| RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Investigation of the Reading Strategies Used by First Secondary Grade Students in a Saudi School: A Case Study

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| ABSTRACT

This study investigated the reading strategies employed by first-grade students in Tabarjal, Saudi Arabia. The participants were divided into two groups based on their academic performance at Khaled bin Alwaleed Secondary School: high achievers (those with grades above the median score) and low achievers (those with grades below the median score). A sample of sixteen first-grade students was randomly selected from these two groups. The findings revealed that both high and low achievers used similar strategies, such as activating prior knowledge, employing the question-answer relationship (QAR), translation, restating, and scanning. However, significant differences were observed in the use of other strategies, including fix-up techniques, identifying keywords, predicting, using context clues, evaluating, and drawing conclusions. These results highlight both commonalities and distinctions in reading strategies between high- and low-achieving students, offering insights into how different approaches may influence reading comprehension and academic performance.

1. Introduction

Learning strategies are considered an instrument of understanding and a way of dealing effectively with situations (Wagner et al., 2013). This view agrees with Piaget's (1928) description of the learner's thinking as a way to organize and improve new cognitive structures in relation to existing structures. Reading skills are crucial tools for learning and play an essential role in academic learning and personal development (Lee & Hus, 2009). Reading comprehension is the main goal of any reading task and is considered a complex skill in which the reader looks up the meaning of new words from the context, using their knowledge and experience of the content, and employs different activities and techniques (Meniado, 2016).

Grellet (1981) defined reading as "a constant process of guessing"; when   reading, the eyes do not follow each word of the text one after another-at least in the case of efficient readers. Many words or expressions are simply skipped; readers go back and check something or go forward to confirm some of their hypotheses. Therefore, readers must clearly have decoding skills in order to read; by way of compensation, they will also need a large amount of contextual support, since many of the words they are decoding are either unknown to them or accessed slowly. Thus, a good reader is one who can decode lexical units and syntactic structures with occasional exceptions, who can engage with texts, and who uses and orchestrates all reading strategies to their benefit, not just by guessing from context or prior knowledge of the world, but by a kind of automatic identification, that requires no conscious cognitive effort (Rasinski , 2017).

The main function of the reading strategy is to provide students with the opportunity to prepare themselves before they start reading by giving themselves a purpose for reading by monitoring their understanding, asking themselves questions and making judgments (Tovani, 2000). Therefore, Freahat & Al-Faoury (2017) stated that one of the best ways to develop reading skill

amongst students was to develop their reading and thinking strategies by reading academic texts in their classes. The reading classes consist of a pre-reading phase that activates and builds background knowledge and a post- reading phase that consists of exercises, comprehension checks, discussions and writing activities to develop reading skills i.e., finding supporting details or arguments and guessing unfamiliar vocabulary by using context clues.

1.2 Statement of the problem

The Ministry of Education syllabus places great importance on the role of the teacher as well as the role of the student in teaching reading for the first secondary grade. The Ministry of Education considered the role of the teacher as a facilitator for the reading process that is, teachers are encouraged to ask questions that can draw attention, enable students to make judgments, infer and evaluate (Ivowi, 2001). The role of the student was also apparent in the Ministry's syllabus.

First-secondary grade students were expected to read and understand English texts of a general nature with a vocabulary of about 4000 words. Thereafter, students were supposed to acquire the skill of reading silently at a reasonable speed without sub-vocalizing or translation. Also, students were supposed to get specific information from a reading passage progressively, acquire the habit of reading for pleasure, and distinguish facts, opinions, attitudes and implications. Finally, students were supposed to react intelligently to what they read by substantiating their views (Ivowi, 2001).

Teachers have noted that students struggle to read and comprehend texts effectively during their first reading (Block, 1986). For that particular reason, it would be difficult for those students to tell in their own words what they read and comprehended. Normally, when teachers give a reading task to students, they are after the product of the reading task; not what happened inside the reader's mind during that complex process of reading. Therefore, teachers need to ask themselves what happened and why students answered in such a way.

Because reading plays a significant role in our lives, it should be given the utmost attention (Almufayrij, 2016). Students read in order to learn the language not only in schools but also to pursue their studies at universities or colleges, they need the ability to employ strategies to tackle new words and new texts (Almufayrij, 2016).

1.3 Purpose of the study

The main goal of this study was to examine the reading strategies employed by 1st secondary-grade students in the city of Tabarjal.

The following research questions were formulated to achieve the study's objectives:

1- To what extent do 1st secondary graders use pre-reading strategies?

2- To what extent do 1st secondary use during-reading strategies?

3- To what extent do 1st secondary graders use post-reading strategies?

2. Literature review

Many studies have been conducted worldwide to investigate reading strategies and their importance in language learning, yielding interesting results. The focus will be on the role of the teacher in enhancing reading skills and, at the same time, the role of the student in acquiring reading skills.

Oded and Walters (2001) studied whether students who have written a summary of a text do better on subsequent comprehension questions than students who have listed the examples used by the writer of the text. The respondents of this study were 60 bachelor students at an Indian university taking an EFL reading comprehension course. The respondents of the study were asked to have an exam consisting of two passages. The study stated that writing a summary gave the students an opportunity to focus on significant information and form a rational model of the text. Moreover, the study concluded that low-level students desired to be given more courses on writing summaries of the main ideas as they read by giving them the basic structure on which they would reconstruct extra information.

Abu-Sirhan (2003) conducted a study to identify metacognitive strategies used by English teachers to improve students' reading comprehension skills. The study group consisted of all English teachers teaching grade 11 in public schools in the Qasabet Al-Zarqa and Al-Russeifa education directorates. A sample of 54 English teachers teaching 11th grade was selected from 23 public schools out of 82 public schools in these two educational streams. The study revealed that Jordanian teachers made poor and unsatisfactory use of metacognitive strategies.

However, the literature review will focus on the role of the student in acquiring reading skills. The study by Al-Asmara (2000) investigated the reading strategies of English students at An-Najah University. A total of 57 students from the third year

of the "18th Century Literature" course took part. A think-aloud protocol was implemented to reveal the strategies used by students. The results of the study showed that vocal strategies were used during reading at a rate of (87.95%). Only post-reading strategies (1.78%) and pre-reading strategies (10.26%).

Sheorey's (2001) study pointed to discovering possible differences between ESL students and American students in the use of reading strategies when reading academic materials. 152 native English speakers and 150 native English speakers participated in the study. The results of the study showed that both native and non-native English speakers had knowledge of all strategies included in the study.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 60 first-secondary grade students from Khaled bin Alwaleed School during the second semester of the 2024-2025 academic year. With reference to their school records, the subjects of the study were chosen according to their achievement in the English language for the last semester. Based on those records, students were divided into two groups: the first group was all the high achievers whose grades were above the median score and the second group was all low achievers whose grades were below the median score. The sample consisted of sixteen students, divided equally into high achievers and low achievers. The students from each sub-group were chosen by using a simple random selection method. The sample was 26% of the whole population.

3.2 Procedures

The researcher conducted individual interviews with students using a video camera to facilitate the 'think-aloud protocol'. There were two reasons behind recommending the use of video camera and conducting individual interviews with students. The first was that students would not feel intimidated when they were alone i.e. without the presence of their teacher and other students. The other reason was that the researcher could capture every moment of the interview, the eye movement, the movement of the hands and most importantly, the facial expressions of the student being interviewed which would not be possible if the researcher used tape recording.

Before conducting the interviews, The first step involved providing the sample with two unseen passages selected by the researcher. The first procedure was to give the sample study two unseen passages that the researcher had adopted to use in his research. In order to examine the appropriateness of these passages, the researcher gave them to three expert English teachers who taught the 1st secondary grade in the city of Tubarjal to check their appropriateness for students' level.

The second step was to determine what the cognitive reading strategies that might be applicable in reading. It was necessary to find out what types of strategies were employed by students when reading. The strategies, which the researcher found based on his review of literature, were of two types. The first was based on adopting introspective reports, in which students can practice thinking aloud and, at the same time, can observe them during their reading (Block, 1986; Dai, 1989; and Zahran, 1992). The other type was the retrospective reports which were usually taken after the end of the reading session (Zahran, 1992). The third producer categorized the cognitive reading strategies into three categories: pre-reading strategies, during-reading strategies, and post-reading strategies. The next procedure was finding a suitable place to conduct the interviews. Because the interviews involved the use of a video camera, it was a crucial issue to find a quiet place with good lighting and easy access at any time. The principal of the school who suggested taking an empty room and putting all the necessary equipment (a chair, table, the video camera and its accessories) in it.

The final step was when to take the students in order to conduct the interviews. The researcher could not interrupt the ongoing classes and, at the same time could not let students skip classes in order to conduct the interviews. Therefore, it was necessary to conduct the interviews in the physical education classes, vocational education classes and some art classes.

3.3 Data collection

The individual interviews began in the second week of January and lasted for about four continuous weeks. The interviews were conducted with a video camera for documentation purposes. It was necessary to conduct individual interviews so that students could express their thoughts freely. Students were not told that they were selected based on their English proficiency, but instead, they were told that the researcher had chosen a sample from the class randomly. None of them knew they were participating in a study until they were called into the interview room. Before the students were given the actual texts, they were asked a series of pre-reading questions that had to be read and answered in order to activate their prior knowledge. The appropriate steps for reading and practicing the think-aloud protocol were then provided. After that, they were handed the actual passages which they would read and practice the think-aloud protocol.

The participants were asked to read only one passage in each interview and were told that they would have to complete another reading task after a few days. The reason for not providing both texts at the same time was that students might become a little frustrated with the amount of reading, which could lead them to read quickly without understanding and not focusing on their reading. The researcher began the interviews with the text "Health care in the kingdom." As each student in the sample entered the room, they were given instructions on how the interview would proceed. The students were told that they would read a text and that while reading, they would have to think aloud, that is, express it as they could. The same procedures were used when giving students the second reading passage. During the interviews, students used a think-aloud protocol while reading, expressing their thoughts and understanding of the reading task without attempting to provide an explanation or theorize about their thoughts. Students were encouraged to think aloud in English, but most students preferred to think aloud in Arabic.

3.4 Data analysis

All interviews were reviewed, transcribed, and analyzed using seventeen identified reading strategies (Casanave, 1988; Carrell, 1985; Carrell et al., 1983; Aron, 1986; James, 1986; and Zahran, 1992) The seventeen reading strategies were divided into three categories (pre-reading, during-reading, and post- reading strategies). Many reading strategies were assigned to more than one heading because they occurred in more than one reading phase. The percentages and frequency table of the readers who participated in the research were used to investigate the reading strategies employed by them in reading.

4. Results

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the reading strategies employed by first-secondary-grade students in the city of Tubarjal. More specifically, the study aimed at identifying types of strategies employed by first secondary grade students when they were in the pre-reading phase, during-reading phase and post reading phase.

To answer the main question of the study "To what extent do first secondary graders employ reading strategies in their reading?" All students' responses were collected and analyzed in all stages i.e. pre, during and post reading. Table 1 shows the frequencies and percentages of the students' reading by participants of the study.

Table 1: Reading strategies and their percentages

	Strategies employed by students	Low achievers		Percentage	High achievers		Percentage
		Passage one (Number of students)	Passage two (Number of students)		Passage one (Number of students)	Passage two (Number of students)	
1	Activating prior knowledge	8	8	100%	8	8	100%
2	Q A R	8	8	100%	8	8	100%
3	Translation	8	8	100%	8	8	100%
4	Restating	6	7	81%	7	6	81%
5	Scanning	8	8	100%	8	8	100%
6	Predicting	4	3	44%	7	6	81%

7	Summarizing	4	1	31%	6	8	87%
8	Skimming	2	2	25%	6	7	81%
9	Visualizing	5	3	50%	5	4	56%
10	Rereading	2	3	31 %	3	6	56%
11	Think aloud	2	4	37.5%	6	5	69%
12	Context clues	1	1	12.5%	5	6	69%
13	Evaluation	0	0	0%	3	4	44%
14	Inferring	0	0	0%	2	3	31%
15	Key words	1	1	12.5%	3	4	44%
16	Fix up	1	2	19%	2	4	37.5%
17	Drawing conclusions	0	0	0%	3	2	31%

Table 1 provides the strategies that were in common between the two groups. Both groups employed some strategies such as activating prior knowledge, question-answer relationship (QAR), translation, visualizing, restating and scanning. Several strategies were employed differently by students. Such strategies were fixing up, rereading, key words, predicting, context clues, evaluation, drawing conclusions and keywords.

To identify the reading strategies employed during the three phases of reading. Three questions were addressed to achieve the purpose of the study. To answer the first question, "To what extent do first secondary graders employ pre-reading strategies in their reading?" Table 2 clearly shows what the most frequent strategies and their percentages employed by high achievers and low achievers when reading the two passages were.

Table 2: Pre-reading strategies and their percentages employed by the two groups of Students

	Strategies employed by students	Low achievers		Percentage	High achievers		Percentage
		Passage one (Number of students)	Passage two (Number of students)		Passage one (Number of students)	Passage two (Number of students)	
1	Activating prior knowledge	8	8	100%	8	8	100%
2	Q A R	8	8	100%	8	8	100%
3	Translation	8	8	100%	8	8	100%
4	Think aloud	3	2	31%	7	6	81%

5	Scanning	5	7	75%	7	7	87.5%
6	Predicting	3	3	37.5%	7	6	81%
7	keywords	0	0	0%	0	0	0%

A number of strategies were common to both groups. Both groups employed activating prior knowledge, translation, QAR and scanning. and predicting. Not only was there a difference between the two groups in employing the think aloud strategy, but also the usage of this strategy differed by low achievers between the two passages. None of the two groups employed the keyword strategy in the pre-reading phase.

To answer the second question "To what extent do first secondary graders employ during-reading strategies?" Table 3 shows the strategies and their percentages employed by students during reading.

Table 3: During-reading strategies and their percentages employed by the two groups of students

	Strategies employed by students	Low achievers		Percentage	High achievers		Percentage
		Passage one (Number of students)	Passage two (Number of students)		Passage one (Number of students)	Passage two (Number of students)	
1	Q A R	8	8	100%	8	8	100%
2	Translation	8	8	100%	8	8	100%
3	Restating	7	7	87.5%	8	8	100%
4	Skimming	4	4	50%	4	3	44%
5	Visualizing	5	3	50%	5	3	50%
6	Rereading	2	2	25%	5	4	56%
7	Key words	3	0	19%	4	6	62.5%
8	Predicting	0	0	0%	6	4	62.5%
9	Context clues	1	1	12.5%	5	4	56%
10	Fix up	2	1	19 %	3	5	50%
11	Think aloud	0	1	6%	4	3	44%
12	Evaluation	1	1	12.5%	2	1	19%
13	Inferring	1	0	6%	1	1	12.5%

A number of strategies were common to both groups.. Both groups showed similar responses in employing strategies such as QAR, translation, restating, visualizing, evaluation, skimming and inferring. There were a number of strategies which were employed differently by students such as predicting, context clues, thinking aloud and keywords.

To answer the final question of the research "To what extent do first secondary graders employ post-reading strategies?" Table 4 shows the types of strategies and their percentages employed in the post-reading phase.

Table 4: Post-reading strategies and their percentages employed by the two groups of students

	Strategies employed by students	**Low achievers**		**Percentage**	**High achievers**		**Percentage**
		Passage one (Number of students)	**Passage two (Number of students)**		**Passage one (Number of students)**	**Passage two (Number of students)**	
2	**Q A R**	8	8	100%	8	8	100%
3	**Translation**	8	8	100%	8	8	100%
4	**Summarizing**	6	1	44%	7	8	94%
5	**Inferring**	1	0	6%	4	4	50%
6	**Evaluation**	3	1	25%	4	3	44%
7	**Think aloud**	1	1	12.5%	4	2	37.5%
8	**Drawing conclusion**	0	0	0%	3	3	37.5%
7	**Fix up**	1	0	6%	1	1	12.5%

There were a number of strategies that were in common between the two groups. Both groups showed similar responses in employing the QAR strategies, translation, and fixing up. Students employed a number of strategies differently, such as summarizing, inferring, evaluating, thinking aloud, and drawing conclusions.

5. Discussion

This study investigated the reading strategies used by first-secondary grade students in Tubarjal, with a focus on the pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading phases. The results reveal significant insights into the strategies used by both high achievers and low achievers, as well as the differences in their approach to reading comprehension. The current study found that both high and low achievers frequently used strategies such as activating prior knowledge, QAR (Question-Answer Relationship), translation, and scanning.

Studies by Pressley and Afflerbach (1995) and Zhang (2001) have emphasized the importance of activating prior knowledge as a foundational strategy for comprehension. This strategy helps students connect new information to what they already know, facilitating deeper understanding. Additionally, Raphael and Au (2005) highlighted the effectiveness of QAR in improving students' ability to answer comprehension questions by linking questions to specific parts of the text. The universal use of QAR in the current study supports its widespread recognition as a valuable strategy.

Moreover, In bilingual or multilingual contexts, translation is often used as a comprehension aid. This aligns with studies by Jiménez et al. (1996), who found that students frequently translate text to their native language to enhance understanding, especially when dealing with complex or unfamiliar material. In addition, the frequent use of scanning in the pre-reading phase of the current study is consistent with findings by Grabe and Stoller (2013), who noted that scanning is a common strategy for quickly locating specific information in a text.

On the other hand, the current study found significant differences in the use of advanced strategies such as predicting, summarizing, skimming, and using context clues between high and low achievers. These findings are supported by previous research as follows.

High achievers' greater use of predicting aligns with studies by Duke and Pearson (2002), who found that skilled readers often make predictions to set expectations and guide their reading. Low achievers' limited use of this strategy suggests a need for explicit instruction in anticipatory thinking. Moreover, The current study's finding that high achievers use context clues more effectively is supported by Nagy and Townsend (2012), who argued that skilled readers rely on context to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words. Low achievers' limited use of this strategy may indicate a need for vocabulary development and inference training.

6. Conclusion

The study highlights the importance of reading strategies in enhancing comprehension and reveals significant differences in strategy use between high and low achievers. The current study's findings are largely consistent with previous research, reinforcing the importance of reading strategies in enhancing comprehension. However, it also provides new insights into the specific strategies used by secondary students in a bilingual or multilingual context. By comparing these results with earlier studies, it becomes clear that while certain strategies are universally effective, their application may vary depending on students' proficiency levels, cultural contexts, and educational backgrounds. This underscores the need for tailored instruction that addresses the unique needs of different learner groups. Clearly, by addressing these differences through targeted instruction and encouraging active engagement with texts, educators can help all students improve their reading comprehension skills.

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