحث. تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية التحقق من أهمية اكتساب المفردات والقدرة على الاستدلال والقراءة من أجل التفاصيل كمهارات فرعية في فهم القراءة لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، فالقراءة نشاط ذو هدف أساسي ألا وهو الفهم الذي يعد محور عملية القراءة لأن القراءة بلا فهم يعد نشاطاً غير مُجدٍ حتماً، لكن يعتمد مدى الفهم على عدة عوامل مثل طبيعة النص المقروء، ومدى وضوح التعبيرات، والغرض من القراءة، وكذلك اهتمامات القارئ وخلفيته وخبراته السابقة. يحدث الفهم على ثلاث مستويات: أولها فهم المعنى الحرفي أو ما يسمى بتركيب المعنى، وثانيها تفسير المعنى، وثالثها تقييم المعنى. ويطلق على تلك العمليات الثلاثة "قراءة ما على السطور" و"قراءة ما بين السطور" و"قراءة ما وراء السطور". تم أخذ عينة من ٢٣ طالباً بالعام الأول بمرحلة البكالوريوس من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية التربية - شبوا، جامعة عدن لإجراء هذه الدراسة، وباستخدام مجموعة من ثلاث قطع للقراءة والفهم وثلاثة اختبارات ملء الفراغات معدة على نفس قطع الفهم بحيث تقوم الاختبارات بالتحقق من قدرة متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية على القراءة والفهم، وكذلك الوقوف على الصعوبات التي تواجههم فيما يتعلق بالمفردات والاستدلال والقراءة من أجل التفاصيل. ولقد أوضحت نتائج العينة وجود صعوبات في فهم القراءة واكتساب المفردات بشكل غير متكافئ وسرعة القراءة، كما أنهم يعانون من نقص في القدرة على الاستدلال أثناء عملية القراءة.