

READING COMPREHENSION DIFFICULTIES AMONG
MIDDLE EASTERN STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Reading is a process that requires effort on the readers' part if they want to understand what they are reading. A vast amount of research has been devoted to understand processes that contribute to reading comprehension. As part of that research, this study was conducted to explore problems or difficulties faced by 30 Middle Eastern students in the University of Malaya when they read texts in English and the reading strategies used by them. Based on the hypotheses that the students lack of ability to identify main ideas, infer information, deduce meaning from context, elicit specific information or details, guess and make predictions, understand relations between sentences and recognize the author's purpose, it was found that the major difficulties faced by students are identifying main ideas, deducing meaning from context and eliciting specific information. The results of the study also showed the strategies are to refer to the glossary to understand the meaning of words and refer to the illustration to help them understand the text. In fact, these 30 Middle Eastern students in the University of Malaya, also always read and try to understand in both Arabic as their first language and also in English as their foreign language. Suggestions are made that EFL educators should expose the students to appropriate methods and materials, integrate reading and writing and extend reading courses in their teaching process. The study also recommends that to improve students' reading comprehension, it has to start during the early stages of reading acquisition because children's oral language comprehension level is much higher than their reading comprehension level.

ABSTRAK

Membaca adalah proses yang memerlukan usaha oleh pembaca jika mereka mahu memahami apa yang mereka baca. Sejumlah besar penyelidikan telah ditumpukan untuk memahami proses yang menyumbang kepada kefahaman membaca. Sebagai sebahagian daripada penyelidikan, kajian ini dijalankan untuk meninjau masalah atau kesukaran yang dihadapi oleh 30 pelajar Timur Tengah di Universiti Malaya apabila mereka membaca teks di dalam Bahasa Inggeris dan strategi membaca yang digunakan. Di atas sebab itu, hipotesis dibuat bahawa pelajar-pelajar ini kurang keupayaan untuk mengenal pasti idea utama, maklumat membuat kesimpulan, menyimpulkan makna daripada konteks, mendapatkan maklumat tertentu atau butir-butir khusus, meneka dan membuat ramalan, memahami hubungan di antara ayat-ayat dan mengenal pasti tujuan pengarang. Keputusan mendapati bahawa masalah utama yang dihadapi oleh 30 pelajar Timur Tengah di Universiti Malaya ini adalah mengenal pasti idea utama, menyimpulkan makna daripada konteks dan mendapatkan maklumat tertentu atau butir-butir khusus. Hasil kajian ini juga menunjukkan strategi utama yang mereka gunakan adalah merujuk kepada glosari untuk memahami makna perkataan dan merujuk kepada ilustrasi untuk membantu mereka memahami teks di dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Malah, mereka juga selalu membaca dan cuba memahami dalam kedua-dua bahasa iaitu Bahasa Arab sebagai bahasa pertama dan juga dalam Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa asing. Cadangan telah dibuat bahawa pendidik yang mengajar Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa asing

haruslah mendedahkan para pelajar kepada kaedah dan bahan-bahan yang sesuai, mengintegrasikan membaca dan menulis dan memperbanyakkan proses membaca di dalam pengajaran mereka. Kajian ini juga mengesyorkan bahawa untuk meningkatkan kefahaman bacaan para pelajar, ia haruslah bermula pada peringkat awal kerana tahap kefahaman bahasa lisan kanak-kanak lebih tinggi daripada tahap kefahaman bacaan dewasa.

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

In this chapter a general introduction will be given to the study under discussion: its aim, statement of problem, significance and research questions. It states the status of English among Middle Eastern students in the University of Malaya, status of English in the Middle Eastern countries, surveys the background to the teaching of English in general with respect to reading comprehension (RC) skills, hypotheses and describes the organization of the thesis.

The scenario faced by many students at tertiary level these days is they do not know the importance of reading skills which can help them to do better in their studies. Lacking in a few skills may affect the students' academic performance. For example, when the students want to answer some questions based on a long passage, they tend to go away from the main ideas of the passage itself. As a result, they need to read it again and again to understand it better. Thus, this will consume more time for them to answer all questions based on the time given.

1.1 Background of the study

As this research focuses on Middle Eastern students and the difficulties they face in correctly answering reading comprehension questions in English, it is pertinent to begin by giving some background information on the status of English in the Middle East, specifically in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Libya. It would also be helpful to briefly explain the educational policies that are in place in these countries with regard to the teaching of English at all levels of education. Hence, this section will be divided into two sub-sections which are status of English in the Middle East and teaching of English as a foreign language.

1.1.1 Status of English in the Middle East

English has a special status as an international language in the educational system in the Middle East. However, Arabic is the national, official and first language for Middle Eastern students as it is their mother tongue. It is the language of instruction in schools, the language of the media and the language of the upper class people. It is a symbol of cultural identity. It is the mother tongue of almost all citizens, except the ethnic minorities (e.g. Urdu/Hindi and others)

The importance of English, however, is recognized throughout the Middle Eastern countries as a foreign language (FL). There are a number of reasons for this. For example, it is considered by many countries in the Middle East that English is

essential for a comprehensive development of the modern Middle Eastern citizens. For example in Egypt, United Arab Emirate (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, many people from different parts of the world who teach EFL come to work to teach English there. The English language roles in certain sectors of the civil services such as the airlines, navigation, banking, insurance, international telecommunication, customs, immigration, foreign trade as well as tourism, health services and medical prescription is an indication of its overall importance. It also opens wide opportunities for the countries to have international relationship with other countries.

English also has a place in the mass media. There are local English newspapers, for example, Times which is published weekly in Yemen. Moreover, an English version of the daily bulletin of Saba and Aden News Agencies is provided by the media. There is nightly news telecast in English, for example, on Yemeni television, as well as weekly showing of British/American films and series, children's films and also children's programmes. English films are not only shown in most cinemas but also available in CD and DVD centers on a regular basis. For non-Arabic films (e.g. Indian and European) there are usually subtitles in Arabic and also in English.

English also has a place in the streets. Most banks, companies, hotels, restaurants and shops with Arabic names display their names in English as well. In addition, some of the confectionary and other products are also modeled on their English counterparts. Apart from the above mentioned usage, English also plays a prominent role in education.

1.1.2 Teaching of English as a foreign language

This section will give a brief overview of the teaching of English in the Middle East, particularly in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Libya with special emphasis on reading skills. As in many countries belonging in Kachru's "Expanding Circle" (1985, as cited in Bauer, 2002), English is one of the main school subjects in the primary and secondary education in the Middle East.

In general, most Middle Eastern students, in fact, start learning English years after they have acquired their mother tongue (Arabic) which is the official language of the country and is used as a medium of instruction in all levels of education except the Faculties of Medicine, Pharmacology and Technology at the university levels where English is the medium of teaching.

In Middle Eastern countries, the decision of choosing the English language to be taught as a FL in primary and secondary levels was made by the Ministry of Education through educational supervisors in particular countries. The aim behind this decision is to enable students to communicate with the outside world effectively. This implies that English has a special place in the Middle Eastern educational system, as it is an international language used all over the world and it also takes on an increased importance as a result of its usage in all fields such as business, science and technology (The yearly educational Census Book for 95/96, 1996).

At the level of higher education, English is taught as one of the required subjects for one or two years in all universities. The content of the English syllabus

focuses on the four skills and to prepare the students for the next level of education where most of the courses use English as the medium of instruction. By doing this, the students will have the skills of English language as well as the courses they are currently pursuing. The situation is not the same at the school level where the teachers who teach science prefer to teach materials full of science terms where writing is the most important skill for the students as they will need this skill to write processes, reports, researches and the same is true for the teachers of other specializations. Here, the other three language skills namely reading, speaking and listening are not important.

As far as reading is concerned, it can be argued that there are no considerable or significant shifts in the attitude towards the reading process in primary and secondary institutions. Reading is an extra activity used to reinforce the specific grammatical item in focus, and in most cases it consists of asking and answering questions. This is a convenient classroom technique and it provides a certain kind of practice but it does not give specific preparation that is realistic enough for real life reading activities which students do once they have left the university.

In its worst situation, the activity of reading is done passively due to teachers' concentration on the product rather than the process of reading and as a result students face many problems in tackling RC skills and the most important point is that the majority of them seem to be bad readers unable to get the main point of the text of even short passages and even after years of learning.

1.1.2.1 Yemen

In Yemen, learners spend six years learning English starting from Class Seven at a frequency ranging from five to six periods of 35-45 minutes per week. In other words, a pupil (starting school at six or seven years old) starts learning English at the age of 12 onwards, through to the final year of secondary school. It is compulsory to pass in English in order to qualify for the General Secondary School Certificate (GSSC) (The National Report, The Development of Education in The Republic of Yemen, 2008).

Besides that, a study by Al-Quyadi (2002) on the Yemeni Arabic EFL context found that the students had positive attitudes towards the English language learning due to the importance of English usage in the social and educational contexts of the Yemeni society. It was supported by Tamimi and Shuib (2009) when they found that 97.5% of the Yemeni students at Department of Petroleum Engineering at Hadhramout University of Sciences and Technology claimed that they would like to enroll in more English language training courses which would help them to upgrade their proficiency in the language. Moreover, these students also mentioned that they believe that English language is a crucial requirement at the workplace and in order to get a job easily and meet the academic requirement as well.

The school syllabus for the teaching of English is mainly based on the functional approach in which language is seen as a means of communication through performing a number of functions like using English to perform a variety of different

social acts such as describing people and places, asking questions, making requests and giving orders. A list of functions are selected and integrated into units containing lessons of different registers like letters, dialogues, descriptive passages and different social topics, history and science. In other words, the English syllabus aims at teaching the intended functions of the language in a gradual way, one by one, until all the functions are covered. Language units are related to each other and built on each other. Before the lessons in each unit, a set of objectives are prepared and each unit has its own objectives that should be realized after completing teaching the unit. The students are expected to perform the intended functions at the end of each unit.

English textbooks are provided with questions of different types such as comprehension questions, true/false questions, substitution tables and filling in the blanks. These questions do not give equal focus to the four skills. In these textbooks, it seems that one of the greatest stumbling blocks is the putting together of teaching materials in a manner which is devoid of a necessary balance between the different skills. The listening skill, for example, is largely ignored. Focus is more on developing reading, writing and speaking skills to some extent. However, in English classes in the Middle East, the purpose of reading is different from that of reading in the English speaking world. It aims at ensuring that learners know every word and understand the main grammar point or structure and is quite often simply a pretext for teaching new lexis and structure rather than reading skills. Answering exercises, therefore, requires learners to look up and memorize new vocabulary, and answer straight forward questions directly based on the text (Richard, 2003).

At the Faculty of Arts, at Hodeidah University, particularly in the Department of English, the situation is different. The attitude to English language as a FL is manifested in the curriculum as it is the language of specialization. Four years of English study are divided into eight semesters for teaching a number of English subjects such as reading, drama, listening and writing. It should be mentioned here that reading as a language skill is taught only in the first year for two semesters in a three hour lecture per week. The focus is on providing some specific aspects that are problematic for students, ranging from simple tasks, where the students are required to give simple responses to more complicated ones, where reading is only the basis for more sophisticated activities involving another language skill like writing. Yet many RC exercises seem very largely a test of memory rather than of comprehension. Therefore, RC skills surely need to be studied in greater depth to find out what weaknesses are responsible for students' problem in achieving successful communication in reading.

In addition, Yemeni children begin to speak their mother tongue, more or less fluently, by the age of 3. English doesn't enjoy the official status in the Republic of Yemen. But this language is in practical demand with the people. To the Yemeni students going abroad for advanced studies, the knowledge of English is necessary. In rural areas of Yemen, English is irrelevant, as it is of no use to the folks.

1.1.2.2 Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, English is spoken as a foreign language. As an EFL country, in Saudi Arabia English is used as an instrument with which to communicate, do trade, conduct business, for diplomacy, travel and as a medium in higher education. Due to this, English language is used as the language of instruction for many subjects at the tertiary level such as in Science, Medicine, Dentistry, and Engineering and to a lesser degree in others. One of the requirements to be accepted into faculties such as Medicine and Dentistry is proficiency in English as it is needed at a higher degree level (Alshumaimeri, 2001).

In general, the overall syllabus for the three years of the secondary level of education and the broad-ranging aims of teaching English in Saudi Arabia are really to provide the secondary school students an opportunity to view the world, to present the students a delightful experience of reading samples of English that have a global appeal both in the arts and sciences, to develop the students' ability to think critically as a useful adjunct to intelligent reading of English texts and to provide the students with sufficient knowledge of English to aid them in their future studies (Alshumaimeri, 2001).

However, there are a lot of problems that confront Arab students in their course of studying the English language. In Saudi Arabia, since Saudis speak their native language at home and during their interaction with their friends, peers, and classmates, there is a little chance to learn English through day-to-day interface.

The educational system in Saudi Arabia is an issue only discussed and decided by its royal rulers. Prince Turki Al-Faisal, one of Saudi's high-ranking royals, in an interview admitted that there was wrong with Saudi Arabia's educational system (Elyas, 2008). The prince also expressed assurance that the royal government is making steps to combat extremism through reforming the kingdom's educational system. With this, some steps done were the re-writing of school textbooks, but Saudi Arabia stated that the reformation of its pedagogical system goes beyond that, as it should also include training and effective political directions (Elyas, 2008).

Because of international pressure, Saudi Arabia's Higher Committee on Education Policy mulled a program that aimed at introducing English language as part of primary schools' curriculum (Elyas, 2008). This decision was for the purpose of inculcating in the minds of the Saudi youths the idea of open-mindedness and recognition of others, and the notion of living peacefully with people from other races and cultures (Elyas, 2008). To implement such a decision, the first step was to employ almost a thousand of English foreign teachers.

1.1.2.3 Libya

Unlike Saudi Arabia and Yemen, English is a mandatory subject from the 5th grade of Elementary school in Libya. The majority of English language usage takes place in Tripoli, as it is the capital city of Libya. However there is a growing demand in Benghazi (Samer, 2009).

During the 70s, amidst progress in the process of Arabization, English claimed an increasingly important place as a foreign language in Libya. English was not only taught from the level of primary school onward, in the universities English was also used as the medium of instruction for many scientific, technical, and medical courses. Although it is not likely for a shopkeeper in Tripoli or a hotel doorman to speak the language, business people, on the other hand, were used to communicating in it. There were also some internal statistical documents and other publications that the government issued in a bilingual English-Arabic format. In 1986, former Prime Minister of Libya, Muammar Ghadaffi announced a policy of doing away with the teaching of English at all levels. The policy was actually carried out in 1987, but it appeared harmless to assume that English would continue to be widely used for the immediate future if not longer in this country. In the early 1980s, arrays of courses were taught in primary and secondary classes. English classes were introduced in the fifth primary grade and continued from then on (Helen, 1987).

1.2 Statement of problem

The problem that is common among the Middle Eastern students in the University of Malaya is the understanding of English texts and materials involve in their studies with regard to answering RC texts given by the lecturers. The majority of the students cannot get the correct answers while answering RC texts. They tend to deviate from the actual meaning of the texts and misinterpret what the questions

want. At the University of Malaya, international students have to pass English courses such as ELPIS. This is a requirement to continue their study at the University of Malaya. Middle Eastern friends of the researcher who are taking English Language as their major are always approached by their fellow friends who need their help in understanding some of the main ideas in passages from books, journals or magazines related to their study. The researcher is also frequently approached for the same reason.

It is believed that the students' weakness is attributed to a number of reasons such as the strategy used by them to understand everything, which, in the researcher's opinion, is the result of the method used in teaching reading skills. The most widely accepted view of learning in the Middle Eastern situation is that it is memory-based (Alsamadani, 2009). Therefore in order to obtain knowledge, it is adequate for the students to remember the points of the particular subjects. This undoubtedly condemns both teachers and students to the use of non-meaningful strategies in which grammatical forms take precedence over meaningful communication. So what is needed is not a lot of drills or memory-based activities but a need to encourage acquisition. Based on these assumptions and the foregoing discussions, this study aims at:

- a. Investigating the problems or difficulties faced by Middle Eastern students at the University of Malaya when they read texts in English.
- b. Investigating the strategies used by Middle Eastern students at the University of Malaya when they read texts in English.

1.3 Purpose of the study

The aim of this study is to investigate the reading strategies of the Middle Eastern students in the University of Malaya. It is mainly concerned with investigating the hypothesis of the existence of a relationship between the students' proficiency in RC and the strategies they use in reading English texts. The purpose of the study is twofold; in addition to investigating the problems or difficulties faced by Middle Eastern students in University of Malaya when they read texts in English, this study also investigates and explores the strategies used by Middle Eastern students when they read text in English. Based on these purposes and the consequent findings, it is hoped that remedies to overcome the deficiency can be looked into.

1.4 Research questions

As one of the English students from the Middle East, the researcher considers it vital that we should be exploring ways to best help students negotiate a text, since time allocated for reading skills is limited and the need for reading is great and one way of doing so is to look at reading from the learners' point of view.

The question which the present research investigates is mainly based on the fact that most of the Middle Eastern students who learn English as preparation to enter the mainstream faculties have difficulties in getting good scores in RC tests

which can hamper their chances at progressing in their studies. Most reading comprehension questions commonly test skills such as getting main and relevant specific ideas, drawing inferences and making predictions, determining the meaning of vocabulary from context, recognizing the author's purpose, identifying relations between sentences as well as making references.

The research is mainly concerned with investigating the following skills which have been determined by the main hypotheses. It is hypothesized that:

1. Most of the Middle Eastern English language students lack RC skills. Their weaknesses can be characterized based on their lack of ability:
 - a. to recognize main ideas
 - b. to infer information
 - c. to deduce meaning from context
 - d. to elicit specific information or details
 - e. to guess and make predictions
 - f. to understand relations between sentences
 - g. to recognize the author's purpose
2. Most of the Middle Eastern English language students tend to work much harder than necessary aiming at understanding every single word they read, thinking that successful comprehension is total comprehension.

It is believed that the student's weakness is caused by a number of reasons such as the strategy they use in their attempt to understand everything which may be the result of the method used in teaching. Based on this assumption this study looks at the following research questions:

1. What are the problems or difficulties faced by Middle Eastern students at the University of Malaya when they read texts in English?
2. What are the strategies used by Middle Eastern students at the University of Malaya when they read texts in English?

1.5 Significance of the study

Reading is one of the four basic skills that students have to learn in order to acquire the language they are learning. This also applies to English language learning. Exploring the problems or difficulties faced by Middle Eastern students in the University of Malaya when they read texts in English will provide data that help in suggesting implications for effective reading skills in EFL instruction.

This study will provide information needed to enhance teaching pedagogy in developing reading skills and to improve learning conditions among the Middle Eastern students especially in the University of Malaya. In order to achieve this purpose, research is needed to understand the problems or difficulties faced by Middle Eastern students in the University of Malaya when they read texts in English.

Therefore, the results of this study will generate important information for curriculum and course developers to devise a more effective programme for the development of reading skills for all international students and Middle Eastern students in particular.

Reading has been chosen for a number of reasons. The most important reason to be stressed here is that it is an area which is being neglected, as focus on a student's reading training is usually more on linguistic aspects than on other non-linguistic ones. It is hoped that the results yielded from this study will create awareness that there are numerous strategies involved in becoming an effective reader and, therefore, reading classes should be dedicated to developing reading skills only.

Another significance of this study is that it will reveal the general types of reading strategies which the Middle Eastern students usually use when they read English texts. This study is intended primarily for English language teachers in universities who have to bear in mind the types of reading activities that can be used in teaching and might be applied in academic contexts, particular difficulties encountered by FL learners when coping with these activities and how they as teachers can best help the learners to overcome these difficulties. In other words, it will enable teachers to be in a better position to diagnose the causes and to offer appropriate treatment.

1.6 Limitation of the study

Even though the study is about the problems faced in RC by the Middle Eastern students at the University of Malaya, it is only focusing on the first year students from three different countries which are Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Libya. It also involved only 30 respondents who are all males. Their ages range between 21 and 30 years old. They are doing their First Degree and Master Degree in various courses in the University of Malaya. This study did not look at correlations between age and performance nor their major of studies and their performance in the reading test. Because of this, the results obtained from this study may not reflect the reading problems of all Middle Eastern students in general.

1.7 Organization of the study

This research will be divided into five chapters. Chapter One sheds some light on introductory remarks such as the research aim, values, questions, significance and limitation of the study and the organizational layout of the dissertation. It also provides information about the status of English as a SL/FL as well as the English language teaching situation, with more focus on RC skills, in the Middle Eastern situation both at the school level and the university level.

Chapter Two reviews the existing literature and current research. Chapter Three presents the methodology used, the subjects and the tools of the investigation. Chapter Four deals with two main issues: the research results and their interpretations. It presents the most relevant findings of the empirical study and the analysis that the data have been subjected to. It also provides the researcher's interpretation of these results in light of the hypotheses that the study has investigated and the theories presented in the review. The focus in Chapter Five is to discuss the major findings in light of the research questions, conclude and provide practical solutions and recommendations for classroom applications.

1.8 Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter has highlighted some general information about the exposure that students from the Middle East have had back in their respective countries and how this has had some impact on their reading skills in English.

Chapter Two

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter focuses on theoretical perspectives regarding the skill of reading. The review attempts to give a general presentation of the nature of reading skill as an interactive process as well as a comprehensive survey of different reading models. Here prominence is given to interactive models of reading and to schematic - knowledge based literature on RC. This will be followed by a brief description of the main problems that FL readers might experience in the process of RC as well as characteristics of good readers. A number of reading difficulty studies will also be reviewed. Finally, new trends in reading research will be given briefly.

2.1 Definition of reading

Reading is definitely an important skill for academic contexts but what is the appropriate definition of the word “reading”? FL reading research has gained specific attention since the late seventies (Eskey, 1973; Clarke and Silberstein, 1977; Widdowson, 1978). Before that time, FL reading was usually linked with oral skills and viewed as a rather passive, bottom-up process which largely depended on the

decoding proficiency of readers. The decoding skills that readers used were usually described in hierarchical terms starting from the recognition of letters, to the comprehension of words, phrases, clauses, sentences and paragraphs. In other words, it is a gradual linear building up of meaning from the smaller units to the larger chunks of text. The common assumption that reading theorists had about FL reading was that the higher the FL proficiency of readers the better their reading skills. Knowledge of the foreign culture was also an important factor that enabled foreign readers to arrive at the intended meaning of texts (Fries, 1972; Lado, 1964; Rivers, 1968). Reading thus involves two main processes as suggested by Lunzer and Dolan:

The reader must establish what the writer has said and he must follow what the writer meant. (1979:10)

Accordingly, the readers use their linguistic background to see how words are put together. They will also use their ability to interpret as well as their knowledge of the world to extract the message the writer is trying to convey (Widdowson, 1978; Williams, 1984; Smith, 1985).

Nuttal (1982) defines reading as the ability to understand written texts by extracting the required information from them efficiently. While looking at a notice board, looking up a word in a dictionary and looking for special information from a text, normally we use different reading strategies to get what it means. Smith (1971) defines it as the act of giving attention to the written word, not only in reading symbols but also in comprehending the intended meaning. The writer and reader interaction through the text for the comprehension purpose is also viewed as reading by Widdowson (1979:105). What is significant in all these definitions is that there is

no effective reading without understanding. So reading is more than just being able to recognize letters, words and sentences and read them aloud as known traditionally (although letter identification, and word recognition are of course essential). It involves getting meaning, understanding and interpreting what is read. What we need is reading that goes hand in hand with understanding and comprehension of what is read or in Smith's words "making sense" (Smith, 1982) of what one is doing.

Traditionally too, reading is the reader's ability in answering the questions that follow a certain text. This happens especially in schools. But recent approaches, as mentioned above, see reading from a different point of view. According to Smith (1982), before someone reads a text, the idea of questions is seen as important to render the process of reading as a purposeful and more meaningful activity. Asking questions before reading makes it possible and relatively easy to look for answers. Smith makes these issues clear:

The twin foundations of reading are to be able to ask specific questions (make predictions) in the first place and to know how and where to look at print so that there is at least a chance of getting these questions answered (1982:166).

It seems obvious that this is a shift from reading to answering comprehension questions, which only measure the 'outcomes' without showing the process or purpose for why one reads. This shift has had a positive influence on the design of reading materials, tasks and activities.

The idea of finding a precise and specific definition of reading is not an easy one. The reason for this have been attributed by Alderson and Urquhart (1984) to the unquestionable complexity of the act of reading and to the fact that previous research

had not approached the study of the reading process comprehensively from a number of inter-related perspectives, as they suggest should have been done:

It follows from our positing that reading is a complex activity, that the study of reading must be inter-disciplinary. If the ability involves so many aspects of language, cognition, life and learning then no one academic discipline can claim to have the correct view of what is crucial in reading: linguistics certainly not, probably not even applied linguistics. Cognitive and educational psychology are clearly centrally involved, sociology and sociolinguistics, information theory, the study of communication system and doubtless other disciplines all bear upon an adequate study of reading. (1984:xxvii)

According to all the definitions mentioned it can be concluded that reading means bring meaning to a text in order to get meaning from it or an oral interpretation of written language.

2.2 Comprehending a text

Reading has been broadly described as a receptive phase of written comprehension. In written language a message has been encoded by the writer in graphic symbols spatially distributed on the page. The reader does not only scan the written language, but s/he also receives and records a torrent of either visual or perceptual images. In a process of decoding the written language, the reader must actively use his knowledge of language, his previous experiences, and his realization of the processing of language data encoded in the form of graphic symbols. An active interaction between the reader and the language in its written form through which the reader is able to recreate a message from the writer is regarded as a successful reading process.

This is a view of reading as a total process and to understand the complexity of such a process we have to consider the elements that make up the reading text. These elements are referred to as systemic and schematic knowledge in the reading field today.

2.2.1 Systemic knowledge

In reading a text we extract two levels of meaning - the systemic (consisting of structural and lexical elements) and schematic (consisting of prior knowledge and socio-cultural elements). For lexical or grammatical meanings, readers may turn to a dictionary or a grammar textbook. It is the schematic meaning that is the most difficult for a SL/FL reader to penetrate.

Knowledge of language will enable us to decipher strings of symbols as sentences and is more commonly referred to as the linguistic competence that underlies the decoding view of comprehension. However, this knowledge in itself will not make it possible for us to comprehend language in use. This is because it also requires a realization of the particular meanings of signs in association with the context of utterance. The sign in the utterance, according to Widdowson (1990) actually functions as an index rather than as a symbol.

“... it indicates where we must look in the world we know or can perceive in order to discover meaning”. (1990:102)

Widdowson is suggesting that there is a contextual level within the knowledge of language itself, ‘a level of preparedness for use’, and it is at this level that schematic knowledge functions.

2.2.2 Schematic knowledge

The function of background knowledge has been formalized as schema theory (Rumelhart and Oriony, 1977; Rumelhart, 1980). Based on the schema theory, a spoken or written text does not provide meaning. It only helps by giving the readers directions on how they should retrieve or construct meaning from the knowledge they had acquired previously (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983:556). As Johnson explains, “Readers understand what they read because they are able to take the stimulus beyond its graphic representation to an appropriate group of concepts already stored in their memories” (1982:505).

Rumelhart, 1980 (quoted in Kary, 1988:15-16) explains that:

“... schemata are the building blocks of cognition. They are the fundamental elements up on which all information processing depends... (33). A schema theory is basically a theory about knowledge. It is a theory about how knowledge is represented and how that representation facilitates the use of knowledge in particular ways. According to schema theory, all knowledge is packaged into units. These units are the schema... a schema then, is a data structure for representing concepts stored in memory”.

The notion of schema has been discussed by many scholars (Rumelhart, 1977; Anderson and Pearson, 1988; Kary, 1988; Carrell and Eisterhold, 1988). According to them, the interaction between the reader's background knowledge and the text is what we term as comprehending a text. The ability to relate the textual materials to one's previous knowledge results in efficient comprehension. An interpretation process is guided by the principle that every input is mapped against some existing schema and that all aspects of that schema is compatible with the input information.

Whether we are aware of it or not it is this interaction of new information with old knowledge that we mean when we use the term comprehension. To say that one has comprehended a text is to say one has found a mental home for the information in the text. (Anderson & Pearson, 1988)

During the reading process, new information from the text is related to the old information acquired from the reader's previous knowledge. Pearson-Casanave (1984) points out that the text does not carry meaning; it only provides clues to enable the reader to understand the meaning. That is, the text helps to activate and build on the existing schema. The view of schema theory asserts the activating or building of readers existing knowledge prior to reading which would aid RC and retention (Johnson, 1982). Expanding background knowledge would prepare the reader to comprehend and retain the materials he reads.

Comprehending a text, thus, becomes as Kary states:

“... an outcome of the interaction between the writer's text and the reader's background knowledge or schema. The interaction occurs in terms of simultaneous bottom-up and top-down processes to provide a satisfactory interpretation of a written text...” (1988:18).

In seeking to understand the role of background knowledge in RC, it is useful to draw a distinction between formal schemata and content schemata.

2.2.2.1 Formal schemata

Formal schemata or 'rhetorical routines' as used by Widdowson (1984) refer to the background knowledge and the expectation of differences among rhetorical structures. It includes the differences in genre and differences in their structure for example in fables, simple stories and scientific texts. Our schema for simple stories, for example, includes that the story should have a setting, a beginning, a development and an ending.

Meyer and Freedle (1984) recognize five different types of expository rhetorical organization (collection, causation, response, comprehension and description). Each of these types are said to represent different abstract schema of ways writers organize and readers understand topics.

Several studies have shown the effects of formal, rhetorical schemata in English as a second language (ESL)/EFL. Results of a study by Carrell (1984), for instance, showed that when stories violating the story schema are processed by SL readers, both the quantity of recall and the temporal sequences of recall are affected.

2.2.2.2 Content schemata

This type of background knowledge or ‘frame of reference’ (Widdowson, 1984) relates to the content area of the particular text. A reader who cannot activate and interpret an appropriate content schema would experience various levels of non-comprehension. This may be attributed to a mismatch between what the writer hopes for the reader to do to elicit meaning and what the reader is actually able to do.

Schema theory proposes that readers possess different conceptual frameworks, called schemata, which they bring to the reading of a text and which they use to make sense of what they read. Such schemata are used by readers in interactive bottom-up and top-down processing. The content schema is the knowledge relative to the content domain of the text. Content schemata themselves can be classified into different types. One which has attracted growing interest is the culture-specific content schema. Several studies of second-language speakers and reading comprehension indicate that prior cultural experiences are extremely important in comprehending text (Anderson, 1991; Johnson, 1982).

In her investigation of both content and formal schemata, Carrell (1987) asked her ESL subjects, who were of Muslim and Catholic background, to read passages dealing with aspects of the two religions. Carrell found that the subjects’ comprehension was better when they read the passages related to their own religious backgrounds. Surprisingly, the subjects’ performance was also better when they read

the passages reflecting their own religious background, but with an unfamiliar organization.

Studies by Mikhail (1987) and Walters (1993) have shown that the text that interacts with the reader's own cultural background knowledge of content is much easier to understand than syntactically and rhetorically equivalent texts based on a less familiar and more alien culture. Singhal (1998) has demonstrated that SL readers would enjoy and engage in more reading if such readings relied more on their previous cultural knowledge. Agapito (1999) reported that a list of readings based on learner's experience and choice was recommended for use as a guide for reading lessons in the ESL classroom.

Pritchard (1990), who investigated the effects of cultural schemata on reading processing strategies, argued that one's schemata are influenced by one's own cultural background, and that they provide the reader with an interpretive framework on which he/she may rely on while reading. This is supported by Kellen's (1991) findings, which indicated that meanings of words in context are dependent on the reader's schema. Pritchard (1990) found that even strategies used by readers when reading familiar and unfamiliar passages vary according to their cultures in terms of range and frequency.

2.2.3 Problem with schema theory application

As mentioned earlier, in reading, comprehension of a message means extracting information from both the message and the internal schemata until sets are reconciled as a single schema or message. However, sometimes the writer's intention and the reader's comprehension are different which then lead to misinterpretation on the part of the reader about what the author's purpose is. This is most obvious where readers have had life experiences which are different from the writer's 'model reader'. Therefore, readers sometimes feel that they comprehend a text, but it is still a different interpretation to the author's (Hudson, 1982; and Afflerbach, 1999). Afflerbach's study (1999) was set to examine systematically the influence of prior knowledge on expert readers' use of strategies to construct the main idea. Readers were asked to give verbal reports about the strategies they were using to construct the main idea as they read, and these reports were analyzed to identify common strategies. Experts from two different fields, namely, anthropology and chemistry, read texts from both familiar and unfamiliar content domain, in order to specify the effects of prior knowledge on their reported strategies.

As reading is an interactive process, this study draws on the cognitive work bench model which suggests that cognitively demanding processes such as main idea construction may strain the limited resources of the reader's information processing system and specifically the reader's working memory. It also draws heavily on schema theory which suggests an explanation for the facilitative effect of prior knowledge on text comprehension (e.g. Anderson & Pearson, 1988). Readers with

high prior knowledge of the content domain have well-developed schemata into which they assimilate the information from a text.

Three strategies were used for overall main idea construction like draft and revision, topic comment and automatic construction and two other strategies like initial hypothesis and listing. The analyses of the data demonstrated that prior knowledge had a significant influence on expert reader's main idea construction strategies. Unfamiliar texts necessitated significantly more frequent use of the construction strategies of draft and revision and listing. The protocol report shows evidence that readers initially sought a framework for interpreting the text they read, and the more extensive the reader's prior knowledge, the more quickly and easily appropriate schemata were accessed and used to help build meaning.

As Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) point out, "one of the most obvious reasons why a particular content schema may fail to exist for a reader is that the schema is culturally specific and is not part of a particular reader's cultural background". It is thought that readers' cultures can affect everything from the way readers view reading itself, the content and formal schemata they hold, right down to their understanding of individual concepts.

Rumelhart (1980) provides a detailed discussion on such issues and mention three potential obstacles that readers face while interaction takes place:

1. The reader may lack the appropriate schemata in which case, he or she will not be able to understand the concept that is being communicated.

2. In cases where the reader may have the suitable schemata, but the absence of clues by the author to suggest them will still not allow the reader to activate his schemata.
3. The reader may detect a consistent interpretation of the text yet may not find the actual interpretation meant by the author. In such a case, the reader will understand the text but will end to misunderstand the author.

(Cited in Kary, 1988)

Kary (1988) adds two more hypotheses that may cause failure of understanding in RC. One of her hypotheses states that failure in interaction may also attributed to reader's immaturity to build up the procedural details necessary for a specific schema. An example can be seen when a child, a native reader cannot realize that 'restaurant schema' is not only represented in an outdoor place where people can eat and be served but also a bill should be paid at the end of a meal and it may have no waiters.

Kary's second hypothesis was a result of not having the ability of picking up clues from a text for the purpose of comprehension. As a result, "...there is failure of comprehension because the reader has not utilized all the possible entries into the system in a bottom-up processing mode and hence has blocked the interaction with a top-down mode" (Kary, 1988).

2.3 Models of reading

In the reading field today two main views prevail - the decoding and the interpretative. The decoding view is exemplified by bottom-up processing models (e.g. Gough, 1972). The interpretative view can be further categorized to include top-down processing models (e.g. Goodman, 1967) on the one hand and interactive models (e.g. Rumelhart, 1977) on the other.

According to their description, information sources needed for bottom-up and top-down models are different. Moreover, reading activities and skills related to each level are not the same. Interactive model is the one which involves readers to use all those which have been looked at separately by bottom-up and top-down theories. Brief discussion of three reading models namely the decoding model, the psycholinguistic model and the interactive model will be discussed in the next section

2.3.1 The Decoding Model

During the early seventies there was a strong tendency in early cognitive theorizing to depict information processing as a series of distinct stages (Clark & Clark, 1977). Each stage transformed the input after which the recorded information was passed on to the next higher level for additional transformation and recording. Because the

sequence of processing proceeds the incoming data to higher-level encodings, these descriptions of the reading process are called data-driven or bottom-up models. It is not surprising then that since these models were so influential in the early development of information processing theorizing, they were the first to be applied to reading not only in L₁ but also in SL/FL situations.

This approach is the result of the strong influence of the audio-lingual method which dictated the primacy of listening over reading and of speaking over writing, and it is also due to the importance assigned to phoneme-grapheme relationships by structuralists such as Fries (1963) and Lado (1964). In such a model, reading was mainly regarded as a passive process and the reader's role was limited to that of a 'decoder' who, in order to arrive at the meaning of an encoded text, merely employed decoding processes. This linear approach to reading was based on the assumption that if readers were familiar with the graphic or written code, in other words, if they were able to decipher the writer's symbols, they would have no serious problems with arriving at or reconstructing the writer's meaning. Hence, reading problems in such a reading approach are viewed as being essentially decoding problems, deriving meaning from print (Rivers, 1964, 1968).

Reading here refers to what Carrell (1988) calls 'an overreliance on text based' or bottom-up processing. It involves the decoding of individual words and their lexical meanings and decoding the syntactic structures of each sentence and their grammatical-functional meanings.

Smith (1973) describes decoding as ‘the great fallacy’, which merely means “...transforming or reconvertng written symbols into spoken language.” (1973:70)

Smith, 1973 defined the term ‘decoding’ to describe what happens when a reader translates a grapheme input into a phoneme input, Goodman uses it to discuss the manner in which either a graphemic input or a phonemic input gets transform into a meaning code. To Goodman, the term ‘recording’ is used to explain the process of converting graphemes into phonemes. That being so, decoding can be either direct (graphemes to phonemes), or mediated (graphemes to phonemes to meaning), or indirect (grapheme to meaning).

2.3.1.1 Limitation of the decoding model

The decoding model is inadequate for any SL class for a number of reasons. According to Smith (1973), underlying the decoding hypothesis is a ‘gross oversimplification’ that spoken language is comprehended directly and instantaneously, and therefore the conversion of written language into speech is sufficient to ensure its immediate understanding.

As Goodman (1971) points out, spoken language is itself a code that requires being broken if meaning is to be apprehended. Written language is not speech written down: writing is a visual form of language, and speech as an acoustic form surface

structure to deep structure, involves complex syntactic and semantic decision, the uses of knowledge and of the world.

There is substantial experimental evidence (Smith, 1973) that meaning from semantic and syntactic constraints are employed by readers to minimize the amount of visual information required to identify words occurring in meaningful and predictable sequences:

“... the reader who concentrates on identifying every word correctly will, unless he is already very familiar with the material he is reading, be unable to read for meaning.”

(1973:7)

It is only by reading for meaning first that there is any possibility of reading individual words correctly. There is not sufficient information in the spelling of words to read them before their meaning is comprehended by the reader. In a sentence such as the following one taken from Smith (1973:77), “We should read the minute print on the permit”.

It is not the case that a fixed amount of visual information is required to identify words like ‘read’, ‘permit’ and ‘minute’; the amount of visual information required depends on the uncertainty of the reader, that is, the amount of non-visual information that he can contribute. Only the meaning of the entire sequence will tell us the syntactic role of the individual words. All the three words ‘permit’, ‘read’, and ‘minute’ can be pronounced differently depending on their meanings and functions in the context.

Another shortcoming of the decoding model is shortage of feedback (Stanovich, 1980). There is no adequate mechanism provided to allow for processing stages which take place later in the system to affect processing which occur earlier in the system. Due to the absence of feedback loops in the model, it is hard to describe sentence-context effects and the role of previous knowledge to text topic as facilitating variables in word recognition and comprehension.

Eskey (1988) finds the model inadequate as a model of the reading process because it underestimates the contribution of the reader; it fails to recognize that students utilize their expectations about the text based on their knowledge of language and how it works.

2.3.2 The Psycholinguistic Model

Like the decoding school, psycholinguists Goodman (1967) and Smith (1971) also share the belief that for substantial improvements to be made in either classroom procedure of pedagogical materials, a clear understanding is necessary of what it is that the successful reader does in order to understand written language. However, their approach is different.

Goodman (1988) describes reading as a psycholinguistic process which means that it begins with a linguistic surface representation encoded by the writer

and closes with meaning which the reader constructs. “The writer encodes thought as language and the reader decodes language to thought” (1988:12).

There is thus an important interaction between language and thought in reading. Goodman’s argument is that the proficient reader is able to manipulate the redundancy inherent in language which enables the reader to recreate the whole although he extracts only a portion of the graphic material. Once such a reconstruction has taken place, it is necessary to test its accuracy against previous information.

All the reader does not use all the information available to him. Reading is a process in which the reader picks and chooses from available information only enough to select and predict a language structure which is decodable. It is not in any sense a precise perceptual process (Smith, 1973:164).

Thus in this model, the reader need not use all of the textual cues in direct contrast to the decoding model in which reading entails processing each and every word (Gough, 1972). A reader that is better able at making predictions requires less conforming via the text. To accomplish this efficiency, readers have to maintain constant focus on constructing the meaning through the process, always seeking the most direct path to meaning, always using strategies for reducing uncertainty, always being selective about the use of the cues available and drawing deeply on their conceptual and linguistic competence.

Smith (1973) says that the main contribution of the psycholinguistic model is that it has shown us that there is a tradeoff between visual and non-visual information; the visual information which comes from the printed page and non-visual information which comes from the brain-what is already known about reading,

about language, about the world in general. In other words, the more non-visual information one processes, the less visual information he needs to identify a letter, a word or a meaning.

One very immediate and clear implication of such a model is that any reader will have a large number of potential points at which uncertainty may rise and he will therefore have to resort to guessing; hence Goodman's (1988) use of the metaphor 'a psycholinguistic guessing game'. The argument is that all readers will read material in accordance with such a model and consequently will, at certain points, guess wrongly. The effects of such a wrong guess can, of course, vary from inconsequential to quite serious. One of the key differences between a proficient reader and poor reader, according to Coady (1979) is that a proficient reader will recover quickly from such wrong guesses or miscues (as Goodman calls them) and their overall performance will be little hampered by them. The poor reader, on the other hand, will not recover in such a successful manner, and will instead fall into a vicious cycle of wrong previous information leading to wrong later predictions.

The general view, therefore, espoused by Goodman (1969) and Smith (1971) is that reading is primarily concept-driven. This view is also referred to as a top-down approach to reading – an approach that starts with hypothesis and then verifies the psycholinguistic model by processing the stimulus (whereas bottom-up analyses start by processing the stimulus).

2.3.2.1 Limitations of the psycholinguistic model

The model assumes that a large vocabulary and the basic syntactic structures are already available to the reader. Such a demand cannot be easily met by most ESL readers. Both Eskey (1986) and Clarke (1979) have characterized the language limitations as a 'language ceiling' which ESL students must surpass if they are to develop fluent reading abilities.

The psycholinguistic model tends to emphasize such higher-level skills as the prediction of meaning of context clues of certain kinds of background knowledge at the expense of such lower-level skills as the rapid and accurate identification of lexical and grammatical forms. That is, in making the perfectly valid point that fluent reading is primarily a cognitive process, they tend to underestimate the perceptual decoding dimension of that process.

The model is an accurate model of the skilful, fluent reader, for whom perception and decoding have become automatic. For less proficient, developing readers this model does not provide a true picture of the problems such readers must surmount.

Although Goodman's (1988) model gives an honest and largely valid description of the complex reading process as a whole, it begs the crucial question of how a skilful reader can draw on so many different kinds of skills at once and why some readers are so much better than others at guessing right. In the 'guessing game' the reader uses the printed word for little more than hints as to whether he is thinking

the right thoughts or not. According to Eskey (1979), “good reading must be something more systematic than guessing”.

Such model has also been questioned for the vagueness in their conceptualizations because they require implausible assumptions about the relative speed of the process involved. This argument is reinforced by several researches indicating that fluent readers do not use conscious expectancies to facilitate word-recognition. For example, many studies (e.g. Eskey, 1988, Stanovich, 1980) suggest that fluent readers are no more likely than poor ones to rely on orthographic or sentence-context effects for the simple identification of words. Reading rate, according to Stanovich (1980:44),

“...is more dependent on the speed with which a reader can recognize words and construct a representation than to use prediction”

Frequent use of top-down strategies at word level suggests a simple failure to decode properly. To really achieve both fluency and accuracy in reading, developing readers must be encouraged to put in more effort at perfecting both their bottom-up recognition skills and their top-down interpretation strategies. Eskey (1988) stated that, “good reading - that is fluent and accurate reading - can result only from constant interaction between the processes”.

In summary the psycholinguistic models, relying on so much on top-down strategies, have serious deficiencies as an explanation of fluent reading.

2.3.3 The interactive model

Previously, views of SL reading were rather restrictive, as it was seen as a passive linguistic decoding process, while in recent times, it is seen as an active and predictive process. The field today is strongly influenced by top-down processing perspectives. However, lest the top-down view of SL reading is seen as a substitute for the bottom-up, decoding view, rather than its complement, several researchers have felt the need to emphasise that effective SL reading requires both top-down and bottom-up strategies operating interactively (Rumelhart, 1977; Kary, 1987; Widdowson, 1979).

In this light, reading is viewed as mixing information in a text with the previous information which a reader brings to a written text. Thus, reading cannot be regarded as simply a process where information is extracted from the text. In fact, it triggers a range of prior knowledge in the reader's mind that he/she uses. This knowledge may now be enhanced and refined by the new information from the text. A communication between the reader and the text during the reading process may also be viewed as a dialogue in progress (Widdowson, 1979; Anderson, 1984).

Widdowson (1979) considers reading in the context of a more general interpretative activity – a process which underlies all communicative activities. He suggests that because the encoding process (e.g. the writer's composition of message) is imprecise and approximate, there is no possibility that the reader will get complete meaning from the text. By encoding the writer is only creating a set of

directions. These directions inform the reader where he should look in the conceptual world of his knowledge and experience for the writer's meaning. The encoder then relies on the active participation of the decoder and the decoder is successful in his comprehension to the extent that he understands directions and is capable of carrying them out. The direction depends, therefore, on the reader's understanding of the textual cues (bottom-up processing) or apprehension of information and then his relating it to the conceptual world of his knowledge (top-down strategies). And it is this perspective that will be adhered to in this study.

The inadequacies of the bottom-up and top-down approaches to reading have been pointed out by some researchers who have aimed at providing a more balanced reading theory which will account for the reader's simultaneous use of all resources of knowledge.

Like top-down models, the interactive models are reader-driven. The reading process, according to the interactive models, is cyclical rather than linear in nature (Barnett, 1989).

Rumelhart (1980) cited in Barnett (1989) suggested that reading is the interaction between several sources of knowledge such as text, SL proficiency, reading strategies and background experience. The processing of graphic, syntactic and semantic information happens simultaneously, and is equally important to higher level skills such as inferencing, predicting and paraphrasing.

There is no single interactive model. Grabe (1988) further clarifies this point when he says "...interactive models include any model that minimally tries to

account for more than serial processing and does so assuming that any parallel or array processing will interact.”

Theories of skilled reading and of reading acquisition differ in the relative importance attributed to lower level and higher level skills; some theories emphasize the importance of word recognition skills (e.g. Piretti, 1985) and some emphasize general language skills (e.g. Smith, 1971).

In other models, such as Stanovich’s (1980) interactive compensatory model, the relative importance of lower level and of higher level skills depends upon the reader’s level of ability in particular reading component skills. For example, a deficiency in a lower level skill, such as word recognition, may result in a greater dependence upon a higher level skill such as the use of context.

Researchers, such as Block (1992) believe that efficient reading is primarily the successful orchestration and manipulation of lower-level and higher-level reading strategies. Interactive models bring these two aspects (the decoding and the interpretation of text) together. The text (encoder’s message) is as important as the active intervention of the reader.

On the basis of these qualities, it is used as the ideal model for the present study. A number of important implications for ESL reading research follow from an acceptance of this model. Higher-level processing abilities play a significant role. It gives some insight on how these processes can interact and how such notions as background knowledge, topic of discourse, inferencing and schemata all affect the

overall reading model. Such an approach to reading makes the reader aware of the essentially imprecise character of communication through natural language.

In this research, as stated earlier, it is hypothesized that Middle Eastern readers believe that exact meaning can, in principle, be fully recoverable from a text if it is scrutinized in sufficient detail. They are thus discouraged from a normal use of the natural language by understanding every single word in the passage they read and are thus denied access to their own conceptual world which can only ensure meaningful reading.

2.4 Developing the reading comprehension strategies skill

As stressed earlier there is no effective reading without comprehension and there is no good comprehension without effective interaction between thought and language. Comprehension is vital for good reading. It needs the reader to be able to paraphrase, abstract the contents, answer the questions, understand the main ideas and facts or deal critically with the contents. Apparently, good comprehenders read in large units, utilizing information between (and within) words to enable them to minimize frequent fixation pauses and word-by-word decoding.

Smith (1971) argues convincingly that any attempts to identify individual letters while reading for words, or to identify words when the aim is comprehension, must inevitably result in delay and disruption of both identification processes. Reading involves more than looking up unfamiliar words in a dictionary. It involves

abstracting logical ideas from the printed page or drawing unified thought of connected sentences. In the highest development of this stage, the readers read with comprehension materials containing unfamiliar word combinations and new vocabulary or structural items. Although they may not understand every word read, they nevertheless comprehend the main points of the passage.

In an attempt to investigate the strategies of good readers (e.g. Barnett, 1988; Hosenfeld, 1976) and those of poor readers (Block, 1986), researchers identified strategies that are negatively correlated with learners' performance on reading measures and strategies that are positively correlated. Research also suggests that the ability to read successfully is attributed to the degree with which learners used certain strategies (Barnett, 1988).

One of the first studies to examine the strategies used by good readers was conducted by Hosenfeld (1976) quoted in Kary (1995). Using think-aloud techniques, Hosenfeld reported that successful readers tended to:

- a. Keep the meaning of the passage in mind while reading.
- b. Read in chunks.
- c. Skip words unimportant to the total meaning.
- d. Have a positive self-concept as readers.

Similarly, Pardon and Waxman (2001) sought to identify strategies that would positively be correlated with successful reading performance. To do this, the researchers randomly selected 82 Hispanic ESL students in the third, fourth and fifth

grades of an elementary school. The subjects were given the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test. The tests were given twice, with an interval of 3 months in between. Students were not given any treatment in the meantime. The post-test was followed by a questionnaire to elicit the cognitive reading strategies used by learners. Students' responses to the questionnaire revealed that the most frequently reported strategies used by the participants were:

- a. Asking questions on part they did not understand.
- b. Checking if they remember the whole story.
- c. Visualizing the story.
- d. Consulting the dictionary.

The least used strategies were:

- a. Trying to read as fast as they could.
- b. Thinking about other things while reading.
- c. Writing down every word.
- d. Ignoring parts they did not understand.

In the same study, Pardon and Waxman (2001) also investigated the relationship between strategy use and reading achievement. The findings indicated that some strategies relate negatively and others positively to learners' reading achievement. A positive correlation between reading achievement and the following reading strategies emerged:

- a. Summarizing in writing.
- b. Underlining important parts.
- c. Self-generated questions.
- d. Checking if they remembered the entire story.
- e. Asking questions about parts they did not understand.
- f. Taking notes.
- g. Visualizing the story.

Among the strategies that were found to be negatively related to reading performance were:

- a. Thinking about other things while reading.
- b. Writing every word.
- c. Ignoring parts they did not understand.
- d. Reading as fast as they could.
- e. Repeating words.
- f. Looking up words in the dictionary.
- g. Repeating the main ideas.

Pardon and Waxman (2001) thus concluded that the use of ineffective strategies might be one of the factors leading to lower performance. It is, therefore

important for the reading teachers to train students in effective strategy use. In relation to this study, it can be seen that the reading strategies used by elementary school students with the university students are the same.

Another study that investigated effective strategy use was conducted by Barnett (1988). She suggested that learners who use 'good' reading strategies read better than those who do not. Her findings indicate that students who are aware of the strategies they use and believe they use these strategies effectively are better than learners who lack conscious awareness of strategy used. Among the issues investigated, Barnett (1988) examined whether the use of certain problem-solving strategies improved students' comprehension. Effective strategies were classified into text-level strategies (those relating to the reading passages as a whole) and word-level strategies (such as strategies that encourage the use of context to guess word meanings). The subjects were 278 fourth semester SL French students. The students were asked to read an unfamiliar passage. The subjects were given a second unfamiliar reading passage after responding to a background knowledge test concerning the content of the second passage. Finally, the subjects were given a 17-item strategies questionnaires. The findings suggested that learners who depended more on context were better comprehenders. Students who had received training in using this strategy also manifested improved RC performance. Barnett's study again supports the importance of using specific strategies to improve RC.

Whereas Barnett (1989) and Hosenfeld (1976) examined the strategies of good readers, Block (1992) examined those used by poor readers. Using the think-aloud protocol, Block (1992) investigated the RC strategies of ESL learners marked

as poor readers. The participants were nine freshmen university students (three native speakers of Russian, three native speakers of Spanish and three native speakers of Chinese). All were poor readers enrolled in remedial reading courses. The students were given two cloze tasks. One of the passages was translated into the native languages of the ESL learners participating in the study. This was done to determine learners' reading ability in their L₁. The native speakers of English were given both passages in English. Students were asked to think-aloud while reading. Two methods were used to examine students' recall and comprehensions of text: retelling and multiple-choice questions. No significant difference was detected between the strategies reported by native speakers and those used by ESL learners. The findings of this study also revealed that the reading strategies employed by Chinese and Spanish participants in reading in English were similar.

Block (1992) also found that he could classify the 'poor readers' in this study into two groups: integrators and non-integrators. Integrators were found to synthesize and link information and monitor their comprehension. These learners were also often aware of the text structure. The second group, designated by Block (1992) as 'non-integrators', relied more on their personal experience to formulate meaning. Their retellings included more detail than main ideas.

A study to support the importance of effective strategy use was that of Arden (1993). The researchers compared the strategies successful and unsuccessful readers used to infer the meanings of unknown words. Two classes comprising 39 Omani Chemistry students at Sultan Qaboos University were used. Over a period of five months, the participants were given questionnaires about reading in a SL. Six tests

were administered throughout the same period to find out how students dealt with unfamiliar vocabulary. It was found that even the poorest readers made use of world knowledge and context to guess the meaning of unknown words. For non-proficient students, the context extended to the immediate sentence, whereas more proficient readers used the entire paragraph to construct meaning. Finally, the findings show that more successful students used a wider range of strategies. Good and poor students however were distracted by the 'look' of the words from context. The participants tended to focus on the structure of words they were familiar with, and neglected the importance of context in guessing the meaning of unknown vocabulary. Over-emphasizing the instruction of prefixes and affixes was thus attacked by Arden (1993).

It has therefore been implied that learner's ability to use effective reading strategies might affect their performance on reading even if their overall proficiency is similar (Grabe, 1991). No explanatory theory, however, investigates the reasons for the use of ineffective strategies such as guessing the meaning of every unfamiliar word in a reading test, a strategy that would hamper students' overall understanding of the passage (Parry, 1993)

2.5 Research on second language reading difficulty

Some of the research studies in SL reading difficulty, summarized in this section, provide a strong basis for emphasizing instruction that should take into consideration

some related factors such as proficiency level, schemata and background knowledge which can affect RC. It appears then, that reading in a SL is a different process with different factors to be considered.

One of the early studies relevant to reading difficulty is that of Stafford (1976) examined the reading difficulties of three proficient speakers of Hindi, Korean and Persian reading in English. It was found that certain reading difficulties experienced by an individual reader prohibited him from using his good mother-tongue reading strategies when reading in English. The other subjects' reading problems were caused by the lack of contextual-pragmatic knowledge and the lack of syntactic and semantic competence.

Cziko (1998) examined and compared the use of syntactic semantic and discourse constraints by readers of French as both first and SL. The subjects were divided into four groups:

- a. Beginners
- b. Intermediate learners of French
- c. Advanced students who had taken part in a French immersion program
- d. French-speaking students

Cziko found that all groups were able to make use of syntactic constraints. However, only the third and fourth groups were able to take advantage of the semantic constraints. This finding suggests a developmental order in the ability of a SL reader, i.e. sensitivity to syntactic constraints develops before sensitivity to

discourse constraints. Cziko stated that much of the difficulty in reading a SL may be due to the inability of the SL reader to make full use of these contextual constraints.

The purpose of Bilfageeh's study (1999) was to investigate reading difficulties from different point of views i.e. teachers and learners. Her study aimed at finding out some frequent problems that face Yemeni's secondary school students' RC. Students' ability to read with comprehension was measured by three tasks use an academic register in achieving successful communication in reading. Two sets of questionnaires were used in order to get the information and feedback about the teachers' and students' perceptions in the area under investigation. The study looked at 120 final year students of the secondary school and 15 English teachers who taught those students. The analysis of the data revealed that the students were weak in basic reading skills like skimming, scanning and guessing the meaning of words from the context. They also had serious problems in discourse-based reading skills such as identifying cohesive devices and recognizing text organization. It was also revealed that students fell back on their mother-tongue, Arabic, when answering RC questions. This was due to the difficulties they faced in comprehending a text. Moreover, it also revealed that the claim made by their teachers that they paid attention to the reading skills investigated is in contrast with the results of the tasks administered to the students. Most teachers stated that they focused on developing pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar while teaching reading skills. This result indicates the teacher's lack of differentiation between linguistic skills and RC skills. Most of the teacher informants claimed that they devote some of the time of the reading class to such skills as the identification of text organization, information

structure and the main idea in the text. This claim however does not match with the results of the tests in which the students' weakness in those specific skills was quite evident.

The most important and most relevant study upon which the present thesis modeled itself is Kary's research on reading difficulties in Arabic and English (1997). Attempting to find out reading problems faced by Egyptian readers either in Arabic or in English, Kary asked 170 second year English learners to write essays which were then itemized into 40 problem statements for the purpose of a questionnaire procedure. Four groups, newly admitted undergraduates at the faculty of art, participated in answering the questionnaire. 39 low proficiency SL students in one group and 38 high proficiency SL students in another group were given the questionnaire twice, once in Arabic and the other in English while 40 low proficiency L₁ students in one group and 34 high proficiency L₁ students in another group were questioned only once in Arabic for reliability purposes. Reading problems were analyzed in relation to three components: reading styles (extensive/reflective), repair mechanism (meaning/sound) and reading difficulties which are classified under five problem headings i.e. content, language, memory, dislike and economics.

The results revealed that all subjects suffer from all types of difficulties in the native language. Their immature reading styles and ineffective repair mechanism combined with their conceptual and linguistic deficiencies accentuated the intensity of their reading problems. However, bilingual subjects were found to suffer less in both languages than monolingual ones. Two main conclusions need to be considered

seriously. The first one is that high and low L₁ subjects experience reading difficulties. The second one is that high SL proficiency group scored the least percentage of reading difficulties in both L₁ and SL. Kary's interpretation of bilingual subjects who showed better results showed that:

“...the reading materials, the teaching practices and the writing styles in L2 promote better reading habits than the existing ones in L₁.”

Kary's study calls for a remedy for L₁ reading programs at all levels of schooling including the tertiary.

“A program that takes into account recent development in the field in order to engage the cognitive and linguistic abilities of learners. While Arabic has more orthographic density than English, both reading systems require the interaction of bottom-up and top-down processes. Without training this essential interactive process, reading will remain a passive skill which promotes memorization rather than an active one which requires meaning manipulation. In fact, without the awareness of the nature and size of students' problems, they will continue to be victims.”

It can be observed that the difficulties an SL reader encounters centre around and fall in one or more of a number of aspects such as meaning, syntactic and semantic competence and contextual-pragmatic knowledge. A lack of competence in any area could reasonably be expected to provide an obstacle to effective comprehension reading and relying on one area could also reduce comprehension and efficient reading.

2.6 Research on reading strategies

The idea of investigating strategies was first thought of over twenty-five years ago in an attempt to capture the purposeful activities learners engage in when they are faced with the task of language learning. This coincided with research concerns in the field of SL learning and teaching, which showed a shift from the methods of teaching to learner characteristics and their possible influence on the process of acquiring a SL. Consequently, one of the leading educational goals of research on learner strategy has been the autonomous language learner (the term “autonomous” meaning less teacher dependent and more self-dependent).

A shift in focus from teaching to learning implies many changes in the instructional process. To create a classroom in which learning flourishes, teachers need a thorough knowledge of the learner and the language and how it develops within the learner. This can be considered from two angles, via psychology and pedagogy.

Psychologically, one way to consider language learning is by looking at children’s learning of language. Language learning is a process whereby children in interaction with others construct the language system, i.e. the meanings and functions of language and the symbols to represent them in oral and written forms. At the same time as they are constructing the system they are also using the system to construct another one, namely the picture of the world.

Research also confirms that children are active agents in their own learning. Knowledge is not something that exists outside, it is constructed within the learner. All learning especially the learning of languages involves activity and discovery. Children will acquire new knowledge only when they can relate it to existing ideas or knowledge, that is, when it makes sense in terms of what they already know. The child reveals himself as a problem-solver rather than a rote learner. According to Ausubel (1968),

“There is evidence that children make less progress in learning when parents try to teach them to talk, by selecting, reinforcing correct usage and rejecting incorrect forms, or when parents pursue a topic of conversation of their own choice beyond the interest of their child.”

As we move from the field of psychology to the field of pedagogy, we find that teachers and researchers have all observed that some students approach the language learning task in more successful ways than others. That is, all things being equal, some students will be more successful than others in learning SL. It is further assumed that successful learners will differ to some extent in the particular sets of cognitive processes and behaviors which they use to enable them to be successful.

As such there has been a steadily growing interest in considering the task from the learner's point of view and in changing the focus of classrooms from a teacher-centered one to a learner-centered one. In particular, there is a growing interest in explaining how learners can take responsibility for their own learning and in classifying the ways teachers can help students become more independent (Salatic and Akyel, 2002).

When authors write, through language, they express their thoughts and their meanings into producing texts. Their creations are restricted only by the depth of their knowledge. Due to the differences between the language thoughts and meaning of an author and the reader, reading is not an exact process which may give rise to many problems. In the process, the readers' language and thought interact with the language and thought of the author so the readers can never be certain that they have discovered the meaning the author intended to convey. However, in the process of understanding what they are reading, readers interpret actively while reading to gain meaning of the particular text.

To overcome the big problem, the reader applies several complex strategies. For example, to be able to comprehend a reading text a student might mentally ask, 'What does the author mean by this?', 'Do I understand this?', 'Does it make sense?'. By employing this style of comprehension monitoring to identify the areas that are problematic, the students may take note of words and expression which they will check later. The teacher would watch and monitor the note taking strategy by asking the students to relate what they have in their mind while they are reading. Effective learners, it is said, know how to use appropriate strategies to achieve their learning goals, while ineffective learners are less aware and knowledgeable about strategies available for them to use. It is such issues that make the identifying of students' current strategies such as an important and valid pursuit because it is only through knowing and discovering the current strategies that other strategies can be fostered and therefore lead to students becoming more successful readers.

Four major purposes can be achieved through the identification of strategies students are already using for different SL tasks (Anderson, 1994). First, students develop meta-cognitive awareness when they describe their thinking process and they discover those of their classmates. Second, as students discover their reading strategies with their peers (in group activities, for instance) they also come across new strategies and new applications of familiar ones. Third, it allows teachers to assess the strengths and weaknesses in students' current strategy use and use this information to formulate strategy instruction. Finally, knowing about a students' strategy with a task provides a double exposure consisting of the task and what the students do with it. When a teacher pools together the strategies of a group of students, she or he may get a multi-layered perspective of one task. In this way, strategies used by successful learners could be the basis for remediation of the strategies of the unsuccessful learners.

Let us now consider how far research has addressed these issues. In her case study, Cotterall (1991) has used a process of triangulation to collect data on reading performance of one adult Japanese student and an Iranian student studying English in New Zealand. She obtained data from transcript of videotaped reading sessions, the learners' answers to a questionnaire on reading strategies and a series of interviews with the learners. She used reciprocal teaching procedures. This procedure combines four characteristics:

- a. Metacognition awareness
- b. Modeling of strategy use

c. Scaffolded instruction

d. Monitoring of comprehension

She designed a questionnaire comprising 28 statements to explore the learners' approach to reading. She concluded her study confirming the benefits of reciprocal teaching and the modeling procedures.

Abd El-Rehim (1994) conducted his study on English majors in their third year at the university in Mansoura University. The study investigated the effect of two strategies (semantic mapping versus experience text relation) in enhancing RC among prospective teachers of English. The results suggested that semantic mapping strategy was more effective than experience text relation. The study recommended reading instruction for academic programs of prospective teachers of English. These programs should benefit from the inclusion of explicit comprehension fostering metacognitive strategies training.

Abu-Hadid (2000) did a study aimed at developing listening and reading comprehension skills among first grade high school female students in Helwan, Egypt. Abu-Hadid designed a self-instruction program to train students on selected cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Findings of the study obtained indicated that there is a statistical significance of the posttests in favour of the experimental group in all the listening and reading comprehension skills investigated.

Salatic's and Akyel's study (2002) investigated whether instructions strategy in ESL reading affect ESL reading strategies and RC in English and whether instructions strategy in ESL reading affect reading strategies in Turkish. 8 Turkish

students from the pre-intermediate level classes of a one-year intensive English course at a Turkish Medium Technical University were studied. The instruments used to obtain data were think-aloud protocols, an observation, a background questionnaire, a semi-structured interview and the reading component of the PET (The Preliminary English Test). The findings show that the reading strategy instructions used by the teachers in teaching English influenced the students' use of reading strategies in Turkish and English. This suggested that the process of transfer is both bi-directional as well as interactive. As a result of the way the instruction was carried out, the strategies of making prediction, summarizing and utilising prior knowledge were applied considerably more frequently both in Turkish and in English after the instruction. Furthermore, the results of the reading component of the PET showed that the instruction they underwent helped increase their RC scores.

In another research, Taguchi and Gorsuch (2002) studied nine first year Japanese university students who had completed 28 repeated reading sessions using contiguous segments from two graded reading texts. They were beginner to intermediate English proficiency students. At each session, the learners were asked to read the passage seven times. Out of this, three of the reading sessions took place while listening to the passage being read aloud on an audiotape. They found that the repetitiveness had facilitated participants' reading rates from a pre-test reading passage which took place at the beginning of the program to a post-test reading passage which was carried out at the end of the program. It is the wish of repeated reading practitioners that SL learners' gain in reading fluency and comprehension will transfer to new reading passages.

Taguchi et al (2004) also looked at whether repeated reading and extensive reading affected fluency development of beginning level SL/FL readers. Efforts were made to compare Japanese university students' performances in repeated reading and extensive reading program to observe gains in reading fluency and comprehension, and to investigate some characteristics which are unique to assisted repeated reading. The findings show that repeated reading is a good method just as extensive reading is for improving second and SL/FL readers' fluency. The students who participated regularly and consistently enhanced their initial silent reading rate of new passages throughout the period of the course. Based on the participants' answers in the questionnaire the repeated reading facilitates fluent reading by providing SL/FL reader with a special method of reinforcement in the form of the use of repetition and an auditory model of reading. Thus, repeated reading has the potential to powerfully facilitate extensive reading as a way of improving fluency, and enabling beginner SL/FL learners to become independent readers. As learners improve on their reading rate, they will enjoy reading. With greater joy in reading, their access to language input will expand, which will help their language development.

2.7 Conclusion

It can be concluded that reading is a cognitive constructive technique which involves specific skills and strategies. Good readers are those who are able to employ all the necessary skills and strategies for constructing meaning-combination of linguistic and cognitive knowledge.

Besides that, reading difficulties can be identified in terms of which model of reading one is adopting. Three models were considered which different in the reader's role in each. In the decoding model, the reader is seen as a rather passive participant who depends on the linguistic input in the text. The psycholinguistic approach demands an active participation on the part of the reader who has to resort to strategies such as guessing. In the interactive approach the reader has to interact with the language and thought of the author.

Moreover, cognitive reading strategies such as getting the idea quickly, predicting, summarizing, note-taking, semantic mapping, looking for markers of cohesion were proven to be effective in improving RC among learners. At this point in time, there is sufficient evidence of the reasons that cause problems in RC to indicate that reading problems should be investigated to improve students' learning.

Chapter Three

METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

As its title suggests, this chapter presents the methods used in investigating the problem that is being focused on in the study which is reading comprehension difficulties among Middle Eastern students at the University of Malaya. It also provides a description of the subjects and the testing materials. Two instruments were used as a means of gathering data and they are a questionnaire and a set of reading tests. A more detailed description of the instruments used is given in 3.2. Subsequently, details of data collection procedures and data analysis are given in 3.3 and 3.4 respectively.

3.1 Subjects

The population of this study is a group of 30 Middle Eastern students who are studying at the University of Malaya. The study investigates the problem in reading comprehension of students from Libya, Yemen and Saudi Arabia, three countries which share similar education policies with regard to English Language learning. Basically, all the students from these countries have similar amount of English

exposure in their respective countries. There are 30 male students who participated in this study. Their ages range between 21 and 30 years. The subjects are either doing their First Degree or Master Degree in various courses at the University of Malaya. Although they are from different levels of education background and major, all of them are in their first year of study at the University of Malaya, which forms the basis of selection of subjects for this study.

3.2 Instruments

In an attempt to answer the two research questions for this study, two types of instruments were utilized:

a. Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used to investigate the reading views, processes, difficulties and strategies and needs of the informants in this study because information cannot be obtained from the students' performance in tests only. It is to answer the two research questions stated in Chapter One regarding the problems or difficulties faced by Middle Eastern tertiary learners when they read texts in English and the different strategies used in reading in English.

The decision to use a questionnaire in the elicitation of data was based on the assumption that by conducting a well-designed questionnaire, it is possible to survey the learners' approach to reading, the strategies they perceive themselves to use and the problems they encounter. This can provide a quick insight into the theoretical orientation that has been discussed in the previous chapter.

As a matter of fact, the development of the questionnaire had gone through various stages and steps of corrections before it appeared in the final form that was employed in the empirical study. The stages included modifying, deleting, adding and categorizing the various questions and the items within them.

The questionnaire was adapted from a few established sources. Some questions were taken from a study entitled *Connections between L1 and L2 Readings: Reading Strategies Used by Four Chinese Adult Readers* (Kong, 2006). Her research examines the reading strategies that were used by four Chinese adult readers in reading both Chinese and English texts. There were two categories of strategies which are text-initiated strategy (focus on vocabulary, using text structure, constitution meaning, summarizing and utilizing pictures) and the other, reader-initiated strategy (invoke prior knowledge, predict, evaluate, monitor and translating). It was found that all participants demonstrated more strategy use in reading English texts than in reading Chinese texts.

Another source was *Possible Effects of Strategy Instruction on L1 and L2 Reading* (Salataci and Akyel, 2002). The study investigated the reading strategies of Turkish EFL students in Turkish and English. It also determined the possible effects

of reading instruction on reading in Turkish and English. Eight Turkish pre-intermediate level students of a one-year intensive English course at a Turkish - Mediunionm Technical University participated in this study. The results found that strategies used (bottom - up strategies, top - down strategies and metacognitive strategies) had a positive effect on both Turkish and English reading strategies and reading comprehension in English. It indicated that the reading strategy instruction which the participants were exposed to in English affected their use of reading strategies in Turkish and English.

The third established source of questionnaire which was used to help formulate some questions for this research was a study entitled Lack the Skills to Cope with Reading Comprehension Tests (Deutsch, 2005). This action research was conducted to study the reasons for the anxiety students feel and ways of helping them to deal with the anxiety. This was to overcome the problem and to raise their academic performance in ESL/EFL reading comprehension tests. The research investigated 50 Hebrew students of junior high and high school in Pheonix, Arizona, United States of America. This quantitative study found that after 12 weeks of the implementation of a reading strategies and test taking skills programme, all the participants earned a passing grade (55 marks and above) in the reading comprehension tests.

The last study which formed the basis of questions for the questionnaire in this research was entitled Foreign Language Reading and Study Abroad: Cross-Cultural and Cross-Linguistic Questions (Taillefer, 2005). This study explored English and French FL reading comprehension and strategy used in by 177

Europeans (German, Dutch, English, French and Spanish) who studied law and economics abroad. All of them were in their third and fourth year of university. The data collected found similar results for FL students' competency but there was a clear hierarchy in both FL reading comprehension skills and strategies use: English-language (British and Irish) and French students ranked highest, followed by Spanish, German, and Dutch-speaking students. The causal effects of reading on academic results also varied across groups.

Based on these four sources, questions were adapted and adjusted according to the suitability of this study, particularly since this study does not compare reading skills between two languages. The reason why these sources were chosen is because the questions on reading difficulties and strategies used are found to be relevant for the purpose of the present study which also explores similar issues. Furthermore, there were also questions on coping mechanisms employed by students when they are in specific difficult reading situations which the researcher also adapted for use in this research.

The questionnaire contains five parts (Part A, B, C, D and E). For Part A, there are 7 questions which asked about the respondents' personal information like nationality, gender, age, years of learning English in their countries, what faculty they are currently in, previous university/college/institute and TOEFL/IELTS marks if they had sat for these examinations before. Part B is related to the respondents' English language learning experience and interest. Seven questions were asked which included the age the respondents started their English learning and where, their aimed proficiency level in English learning and the way of achieving that aim.

The next section is Part C. It provides information about the respondents' general views on reading in English language. There are also seven questions which asked for the respondents' interest in reading, information about the number of books read in a year, English reading material that the respondents prefer to read during their leisure time, problems understanding English texts, their reading ability, the reading skills that they preferred to be trained in and the purpose for studying reading skills. This section provides information for RQ 2 which is about the strategies used by Middle Eastern students at University of Malaya when they read texts in English.

In Part D, the questions elicit information about the strategies used while reading in English language. Only three questions are asked in this section. Questions 1 and 2 used the Likert scale (Always, Often, Rarely or Never). The respondents need to tick those strategies and approaches based on the frequency they used them while they are reading a text in English language. A four point Likert scale was decided upon to prevent the respondents from choosing a neutral option. Thus, the range selected captures the frequency of their use of the given items.

Finally, the last question is related to the problems of understanding the contents of a text that the respondents face upon reading. To gather data related to this, the respondents were presented with several statements incorporating problems and difficulties they had while reading and how they cope with the situation. This is to answer RQ 2 on the strategies used by Middle Eastern students at the University of Malaya when they read texts in English.

The last part which is Part E is a very important part because it elicits information about the problems or specific difficulties faced by Middle Eastern students at the University of Malaya when they read texts in English and this part provides supportive information to address RQ 1. Question 1 asked the respondents' awareness of the existence of reading skills in English. For Questions 2 and 3, a Likert scale was used. For Question 2, the level of difficulty encountered while reading in English and a four point scale of 'not at all', 'slightly', 'moderately' and 'most' were used to identify their level of difficulty for each item. The items in Question 3 investigate contributing factors like level of motivation, the level of difficulty of a reading text, interest and support which may exaggerate further the difficulties face by the candidates in reading texts in English (refer to Appendix A).

b. Reading comprehension tests

The RC test was conducted for double purposes. First, it is an important test to assess the students' proficiency in reading and whether they are proficient enough to answer the comprehension questions following the texts. It was also needed to assess the students' reading ability. The results obtained were used to address RQ 1. It gives general views on problems or difficulties faced by Middle Eastern students in University of Malaya when they read texts in English whenever they did not manage to answer a particular question. These results are in relation to the first hypothesis mentioned in Chapter One previously.

The second purpose is interpreting the subjects' answers is important in showing the relationship that exists between the students' proficiency in RC, the difficulties they face and strategies used toward EFL learning.

In this study, the RC skills were measured by using three passages which were chosen from the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). MUET is a test of English language proficiency, largely for university admissions in Malaysia. The test is set and administered by the Malaysian Examinations Council and is recognized only in Malaysia and Singapore. This test was established to measure candidates' English language proficiency. MUET is meant for students who wish to pursue their tertiary education at local public universities and it is a compulsory test to gain entry into degree courses offered at all Malaysian public universities. This test is offered twice a year, in April/May and October/November. Registration for the test is usually made via the candidates' academic institutions while for private candidates it is through the State Education Departments.

As opposed to the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) which are universally accepted as the certification of English language proficiency, MUET is recognized only in Malaysia and Singapore. In Singapore, only the National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University and Singapore Management University recognize MUET for the entry requirement (Rethinasamy and Chuah, 2011).

There are four components in MUET and they are listening, speaking, reading and writing. The maximum scores for each component are 45 for listening

and speaking, 120 for reading comprehension and 90 for writing, with an aggregate score of 300. The scores are then graded in 6 bands, with Band 6 the highest and Band 1 the lowest (MUET booklet, 2006). Most universities, including the universities that offer ‘twinning’ courses with local private colleges, outside these two countries do not consider MUET as an acceptable test for English language proficiency because they still prefer the IELTS or TOEFL. However, as the ME students are subject to the English language syllabus that is practiced in Malaysia, the MUET test as a measure of their English proficiency is deemed appropriate.

The selection of passages was based on a number of criteria such as length, authenticity, genre and assumed interest. The three reading tests are almost of equal length, between 2400 to 2800 words. The first text is business oriented, the second is related to the environment and the third one is about an animal. The RC tests for MUET are adapted from articles from journals, newspapers and magazines as well as academic texts and electronic texts.

The test consists of three passages (refer to Appendix B) and there are 7 questions for each passage. The topic for reading comprehension 1 is related to franchise. Reading comprehension 2 is about aquascape artificial reef and reading comprehension 3 is about elephants. All these three passages test the respondents’ skills in:

- a. recognizing main ideas or topics
- b. identifying relations between sentences
- c. inferring information

- d. deducing meaning from context
- e. eliciting specific information or details
- f. recognizing the author's purpose and intention

Not all six skills are tested in every text as there are only seven questions per reading text. Hence, three texts had to be selected. All the reading comprehension texts were taken from the actual 2009 Mid-Year and End-of-Year MUET examination. To ascertain accurate interpretation of each of the reading questions against the skills tested, a list of the questions were given to two coders. The two coders are a lecturer and a senior teacher who are experienced in teaching reading in the faculty. Each of them coded each question against the skill each is supposed to test. At any question where they had differences, the question was discussed until they came to a consensus as to what skill was tested. Data obtained from this test will be used to address RQ 1 of the study.

The RC tests reflected the skills under investigation. As stressed through the literature, these RC skills are influenced greatly by top-down strategies of comprehension (Eskey, 1997). The top-down starts from the respondents' general knowledge of the RC texts, for example, the topic and what the respondents know about it. From a big context, respondents will divide it into smaller pieces of information where they extract, deduce, recognize and infer the main ideas of the texts. Therefore, the test embodies top-down strategies such as main idea extraction, understanding functions of passages and interpretation.

3.3 Data Gathering Procedure

To ensure that the students are in a normal testing environment, and that the test is efficiently carried out, the questionnaire and the reading tests were administered to the students in two different sessions. Both sessions were held at Dewan Minda in the Main Library of the University of Malaya on February 8, 2011 at 2.30 p.m. and on February 10, 2011 at 10.30 a.m. Each session involved 15 students. The students were first given the reading test and this was followed by the questionnaire answering session. They were given 2 hours to answer all the questions in the reading test. After that, they had 15 minutes break before they were given the questionnaire which they completed within 45 minutes in the presence of the researcher. All data collected were manually processed and marked.

3.4 Data analysis

After all the data had been collected, it was interpreted based on the hypotheses and the theories discussed earlier. The data obtained were largely qualitatively analysed and interpretation of data was also presented in terms of percentage and frequency. Results of each section in the reading tests and the questionnaire are presented in table form.

3.5 Conclusion

It can be concluded that to investigate the reading comprehension difficulties among Middle Eastern students at the University Malaya, 30 male students from Libya, Yemen and Saudi Arabia had taking part in the study. Their ages range between 21 and 30 years and come from various faculties. A questionnaire and a set of reading tests were used as the instruments and the data collected in two different sessions with 15 students in each session. Finally the data interpreted in table form for percentage and frequency.

Chapter Four

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.0 Introduction

This chapter covers the analysis of data collected based on the questionnaire and reading tests. The questionnaire consists of five parts. For Part A, there are 7 questions about the respondents' personal background. Part B is about the English language learning experience and interest of the respondents and 7 questions are asked. Part C has 7 questions about the respondents' views on reading in the English language. This is followed by Part D which consists of 3 questions asking in greater detail about strategies used while reading in English language and the last is Part E with also 3 questions about difficulties respondents face while reading in the English language.

For the reading test, there are 3 sets of questions (taken from original MUET examination reading test) with 7 questions for each set. The analysis of the data obtained from the questionnaire and the tests will be presented in detail. The analysis will include a detailed interpretation of the data based on the hypotheses and theories discussed in the previous chapter. The interpretation of data is presented in tables to show the frequency and percentage of the respondents' feedback.

4.1 Questionnaire

The first part of data analysis concerns data obtained from the questionnaire. A detailed interpretation for each part of the questionnaire is provided in this chapter. Section 4.1.1 and 4.1.2 describe the respondents' biodata and English language background. Although correlation between the respondents' biodata and language performance is not in the scope of this study, a brief overview of their background may help readers to develop a better understanding of the participants in this study.

4.1.1 Part A (Personal Information)

Nationality	Frequency	Percentage
Saudi Arabia	13	43.3
Yemen	9	30.0
Libya	8	26.7
Total	30	100.0

Table 1: Nationality

Based on Table 1, 13 (43.3%) of the respondents are from Saudi Arabia. They constituted nearly half of the sample. The next group is from Yemen (30.0%) and the smallest number is from Libya at 26.7%. All the respondents who participated are male Middle Eastern students.

Age	Frequency	Percentage
< 18	0	0.0
19-24	12	40.0
25-30	16	53.3
> 30	2	6.7
Total	30	100.0

Table 2: Age

With regard to age, from the feedback received, out of the 30 respondents, 16 of them which is more than half are between 25-30 years old. 12 or 40.0% are between 19-24 years old and only 2 of them are more than 30 years old. None of the respondents are below 18 years old.

Faculty	Frequency	Percentage
Engineering	16	53.3
Business	5	16.7
Medical	5	16.7
Law	4	13.3
Total	30	100.0

Table 3: Faculty

The 30 respondents who participated in this research were students from 4 faculties. Based on the table, 16 respondents (53.3%) are from the Engineering Faculty, and 16.7% or 5 respondents each are from the Business and Medical. The balances of 4 respondents are from the Law Faculty.

Country	Previous university/college/institute	Frequency	Percentage
Yemen	University of Sana	2	6.7
	University of Queen Arwa	1	3.3
	University of Science and Technology Sana	1	3.3
	University of Yemeni	1	3.3
	University of Al-Ahgaff	3	10.0
	University of Legal Sciences	1	3.3
Saudi Arabia	University of King Abdul Aziz	3	10.0
	University of Umm Al-Qura	2	6.7
	University of King Feisal	2	6.7
	University of Riyadh	2	6.7
	University of King Saud	1	3.3
	University of Effat	1	3.3
	University of King Khaleed	1	3.3
	Riyadh College of Technology	1	3.3
Libya	Libya Open University	1	3.3
	University of Derna	2	6.7
	University of Al-Fatah	1	3.3
	University of Garyounis	1	3.3
	University of Sebha	1	3.3
	Libyan Islamic University	1	3.3
	Marsa Berga Technical University	1	3.3
Total		30	100.0

Table 4: Previous university/college/institute

Based on the fourth question, the respondents came from 21 different universities before they continued their studies at the University of Malaya. From Yemen, most of them graduated from the University of Al-Ahgaff (3 respondents). From Saudi Arabia, which contributed the most number of respondents, 10.0% were from the University of King Abdul Aziz. Lastly, from Libya, there were 2 graduates from the University of Derna and 1 respondent each from the other universities.

The last question for Part A asked for their TOEFL or IELTS marks if they had sat for the examinations. However, none of the respondents had taken these examinations.

4.1.2 Part B (English Language Background)

Age (years)	Frequency	Percentage
< 4	0	0.0
5-10	8	26.7
11-15	22	73.3
>15	0	0.0
Total	30	100.0

Table 5: Age (years)

In Part B, several questions were asked about the respondents' English Language background. The first question asked the age of the respondents when they started to learn English. From Table 5, most of them which is 22 respondents out of 30, started to learn English Language between 11 and 15 years of age. 8 respondents or 26.7% started to learn English Language when they were 5 to 10 years old.

Where English was first learned	Frequency	Percentage
At home	0	0.0
Primary school	8	26.7
Secondary school	22	73.3
College / University / Institution	0	0.0
Total	30	100.0

Table 6: Place where respondents started to learn English

The second question asked about where the respondents started to learn English. From the four options given, 22 respondents or 73.3% stated that they started learning English at their secondary school. Another 8 (26.7%) learned English when they were at their primary school. None of them claimed that they were exposed to English at home because their daily language is Arabic. This is also the same with the situation at schools, colleges, universities and higher institutions where Arabic is the medium of instruction for most of the courses offered as it is the first language in the Middle Eastern countries. It supports the data collected in Chapter One which showed that students from Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Libya need to learn English as a compulsory subject when they enter secondary school. The next one asked at which level of education it was compulsory for students to learn the English Language.

Place where English is a compulsory subject	Frequency	Percentage
Primary school	8	26.7
Secondary school	30	100.0
College	30	100.0

Table 7: Place where English is a compulsory subject

According to Table 7, all 30 respondents indicated that it is compulsory for them to do English at secondary school and tertiary level of education.

Outside English courses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	9	30.0
No	21	70.0
Total	30	100.0

Table 8: English courses outside of formal learning

Question number 4 in Part B is about English courses they have taken outside of the formal learning in the formal institution in their country. In Table 8, only 9 (30.0%) respondents claimed that they attended outside English courses. 6 students attended intermediate courses and another 3 students attended advanced level courses. In contrast, 21 respondents (70.0%) did not attend any English courses outside of the formal learning in formal institutions in their country (refer to Table 8).

Interest in learning English	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	30	100.0
No	0	0.0
Total	30	100.0

Table 9: Interest in learning English

Table 9 shows respondents' interest in learning English and purpose of doing so. This question received positive feedback where all the respondents (100.0%) indicated an interest in learning English. They want to learn English because of a few reasons. The reasons are for their studies (10 respondents), job (14 respondents), and travel (4 respondents). The last one is for business purposes (2 respondents). This is due to the importance of English in this new era as an international language and proficiency in English makes it easier for them to get a better job and a better life.

Years of learning English	Frequency	Percentage
< 5	0	0.0
6-10	22	73.3
11-15	8	26.7
> 15	0	0.0
Total	30	100.0

Table 10: Years of learning English in respondents' countries

Question number 6 is about the duration of English learning in the respondents' countries. Nearly all the respondents stated that they are required to learn English for at least 6 to 10 years in their countries. This is based on the duration of study from secondary to tertiary education level in their respective countries.

Targeted English proficiency level	Frequency	Percentage
Elementary	0	0.0
Intermediate	4	13.3
Advanced	26	86.7
Total	30	100.0

Table 11: Targeted English proficiency level

Table 11 shows the proficiency level aimed at by the respondents. Most of them are aiming for the advanced level which is related to question number 5 in Part B where all of them stated that they are interested in learning English. However, there are still 4 respondents who only aimed at the intermediate level because maybe they feel that English is a very difficult language to master. Lastly, none of them chose the elementary level because they had learned the basic rules of English in their countries. As a continuation from this, question number 8 asked about how the respondents thought they could achieve the level aimed at. Generally, they said that they need to understand English reading materials and writing very well. Besides that, they felt that they should attend extra classes in addition to the formal classes in the university and that they also have to put in a lot of effort to learn English.

4.1.3 Part C (General Views on Reading in the English Language)

Like to read	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	21	70.0
No	9	30.0
Total	30	100.0

Table 12: Interest in reading

The purpose of Part C is to get to know the views of the respondents about reading in English. Table 12 shows that 21 (70.0%) respondents like to read English materials. The other 9 respondents claimed that they do not like to read English materials.

Number of English books read in a year	Frequency	Percentage
None	0	0.0
1-5	11	36.7
5-10	17	56.7
> 10	2	6.6
Total	30	100.0

Table 13: Number of English books respondents read in a year

The number of English books read by the respondents is shown in Table 13. 17 respondents (56.7%) said that they read 5 to 10 English books in a year. 11 respondents said they only read 1 to 5 English books and only 2 respondents read more than 10 English books. These books are the books that they read outside of assigned reading by their lecturers.

English material	Frequency	Percentage
Newspapers	16	53.3
Magazines	12	40.0
Novels	2	6.7
Books	0	0.0
Total	30	100.0

Table 14: English material other than assigned reading

Since question number 1 in Part C asked about the interest in reading English materials, question number 3 asked about the other English materials that the respondents always read outside of their assigned reading. More than half of them claimed that they always read the newspapers because they are easy to get daily anywhere in Malaysia. The second type of material that they always read is magazines (40.0%) and 2 respondents always read novels outside of the assigned reading material. None of them chose books.

Problem in understanding English texts	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	14	46.7
No	16	53.3
Total	30	100.0

Table 15: Problem in understanding English text

Even though the respondents like to read English materials and have an interest in learning English, they still have problems understanding English texts. Table 15 shows that 14 of them (46.7%) face this problem. Meanwhile another 16 respondents claimed that they do not have problems in understanding English texts while reading. This led to the next question in Table 16 where 11 or 36.7% of the respondents claimed that their English reading ability is very good. 8 of them said

they are good in English reading while 6 respondents (20.0%) said that they are not very good in their English reading ability. However, only 5 respondents claimed that they are excellent in reading English materials.

English reading ability	Frequency	Percentage
Excellent	5	16.7
Very good	11	36.7
Good	8	26.6
Not very good	6	20.0
Total	30	100.0

Table 16: English reading ability

Skills to be trained	Frequency	Percentage
Developing ability to overcome problems while reading	11	36.7
Developing ability to answer reading comprehension questions given	7	23.3
Developing reading speed	7	23.3
Developing ability to guess meaning from context	3	10.0
Developing ability to identify main ideas	2	6.7
Developing ability to use the dictionary	0	0.0
Developing ability to identify supporting ideas	0	0.0
Total	30	100.0

Table 17: Skills that respondent wants to be trained in

The subsequent question explores the respondents' opinions on which reading skills they would like to be trained in. Out of the 7 skills listed, most of them would like to be trained to develop their ability to overcome problems while reading. This contributed the largest percentage which is 36.7%. This is followed by the ability to

answer reading comprehension questions and developing reading speed ability with 7 respondents each. The next one is the ability to guess meaning from context which was chosen by only 3 respondents. Finally, 2 respondents (6.7%) want to be trained to identify main ideas from the texts. None of the respondents chose to be trained to develop the ability to use the dictionary or to identify supporting ideas.

Reasons for learning reading skills	Frequency	Percentage
Studies	15	50.0
Job	12	40.0
Travelling	3	10.0
Total	30	100.0

Table 18: Reasons for learning reading skills

The last question in Part C asked the reasons why reading skills are important for the respondents. Half of them indicated that they think that the skill is important because of their need to use it in their studies. This is because reading is one of the four basic skills in learning a language, including the English language, apart from its importance to their survival as a university student. 12 respondents or 40.0% were of the view that reading skills are important in the work domain. Finally, 3 respondents claimed that reading skills are important for travelling purposes as English is an international language used widely around the world.

4.1.4 Part D (Strategies used while reading in the English Language)

The purpose of Part D is to gather the respondents' perception on the strategies used by them when they read in English. In this section, information is elicited through the use of a 4-point Likert scale. Depending on how frequently they use the strategies, they have to choose between always, often, rarely or never. There are three questions in this section with a few sub-questions for each one. Even though the questions relate to strategy used in general, the first question asked what the respondents think they do when they start to read and the steps they take to understand a text. The second question asked the respondents to think about the approaches they tend to use in processing a text for the purpose of understanding it. In the third question, the respondents were presented with a list of problem situations commonly experienced by readers and were asked what they would tend to do to overcome them. It provides insights into the coping mechanism which they perceive they have used or would use in a given situation.

The first question in this section elicited the information about the strategies used by the respondents when they read in English. As Table 19 shows 16 commonly used strategies were listed and the respondents' responses were presented in terms of frequency and percentage. The first item (a) asked if the respondents read word by word. Half of the respondents or 50.0% said that they rarely use this strategy. Another 8 (26.7%) respondents said that they often apply this strategy; 4 respondents (13.3%) always use it. The least number is 3 respondents (10.0%) who claimed that

they never read word by word while reading in English. In summary, more than half of the respondents actually rarely or never read word by word.

No	Strategies used	Answer / Percentage							
		Always	%	Often	%	Rarely	%	Never	%
a	... read word by word?	4	13.3	8	26.7	15	50.0	3	10.0
b	... read sentence by sentence?	6	20.0	14	46.7	10	33.3	-	-
c	... read and try to understand in English?	14	46.7	8	26.7	7	23.3	1	3.3
d	... read and try to understand in Arabic?	14	46.7	8	26.7	7	23.3	1	3.3
e	...read and try to check every word in the dictionary to understand meaning?	5	16.7	13	43.3	12	40.0	-	-
f	... focus on meaning?	13	43.3	9	30.0	8	26.7	-	-
g	... focus on grammar item?	8	26.7	13	43.3	9	30.0	-	-
h	... focus on sentence structure?	3	10.0	8	26.7	19	63.3	-	-
i	... focus on vocabulary?	7	23.3	12	40.0	9	30.0	2	6.7
j	... refer to the illustration to make you understand the text?	22	73.3	3	10.0	5	16.7	-	-
k	... refer to the glossary to understand meaning of words?	24	80.0	6	20.0	-	-	-	-
l	... ask someone to translate the text to help you to understand it?	2	6.7	4	13.3	12	40.0	12	40.0
m	... translate the information mentally to help you understand it?	7	23.3	18	60.0	5	16.7	-	-
n	... consult a teacher to help explain it to you?	2	6.7	1	3.3	6	20.0	21	70.0
o	... consult your friends for help?	3	10.0	3	10.0	8	26.7	16	53.3
p	... discuss the text with a native speaker to understand it better?	-	-	1	3.3	2	6.7	27	90.0

Table 19: Strategies used while reading in English language

The second strategy (b) is reading sentence by sentence. Almost half of them which are 14 respondents (46.7%) stated that they often use this strategy, 10 respondents rarely and 6 respondents always do. No respondents said that they never used it while reading in English.

For items (c) and (d), the percentages were the same for all the options. Most of them always read and try to understand both in English and Arabic. 46.7% of them always try to understand in both languages. 26.7% of them claimed they often use these strategies. 23.3% rarely apply it while reading and one respondent (3.3%) stated that he never use these strategies. This may mean that this one person always tries to understand an English text either in Arabic or in English only.

Item (e) asked the respondents whether they read and try to check every word in the dictionary to understand the meaning. 13 respondents (43.3%), which made up the largest number said they use the strategy often. This was closely followed by 12 respondents (40.0%) who said they rarely use this strategy. Only 5 respondents said they always use it. In general, more than half do rely on the dictionary to varying degrees for meaning. For items (f) and (g) which asked if the respondents focus on meaning and grammar items respectively, all of the respondents use these strategies to varying degrees. The largest number of respondents which is 13 (43.3%) claimed that they always focus on meaning while another 13 respondents (43.3%) claimed that they often focus on grammar items. 7 respondents said that they always focus on grammar items. This means more than half focus on grammar items when they read. None of the respondents claimed they never focus on meaning and grammar items. With regard to whether they focus on sentence structure while reading (item (h)), 19

(63.3%) claimed that they rarely focus on this while only 3 respondents claimed that they always focus on it.

Item (i) asked if the respondents focus on vocabulary while reading and the highest percentage is 40.0% which is 12 respondents who mentioned that they often focus on vocabulary. In contrast, only 2 respondents or 6.7% never focus on vocabulary while reading in English and 7 respondents claimed they always focus on vocabulary. This result is expected because knowledge of vocabulary does contribute to an understanding of a text.

The next item (j) for question 1 in Part D investigates the respondents' use of illustrations to make them understand the text. 73.3% of them always use this strategy while reading in English. None of them said that they never use it while reading in English. This suggests that pictures or illustrations help them to understand a text better. Similarly, in the next item (k), 24 (80.0%) respondents claimed that they always refer to the glossary to enable them to understand the meaning of words. Only 20.0% said that they often refer to the glossary.

With regards to item (l), most of the respondents (40.0% or 12 respondents) said that they never or rarely ask someone to translate the text to help them to understand it in English. Only 6.7% said they always need help from someone to translate the text. However, in item (m), 60.0% of them said they often translate the information mentally to help them to understand an English text.

Items (n) and (o) are about consulting teachers and friends for help in explaining the English texts. For both strategies, most of the respondents claim they never consult anybody to help them to understand a text better. 70.0% stated that

they never consult their teachers and 53.3% of them said they never consult their friends for help. Only 6.7% and 10.0% said they would consult both teachers and friends respectively. The same goes for the last item (p) in question 1 for Part D. 90.0% or 27 respondents claim that they never discuss an English text with a native speaker to help them understand it while reading and only 1 or 3.3% often ask help from a native speaker to understand the English text better.

As a summary for this question, it was found that most of the respondents always focus on the meaning of the sentences read as well as refer to illustrations and the glossary to help them in understanding the English text that they read. Other than that, it was found that the strategies which are most often used by the respondents while they read a text in English are reading sentence by sentence, reading and checking every word in the dictionary to understand the meaning, focusing on the meaning of a text, and on grammar items. They also translate the information mentally to understand the text better. Thus, the respondents rely on in-text strategies more than consulting outside help to aid them in understanding a text.

No	Approaches used	Answer / Percentage							
		Always	%	Often	%	Rarely	%	Never	%
a	If the passage has a title, I think of what the passage might be about.	21	70.0	9	30.0	-	-	-	-
b	When I read, I predict what might come next in the passage.	8	26.7	12	40.0	7	23.3	3	10.0
c	When I begin reading a passage, I think about what I already know about the topic of the passage.	15	50.0	7	23.3	7	23.3	1	3.3
d	I read the first and the last paragraph of the passage before I read it all.	-	-	1	3.3	1	3.3	28	93.3
e	I mark words or phrases I do not understand (by underlining, circling, etc.).	23	76.7	3	10.0	4	13.3	-	-
f	I stop to summarize ideas from time to time either in writing or mentally.	1	3.3	5	16.7	5	16.7	19	63.3
g	I go through the whole passage once and then reread it.	5	16.7	4	13.3	17	56.7	4	13.3
h	I make inferences and draw conclusions while reading.	2	6.7	12	40.0	4	13.3	12	40.0
i	I underline parts of the passage I think are important.	24	80.0	3	10.0	3	10.0	-	-
j	I go through the whole passage once, and then reread the difficult parts only.	17	56.7	2	6.7	11	36.6	-	-
k	I read straight through a passage and do not reread.	3	10.0	16	53.3	5	16.7	6	20.0

Table 20: Approaches used while reading in the English language

The second question for Part D relates to the approaches that the respondents use when they are reading in English. There are eleven approaches listed as can be seen in Table 20 which corresponds to the question. The first approach is if the

passage has a title, would the respondents think of what the passage might be about? Here, 70.0% or 21 respondents always used this approach. Also, 30.0% often used it. On the other hand, none of them chose rarely or never. This shows that all of them actually pay attention to titles and this approach is important while reading in English. The second approach (b) is predicting what might come next in the passage and most of them i.e. 40.0% or 12 respondents and 26.7% (8 respondents) claimed that they often and always apply this approach respectively. Only 10.0% rarely or never used it. Therefore, a majority of them are aware of this technique.

In the following item (c), half of the respondents (50.0%) said that they always think about what they already know about the topic of the passage when they begin to read in English. This approach may help them to understand the text based on their schemata knowledge and experience. In contrast with this approach, item (d) showed that almost all of the respondents (93.3%) never read the first and the last paragraph of the passage before they read it all. It can be concluded that 28 respondents may not be aware of this important approach in reading.

The next approach (e) is marking words or phrases the respondents do not understand by underlining, circling or other methods of highlighting the difficult areas. Based on the table, 76.7% which is more than three-quarters of the respondents stated that they used this approach while reading in English. The response is positive because this is considered as the usual way of dealing with difficult words while reading and none had chosen “never” for this approach. However, the results for the next item (f) which is stopping to summarize ideas from time to time either in writing or mentally, shows that 63.3% of the respondents chose

“never” from the options given and only 1 respondent always used this approach. This seems to indicate that the majority of the respondents do not really reflect on what they have read.

For item (g), which is going through the whole passage once and then rereading it, the highest proportion which is 56.7% or 17 respondents rarely chose this approach. Only 16.7% always implemented this approach in reading in English language while 13.3% each chose “often” and “never”. Item (h) refers to making inferences and drawing conclusions while reading. With regard to this approach, 40.0% which is the highest percentage chose “often” and another 40.0% chose the “never” option. Unsurprisingly, especially because this is a difficult skill, only 2 respondents always used this approach. Moving on to the next approach (i) which is underlining parts of the passage that they think are important, 24 (80.0%) out of 30 respondents agreed that they always did this while reading. By underlining important parts of the passage, it may help them to get the main idea of the passage easily. For the remaining 6 respondents, 3 respondents each chose “often” and “rarely”. None of them claimed that they never used this approach while reading in English.

For item (j), the approach focused on is whether the respondents go through the whole passage once, and then reread the difficult parts only. Most of them i.e. 56.7% or 17 respondents said that they always read the passage through once and reread the difficult parts only for more understanding. None of the respondents had responded “never” to this approach. This is in contrast with item (g), in which most of the respondents rarely read the whole passage more than once.

The last item (h) for question 2 is how often the respondents read straight through a passage and not reread at all. This means the respondents just read that particular passage once and do not go through it again for one more time. Only 10.0% of the respondents always read the passage only once. Most of them i.e. 53.3% said that they often apply it which means they do occasionally reread a text. 5 and 6 respondents rarely and never not reread a text respectively.

Based on Table 20, it can be summarized that certain approaches are more frequently used by the respondents than others. It appears that underlining difficult words and important parts of the passage was an approach always chosen by more than 75.0% of the respondents. Paying attention to titles and predicting the content of the passage while reading in English is another approach which appears to be always practiced by a majority of the students.

No	Situational strategies	Answer / Percentage							
		Always	%	Often	%	Rarely	%	Never	%
a	If a paragraph contains several words I do not understand, I guess the ones that I think are most important and neglect the others.	6	20.0	3	10.0	3	10.0	18	60.0
b	If a paragraph contains several words I do not know, I stop reading for a while.	4	13.3	7	23.3	17	56.7	2	6.7
c	If I come to a word I do not know, I try to guess what it might mean and then continue reading.	14	46.6	8	26.7	6	20.0	2	6.7
d	If I come to a word I do not know, I skip the word and come back to it later.	8	26.7	8	26.7	13	43.3	1	3.3
e	To guess what an unfamiliar word might mean, I try to understand what the rest of the sentence says.	12	40.0	12	40.0	2	6.7	4	13.3
f	To guess what an unfamiliar word might mean, I look at the grammatical form of the word (e.g. whether it is a verb or a noun, etc.).	3	10.0	5	16.7	19	63.3	3	10.0
g	To guess what an unfamiliar word might mean, I note whether the word looks like another word I know.	2	6.7	4	13.3	20	66.7	4	13.3
h	When a passage is difficult, I read it slower than when I read an easier passage.	21	70.0	5	16.7	4	13.3	-	-
i	When a passage is difficult, I read it quickly then reread it.	22	73.3	3	10.0	4	13.3	1	3.3
j	When the passage contains parts I do not understand, I guess what they mean by reading parts that come before and after.	14	46.7	8	26.7	7	23.3	1	3.3
k	When the passage contains parts I do not understand, I just move to the next part.	15	50.0	11	36.6	2	6.7	2	6.7

Table 21: Respondents' response in certain situation while reading in English

The last question for Part D gathers responses from the respondents about what they would do when faced with certain situations while reading English materials. The results are presented in numbers and percentages in Table 21. The first situation (a) was if a paragraph contains several words they do not understand, would they guess the ones that they think are most important and neglect the others? 18 respondents or 60.0% of them said that they never react to this situation in this way. Only 6 respondents said they always respond in this manner and 3 respondents each indicated that they often and rarely respond in this manner. In the second situation (b), 56.7% or 17 respondents said they rarely stop reading if a paragraph contains words they do not understand. 2 respondents said that they never stop reading even if there are words they do not understand. However, 4 or 13.3% of the respondents stated that they always stop reading for a while when they come across words that they do not know.

The next situation (c) asked if they would try to guess what a word might mean and then continue reading. 46.6% of them said that when faced with this situation they would always guess at the meaning and continue reading. 8 respondents (26.7%) would often react in the same manner.

43.3% of the respondents mentioned that if they come to a word they do not know (d), they rarely skip the new word and come back to it later. This same pattern is also observed in responses to question number 2 (item (e), (i) and (j) - Part D) which indicates that when the passage contains parts that they do not understand, they will mark, underline and go through the difficult parts in the passage once again.

Both responses show that the respondents take note of the difficult parts and then go back to those parts to find the meaning.

Another situation presented to the respondents was guessing the meaning of the words which are not familiar to them. To this situation, three strategies were suggested for the respondents to react to. The first was to try and understand what the rest of the sentence says (e). 12 (40.0%) respondents each said that they always and often do this when they are faced with this situation. Meanwhile to the second suggestion (f), 19 (63.3%) respondents indicated that they rarely looked at the grammatical form of the word for example whether it is a verb or a noun to guess the meaning of an unfamiliar word. To the third suggestion (g), 66.7% of the respondents or 20 of them rarely note whether the word looks like another word that they know in guessing an unfamiliar word. This means the respondents do to a varying degree pay attention to contextual clues in deducing the meaning of words.

The next situation focuses on difficult passages and how the respondents deal with them. According to item (h), when a passage is difficult, the respondents read it slower than when they read an easier passage. 70.0% of them agreed with this reaction and always apply it while reading in English. None of them chose “never” which means that all of them tend to read difficult passages slower than easier ones. On the other hand, 73.3% or 22 of the respondents also indicated that they would always read a difficult passage quickly and then reread it again (i). Only one respondent chose “never” when faced with this situation. In a way, the responses by the respondents on the last two situations were rather in contradiction of each other.

The next two items were related to the situation in which if a passage contains parts that the respondents do not understand, what they would do about it. 46.7% of them always guess what the passage means by reading the parts that come before and after those difficult parts (j). 8 (26.7%) said they often do this. This is a positive result considering attempts are made to continue reading despite the difficulty. Yet, at the same time, 15 (50.0%) respondents indicated that if they come across difficult parts, they would also just move to the next part (k).

To sum up, this section explores the respondents' reaction to certain situations they may face when reading an English text. They tend to read a difficult passage slower or read it quickly before rereading the passage one more time. They also will guess what a difficult part of a passage means by reading the part before and after difficult part but most will also just move to the next part. The meanings of words are also important to most of the respondents who would not neglect a difficult word. They would rather look at contextual clues rather than the form of the word.

4.1.5 Part E (Reading Skills in the English Language)

No	Skills	Level of difficulties / Percentage							
		Not at all	%	Slightly	%	Moderately	%	Most	%
a	Understanding words	2	6.7	14	46.7	10	33.3	4	13.3
b	Understanding grammar	1	3.3	12	40.0	11	36.7	6	20.0
c	Inferring information	-	-	12	40.0	13	43.3	5	16.7
d	Getting main ideas	4	13.3	15	50.0	9	30.0	2	6.7
e	Deducing meaning from context	2	6.7	14	46.7	11	36.7	3	10.0
f	Selecting specific relevant information	2	6.7	15	50.0	9	30.0	4	13.3
g	Predicting information	3	10.0	16	53.3	12	40.0	2	6.7
h	Identifying with topic	13	43.3	5	16.7	9	30.0	3	10.0
i	Handling lengthy text	2	6.7	2	6.7	19	63.3	7	23.3
j	Recognizing writing style	5	16.7	8	26.7	16	53.3	1	3.3

Table 22: Level of difficulty in applying reading skills

The last part of the questionnaire is related to the respondents' reading skills in the English language. In relation to this, a list of relevant reading skills was presented and the respondents were asked to indicate whether they had any difficulties with the skills.

The first question in Part E asked the respondents whether they are aware that there are reading skills in English. 100.0% claimed they knew there are reading skills.

The second question investigates the difficulties the respondents face when they read an English text in terms of the skills that are necessary to answer reading comprehension questions. There are 10 sub-skills for this question. The respondents

have to choose from four options which are “not at all”, “slightly”, “moderately” or “most” depending on the level of difficulties they face when they apply the skills mentioned in Table 22. The first skill (a) is understanding words and 14 (46.7%) of them found it to be just slightly difficult for them. Only 4 (13.3%) found this skill to be the most difficult. 40.0% of them also found it slightly difficult to understand the grammar in an English text (b). However, 13 (43.3%) of the respondents found inferring information (c) to be moderately difficult. 12 (40.0%) of them found it slightly difficult and only 5 (16.7%) found it most difficult. To be able to infer meaning, the respondents have to be able to understand words and grammar structures as well as relationship between sentences. Still, this skill does not appear as a major problem for majority of the respondents although in question 2, Part D 12 respondents claimed that they never make inferences and draw conclusion when they read.

Half of them which is 15 (50.0%) out of 30 respondents said that getting the main ideas of the passage (d) is slightly difficult. However, 4 (13.3%) respondents did not find it difficult at all. 46.7% thought deducing meaning from context (e) is also slightly difficult. Only 3 respondents find it to be the most difficult skill while 2 respondents do not find it difficult at all. Similarly, 50.0% and 53.3% of the respondents found selecting specific relevant information (f) and predicting information (g) respectively to be just slightly difficult. Based on these responses from the respondents, it appears that most of them do not have great difficulties in these skills when they read a text for comprehension.

Interestingly, 43.3% of them claimed that they did not face any challenges or in other words no difficulty at all in identifying with the topic (h) of the text. In contrast with this, in handling lengthy text (i), 19 (63.3%) of the respondents mentioned that it is moderately difficult and in the case of recognizing writing style (j), 53.3% or 16 out of 30 respondents also regarded this skill as moderately difficult.

Based on these answers, only one skill was found to be not difficult at all by slightly less than half of the respondents and it is identifying with topic. This may be attributed to the approach used by the respondents who claimed that they tend to use their schematic knowledge to relate what they already know about a topic (refer to question 2 in Part D). The rest of the skills are considered as slightly or moderately difficult for all of the respondents.

No	Problems	Answer / Percentage							
		Never	%	Sometimes	%	Often	%	Always	%
a	Low motivation in learning another language	14	46.7	8	26.7	6	20.0	2	6.7
b	Language problem	3	10.0	9	30.0	13	43.3	5	16.7
c	Difficult words in a text	3	10.0	16	53.3	12	40.0	2	6.7
d	Difficult sentence structure	3	10.0	16	53.3	12	40.0	2	6.7
e	Difficult subject matters	2	6.7	20	66.7	7	23.3	1	3.3
f	Being slow in reading	2	6.7	3	10.0	18	60.0	7	23.3
g	Lengthy text	4	13.3	7	23.3	19	63.3	-	-
h	Complicated grammar structure	5	16.7	18	60.0	5	16.7	2	6.7
i	Not knowing what to do	3	10.0	19	63.3	8	26.7	-	-
j	Lack of patience	2	6.7	17	56.7	8	26.7	3	10.0
k	Lack of interest in reading in English	17	56.7	8	26.7	3	10.0	2	6.7
l	Lack of vocabulary	2	6.7	2	6.7	19	63.3	7	23.3
m	Lack of background/content knowledge	5	16.7	23	76.7	2	6.7	-	-
n	Lack of time	3	10.0	18	60.0	9	30.0	-	-
o	Lack of interesting reading material	7	23.3	21	70.0	2	6.7	-	-
p	Lack of effort to learn	15	50.0	11	36.7	2	6.7	2	6.7
q	Lack of support (personal, parents, peers and teachers)	22	73.3	3	10.0	4	13.3	1	3.3
r	Lack of exposure of English	14	46.7	8	26.7	6	20.0	2	6.7

Table 23: Problem face by the respondents when reading in English

The last question for this section investigated other factors that may contribute to the problems faced by all the respondents while they are reading in English. For this question, they have to choose from four options too, which are “never”, “sometimes”, “often” and “always”. The first item (a) relates to low

motivation in learning another language. 46.7% or 14 of the respondents said that they never have low motivation in learning a new language which in this case is the English language. This appears to support their claim mentioned in their English language background in Part B, where they said they are interested in learning English (refer to Table 9). Furthermore, 26 of them are aiming for the advanced level in English proficiency (refer to Table 11) and they need English for their studies and future career (refer to Table 18).

43.3% said that they often have language problem (b) and this concurs with data from Table 8, which indicated that 21 respondents did not attend any extra English courses outside of their formal learning. Most of them were exposed to English only when they entered secondary school; thus, it may take some time for them to be proficient in English. In reference to question 1 in Part D, most of them mentioned that they never consult their teachers, friends or any native speaker to help them understand a text better. This too might contribute to this language problem.

The next sets of items are difficult words in a text (c), difficult sentence structure (d) and subject matters (e). These three items sometimes add on to problems faced by the respondents. 16 (53.3%) of the respondents claimed that they sometimes have problems when they found difficult words and difficult sentence structure in a text and 20 (66.7%) respondents sometimes are faced with difficult subject matter. Besides that, 18 (60.0%) respondents claimed that being slow in reading (f) often contributes to their problems and 19 (63.3%) respondents indicated that a lengthy text (g) often poses a problem for them.

18 (60.0%) respondents sometimes attributed their problems to complicated grammar structures (h) in a text. This seems to confirm data from Table 22 where more than 50.0% of the respondents indicated that they have difficulties understanding grammar. Data from Table 21 also showed that more than half of the students rarely relied on grammar to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words.

The next sets of factors are non-text-based in nature. They relate to the personal experiences, attitude and external support that the respondents receive. 19 (63.3%) respondents claimed that sometimes their difficulties may stem from not knowing what to do (i). They may have no idea what skills or strategies can be used to understand a passage. 17 (56.7%) respondents sometimes lack the patience (j) while reading in English. Despite that, 17 (56.7%) respondents claimed that they never lack the interest to read in English (k). Another usual contributing problem that the respondents face is lack of vocabulary (l). 63.3% or 19 of them often face this problem while reading and apart from that, 76.7% of the respondents sometimes lack background and content knowledge (m) of the passage being read. Based on their responses in Part C (question number 2), only 2 out of 30 respondents read more than 10 English books in a year outside of their assigned reading. This may contribute to the lack of extra knowledge required to facilitate a better understanding of a text.

In addition, 60.0% of the respondents stated that a lack of time (n) to read sometimes contributes to their problems in finishing their reading process and 70.0% of them said that a lack of interesting reading materials (o) in English sometimes affects them too. Nevertheless, 50.0% of them never have problems or lack the effort to learn (p).

Even though there are a lot of problems faced by all the respondents in this study, 22 out of 30 respondents or 73.3% of them mentioned that the lack of support from parents, peers, and teachers (q) was never a contributing problem for them. This may be because they have the motivation to learn English for their future lives. Finally, 46.7% of them never blame lack of exposure to English (r) as a contributing factor to their problems in reading especially because they are staying in a foreign country where English is the main medium of communication.

In summary, it can be concluded that with regard to factors that are text related, more than 50.0% of the respondents identified only five factors that sometimes contributed to their problems in reading. The factors are difficult words, difficult sentence structure, difficult subject matters, complicated grammar structure and texts that are too long. In addition, more than 50.0% of the respondents recognized several personal factors which sometimes affect their reading proficiency. They do not know what to do when they have a problem, they lack patience and time and have inadequate content knowledge. More than half also often regarded their slow reading speed and lack of vocabulary as contributing factors to their problems. 70.0% of the respondents sometimes attributed their problems to lack of interesting reading materials.

4.2 Reading comprehension tests

The second part of data analysis concerns the RC tests. There are three RC tests with seven questions in each test (refer to Appendix B). The first text discusses the benefits of a franchise, the second one reports the advantages of aquascape artificial reef and the third one describes violence in elephants. Detailed results for each RC test are explained briefly in this part.

4.2.1 Reading comprehension test 1 - Franchise

The first RC test has seven multiple choice questions with three options for each question. The respondents have to choose the best answer for each question. Table 24 shows the frequency and percentage of answers by the respondents and the skill tested. The highlighted columns represent the correct answer for each question.

Question no.	Answers' option						RC skill
	A		B		C		
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
1	9	30.0	4	13.3	17	56.7	Eliciting specific information
2	19	63.3	5	16.7	6	20.0	Referencing
3	13	43.3	4	13.3	13	43.3	Eliciting specific information
4	6	20.0	22	73.3	2	6.7	Understanding relationship between sentences
5	9	30.0	5	16.7	16	53.3	Recognizing main ideas
6	10	33.3	15	50.0	5	16.7	Identifying main ideas
7	7	23.3	20	66.7	3	10.0	Recognizing the author's purpose

Table 24: Result for RC test 1

The first question tests the respondents on the skill of extracting specific information and the correct answer is option C. 17 (56.7%) respondents managed to get the correct answer. This was followed by the second question which tests the referencing skill. 19 respondents (63.3%) chose the right answer. For question 3 which tests eliciting/extracting specific information, only 4 respondents (13.3%) answered the question correctly. For question number 4 which tests the skill of understanding relationship between sentences, 22 respondents (73.3%) selected the correct answer. However, question number 5 for identifying main ideas in almost the same number with question number 3. Only 5 respondents (16.7%) got the correct answer. Question 6 also tests identifying main ideas and only 33.3% or 10 respondents managed to get it right. Question 7 meanwhile, which tests recognizing the author's purpose, was correctly answered by 20 respondents.

4.2.2 Reading comprehension test 2 - Aquascape Artificial Reef

Question no.	Answers' option						RC skill
	A		B		C		
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
8	6	20.0	12	40.0	12	40.0	Understanding relationship between sentences
9	13	43.3	15	50.0	2	6.7	Identifying main ideas
10	14	46.7	6	20.0	10	33.3	Recognizing the author's purpose
11	24	80.0	1	3.3	5	16.7	Understanding relationship between sentences
12	18	60.0	12	40.0	-	-	Deducing meaning from context
13	20	66.7	5	16.7	5	16.7	Eliciting specific information
14	13	43.3	11	36.7	6	20.0	Recognizing the author's purpose and intention

Table 25: Result for RC test 2

Based on test 2, question 8 which tests understanding the relationship between sentences, was correctly answered by 12 (40.0%) respondents. 13 respondents (43.3%) correctly answered question 9 which focused on identifying main ideas. However, only 10 respondents (33.3%) managed to identify the author's purpose in question 10. Question 11 which required the respondents to understand the relationship between sentences was correctly answered by 24 (80.0%) respondents. Only 12 respondents (40.0%) correctly answered question 12 which requires the respondents to deduce meaning from context. Question 13 was correctly answered by 20 respondents (66.7%). For this question, they had to elicit specific information. The respondents appear to find question 14 relatively difficult because only 11 respondents (36.7%) managed to recognize the author's purpose.

4.2.3 Reading comprehension test 3 – Elephant

Question no.	Answers' option								RC skill
	A		B		C		D		
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
15	-	-	14	46.7	16	53.3	-	-	Referencing
16	15	50.0	-	-	5	16.7	10	33.3	Identifying main ideas
17	17	56.7	2	6.7	10	33.3	1	3.3	Understanding relationship between sentences
18	6	20.0	17	56.7	3	10.0	4	13.3	Inferring information
19	1	3.3	9	30.0	5	16.7	15	50.0	Extracting specific information
20	-	-	2	6.7	6	20.0	22	73.3	Recognizing the author's purpose and intention
21	16	53.3	-	-	6	20.0	8	26.7	Inferring information

Table 26: Result for RC test 3

In the last RC, four options were given for each question. Based on Table 26, the respondents could answer 6 out of the 7 questions given with more than 50.0% of them getting the correct answers. Question 15 is a reference item and 16 respondents (53.3%) got the answer right. For question 16, which tests identifying main ideas, only 5 respondents (16.7%) got the right answer. Questions 17 and 18 which test understanding the relationship between sentences and inferring information respectively were correctly answered by 17 respondents (56.7%) each. Questions 19 and 20 which required the respondents to elicit specific information and recognize author's purpose respectively were each correctly answered by 15 (50.0%) and 22

(73.3%) respondents. Question 21 which tests the inferring information skill was correctly answered by 16 (53.3%) respondents.

4.2.4 Analysis based on specific skills

No	Skill	Text 1		Text 2		Text 3	
		Question	%	Question	%	Question	%
1	Identify main idea	Q5 Q6	16.7 33.3	Q9	43.3	Q16	16.7
2	Infer information	-	-	-	-	Q18 Q21	56.7 53.3
3	Deduce meaning from context	-	-	Q12	40.0	-	-
4	Elicit specific information	Q1 Q3	56.7 13.3	Q13	66.7	Q19	50.0
5	Understand relationship between sentences	Q4	73.3	Q8 Q11	40.0 80.0	Q17	56.7
6	Recognize author's purpose	Q7	66.7	Q10 Q14	33.3 36.7	Q20	73.3

Table 27: Specific skills in each text

With regard to the hypothesis from the current study, the Middle Eastern students have weaknesses on the reading skills that are shown in Table 27 above. As the table shows, the highest percentage of weaknesses among all the six skills investigated is to identify main ideas. Questions related to this skill were asked in all the three given tests. The result shows that for all the four questions asked, on average, less than half (27.5%) of the respondents managed to answer them correctly.

The second skill tested in the reading tests is eliciting specific information. There were four questions related to this skill. Out of the four, one question was only

correctly answered by 13.3% of the students. On average, however, slightly less than half (46.6%) of the students answered it correctly. Recognizing the author's purpose was the next skill tested. There were also four questions to test this skill. Two questions were correctly answered by considerably more than 50% of the students while the other two were wrongly answered by about 35% of the students. On average, however, more than half (52.5%) of the students got it correct.

With regard to the next skill, which is understanding the relationship between sentences, one out of the four questions asked was correctly answered by 80% of the students. However, on average, 62% of the students got the correct answers.

There was only one question on deducing meaning from context. For this question, only 40% of the students managed to answer it accurately. There were two questions related to making inferences. For both, more than half of the students answered the questions correctly averaging out to 55% of correct answer.

In summary, we can conclude that, out of six skills, the major difficulties faced by the Middle Eastern students at the University of Malaya are identifying main ideas, deducing meaning from context and eliciting specific information. This result addresses the first research question, that is, what are the problems or difficulties faced by the Middle Eastern students in University of Malaya when they read texts in English?

Chapter Five

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.0 Introduction

This chapter is the final chapter of the study. It concludes the findings of the study. It also discusses the two research questions based on data elicited and analysed from the two instruments discussed in the previous chapters. The subsequent section discusses the pedagogical implication on the teaching and learning process in order to solve the reading comprehension difficulties among Middle Eastern students at the University of Malaya. Finally, some recommendations will be put forth.

5.1 Discussion of findings

This study set out to investigate the reading comprehension difficulties among Middle Eastern students at the University of Malaya. In order to do this, data was gathered to investigate the problems or difficulties faced by Middle Eastern students at the University of Malaya when they read texts in English as well as to investigate the skills used by the Middle Eastern students when they read texts in English.

5.1.1 Research question 1: What are the problems or difficulties faced by the Middle Eastern students in the University of Malaya when they read texts in English?

Research Question 1 relates to the difficulties the Middle Eastern students encounter when they read texts in English for the purpose of answering reading comprehension questions. In order to address this question, the findings from the reading test will be elaborated on and the students' performance will be matched against how they perceive their level of reading ability to be and their perceived level of difficulties for some of the skills listed and other contributing factors that may exaggerate their problems.

No	Skill	No. of question	%			
			Text 1	Text 2	Text 3	Average
1	Identify main idea	4	50.0	43.3	16.7	27.5
2	Infer information	2	-	-	110	55.0
3	Deduce meaning from context	1	-	40.0	-	40.0
4	Elicit specific information	4	70.0	66.7	50.0	46.7
5	Understand relationship between sentences	4	73.3	120.0	56.7	62.5
6	Recognize author's purpose	4	66.7	70.0	73.3	52.5

Table 28: Average percentage according to the specific skills

The table above highlights the specific skills tested in the reading test and the average performance of the students for each of the skills. The performance for each skill is averaged out by adding together the percentages obtained for each question

related to the same skills and dividing that by the number of questions. Based on the table, the Middle Eastern students appeared to have scored quite poorly in the questions which require them to identify main ideas. In all the four questions on main ideas, the percentage of correct answers ranged from 16.7% to 43.3%. On average, only 27.5% of the respondents managed to answer main ideas question correctly.

The Middle Eastern respondents also appear to have difficulties deducing meaning in context. For the single question on deducing meaning in context, only 40.0% of the students managed to answer the question correctly. This appears to be supported by responses from the students in Part E (question 2 - item (e)) of the questionnaire where 46.7% of them claimed that they faced slight difficulties in deducing meaning in context.

With regard to eliciting specific information or details, although the students did not perform as poorly as in the previous two skills, generally, the percentage of students who got the answer correct was below 50.0%. From the four questions which required elicitation of specific information, and with the percentage of correct answer ranging from 13.3% to 66.7%, the average percentage of students who successfully answered the question was 46.7%. For this skill, half of the students also claimed that it was a slightly difficult problem for them while reading a text in English language (refer to Appendix A - question 2, item (f) in Part E).

The fourth skill which was tested was related to recognizing the author's purpose. There were four questions which involved this skill and the average percentage of students who responded accurately was 52.5%. Although this figure is

slightly more than half, it still indicates that almost 50.0% of the students still find this is a difficult skill which can hamper their performance.

The subsequent skills which this study focuses on are making inferences and understanding the relationship between sentences. Two questions were found to test the skill in making inferences. On average, 55.0% of the students managed to get the correct answer. Although this is a better performance compared to the previously discussed skills, it is just slightly more than half of the total population which means it is still a difficult skill for most of the students. From the questionnaire responses by the students, almost half (13 students) of the population claimed that this skill is moderately difficult for them (refer to Appendix A - question 2, item (c) in Part E).

The students' performance for questions which test their understanding of the relationship between sentences appears to be more encouraging. Out of the four questions, on average, 62.5% of the students answered this type of question correctly. Although in comparison to the previous skills, this is a more manageable skill for the Middle Eastern students, it also shows that more than a quarter of the students still got the wrong answer.

Having highlighted the students' performance in the specific skills in the reading test, the researcher now attempts to match the performance of the students in the test to some of the relevant responses in the questionnaire related to the difficulties that they faced while reading in English. This is to see whether there is a match between what they perceived to be easy or difficult and how they did in the actual test.

With regard to identifying main ideas, 15 (50.0%) of the students claimed that they only have slight difficulties with this skill. Only 2 students regarded this skill as most difficult for them and in fact, only 2 students answered that they would like to be trained in this skill (refer to Appendix A – question 6 in Part C). However, the figure indicates that this is a skill that the students appear to be the weakest in and, therefore, need more training in. It may also be attributed to language problems which 43.3% of the students claimed often contribute to their reading difficulties.

Based on the research by Grabe (1991), it has been implied that learner's ability to use effective reading strategies might affect their performance in reading. This is also supported by the research by Kary (1997), where he investigated the reading difficulties in Arabic and English. The finding from that study found that all Middle Eastern students (in this case Egyptians) suffer from all types of difficulties in the second language. This is due to the language problem they faced. In the present study, this finding is also supported by the responses from the students where 13 (43.3%) of them claimed that they have language problems while reading in English.

The Middle Eastern students' difficulties basically arise from their limited FL proficiency and other important extra-textual reader-related factors such as unfamiliarity with topics, purpose and self-confidence. These problems arise because constructing meaning requires integrating information from the text with relevant information from students' background knowledge. This is in line with Widdowson (1984) who used formal schemata or 'rhetorical routines' to explain the background knowledge and the expectation of differences among rhetorical structures. This

routine includes the differences in genre and differences in structure such as in fables, simple stories and scientific texts. This is in line with the result gathered from Part D in the questionnaire where 50.0% of the students indicated that when they begin to read a passage, they think about what they already know about the topic of the passage (refer to Table 20).

This finding is supported by Mikhail (1987) and Walters (1993) who found that the text that interacts with the reader's own cultural background knowledge of content is much easier to understand than syntactically and rhetorically equivalent texts based on a less familiar and more alien culture. In this study, 23 (76.7%) students claimed that they sometimes face problems while reading in English when they lack background and content knowledge about certain subject matter (refer to Table 23).

Besides that, based on the questionnaire analysis in Table 6, 22 (73.3%) students indicated that they started to learn English between 11 and 15 years of age where they were exposed to the language when they attended secondary school (Table 7). However, this is in contrast to their responses in Part E, where 14 (46.7%) students stated that they never have problems with English exposure (refer to Table 23).

In addition to this matter, in the Middle East, English is a compulsory subject only at secondary schools. Therefore, the students' exposure to English was not enough for them to learn the language adequately compared to if they had started learning the language since young. Based on Table 11, more than half of the

population, which is 22 (73.3%) students, stated that they had been exposed to English for 6 to 10 years only. Other than that, 70.0% of the students claimed that they did not attend any English courses outside of the formal learning in the institutions in their country. This led to the low level of English proficiency achievement among the Middle Eastern students at the University of Malaya especially when they read texts in English.

Even though 21 (70.0%) students claimed that they like to read English materials (refer to Table 13), especially newspapers (refer to Table 15), only 17 (56.7%) students read between 5-10 books in a year (refer to Table 14). This is considered as very little if they wish to be better in their reading skills. This may help explain why 14 (46.7%) students mentioned that they have problems in understanding English texts. This represents almost half of the population for this study (refer to Table 16). Yet only 11 (36.7%) students wanted to be trained in developing their ability to overcome problems while reading in English (refer to Table 18). However, due to their awareness of the importance of English, especially for their studies and future career (refer to Table 19), 86.7% of the students aimed for the advanced level of English proficiency.

5.1.2 Research question 2: What are the strategies used by the Middle Eastern students in the University of Malaya when they read texts in English?

To answer Research Question 2, the data collected from the questionnaire is used. The most commonly used strategy that the Middle Eastern students at the University of Malaya used when they read texts in English is to refer to the glossary to understand the meaning of words. 80.0% of the students claimed that they always used this strategy to deal with difficult words (refer to Table 20 - item (k)). 73.3% of the students also always refer to the illustration to help them understand the text (refer to Table 20 - item (j)).

Besides referring to the glossary and illustration, close to 50.0% of the students always read and try to understand in both Arabic as their first language and also in English as their foreign language (refer to Table 20 - item (c) and (d)). It is only natural for them to process what they read in their mother tongue especially if their proficiency is low. They also focus on the meaning of the text (refer to Table 20 - item (f)) although less than half of the students always do this when they read in English. Based on their responses, the students tend to use less out-of-text strategies to aid their understanding. They rarely or never consult others and would often refer to the dictionary and mentally translate information on their own. In relation to this, it has been implied that learner's ability to use effective reading strategies might affect their performance in reading even if their overall proficiency is similar (Grabe, 1991).

In addition, to the above, another strategy typically used by almost 80.0% of the students is underlining or marking important parts and difficult words and phrases. Making sure they understand the meaning of words is very important to the Middle Eastern students. Most of them rarely neglect or skip a difficult word without going back to it again. The study also reveals that 70.0% of the students do predict the content of a passage based on the title of a text and in relation to this, half of the population claimed that they also think about what they already know about the topic when they start reading a passage. What this shows is that the majority of the students are aware of the importance of processing new information against their background knowledge. This may explain their performance in the reading test too where familiarity with the subject matter, like franchise and the elephant, helped them do better in the test. In this respect, they seem to find the topic of artificial reef rather difficult to comprehend.

63.0% of the students never stop to summarize ideas from time to time while they are reading and only less than half of them make inferences and draw conclusion while reading. These are important strategies in reading and students have to be trained to apply them to facilitate their understanding of a text. With regard to the speed at which they read, 70.0 % of the students always read a difficult passage slower than they would an easier passage, yet they also claimed that they would read a difficult passage quickly if they need to reread it again. In general though, more than 50.0% claimed they rarely would reread a whole passage. Indeed, according to more than half of them, lack of time is sometimes a contributing factor to their problems in a reading test.

5.2 Pedagogical implication

Based on the research, the findings might help educators at all levels to open their eyes and understand the importance of reading skills in achieving the reading comprehension purpose. The pedagogical implications that can be made on the basis of all the above results are numerous. Middle Eastern tertiary students need to be trained appropriately to develop their ability to be good readers and achieve successful communication. SL teachers, especially tertiary level teachers, will not deny the importance of this educational goal. The indirect aim of this study is to promote a learner-centred environment in line with the demands of tertiary level education, in which readers are expected to take more responsibility for their own reading and be able to overcome their reading problems.

Based on the researcher's own experience, reading instruction in the Middle East classroom is usually teacher-centred and is limited to activities that precede or follow the reading texts. Teachers hardly help students while they are in the process of constructing meaning. The aim of most of these lessons is to teach language through reading either a set of lexis or a set of grammatical structures. In the process of achieving these goals, reading is lost. The strategies that students develop during their reading lessons involve the acquisition of linguistic knowledge, new words, or new grammatical or rhetorical structures that are soon forgotten due to memorization. There are not ways of processing linguistic information to comprehend a text. Such a pedagogic practice of focusing on the language of the text

may be justified as a language lesson, but it may very well be counter-productive as a reading lesson.

Based on responses by the respondents, it can be gathered that often what is known as reading is actually not reading at all. It is a series of language points, using texts as points of departure. Reading texts are thus sources of language exercises rather than reading exercises. Students naturally get influenced in their reading behaviour by this language focus in reading classes. Focusing attention on reading strategies and language rather than on language alone can result in a reading behaviour which is, at least, arguably better in that it can resemble the behaviour of successful readers or their own L₁ behaviour.

In fact, reading in a FL significantly depends upon many variables like the linguistic skill of the reader, his general learning ability, the learning environment which is conditioned by student and teacher attitudes, materials used, amount of reading exposure, and practice in interpretation of written materials. Finally, there is the problem of separating the reader's general intelligence, experience, physiological and psychological traits, general background of knowledge, diligence in doing recommended practice and general attitude toward the language group which may be significant in determining reading efficiency. According to Smith (1991), "Researches are beginning to realize that reading will be not completely understood until there is an understanding of *all perceptual, cognitive, linguistic and motivational aspects not just of reading, but of living and learning in general*".

In this respect, five criteria will be presented under this section to be taken into account for the purpose of developing RC skills. They are the decoding skill, authentic materials, contextual approach, appropriate tasks and reading strategies instruction.

5.2.1 Improving the decoding skill

The central systemic problem as detected in the present study was the vocabulary problem. Students' over reliance on words indicate that they lack enough vocabulary as well as well-developed word recognition skills to make them effective readers. Hence, they tend not to understand some of the sentences and may fail to get the correct answers in some questions in all the three tests generally. In other words, the aim in this area can be rather paradoxical, via developing students' vocabulary and at the same time weaning them away from over reliance on basic units such as words and phrases and therefore, from the frequent use of the bottom-up, decoding strategies. There are now theories of SL vocabulary acquisition, a wide range of teaching techniques and a greatly increased awareness on the part of most teachers and students of the importance of vocabulary development (Eskey, 1997).

There seems to be a need among SL readers for a development of automatic identification skills. There are two dimensions to the problem here as suggested by Eskey and Grabe (1998); one is cognitive in that for successful decoding the reader

must know the meanings of the forms, and the other is perceptual in that the reader must also recognize instantaneously the forms of their visual representations.

To develop identification skills, teachers might try what are called 'rapid recognition' exercises (Eskey & Grabe, 1998). These exercises can help poor readers to identify quickly and accurately linguistic forms at word level; they should be intended for warm-up exercise in the first years of tertiary level classrooms. The exercises have many forms. There are variants of exercises set for beginners (Eskey & Grabe, 1988) in which students must match not just forms with forms but meanings with meanings, key words with synonyms or antonyms. Students should be made aware that doing these exercises in the reading classes is not only for developing identification skills but also for extensive and independent reading over time. These exercises, taken in small doses, can serve the purpose of consciousness-raising that is drawing the reader's attention to the central purpose of developing systemic skills in English.

At the phrase level, similar exercises can develop the chunking ability of the readers. The learning of chunking constitutes a crucial breakthrough for many FL readers and it is the reading teacher's job to build on this.

Yet another bottom-up exercise is rate-building. Readers in L₁ have been shown to read faster than in SL, making far fewer pauses. In SL the tendency is for them to read word by word, a strategy that hampers their understanding of most of the text. For rate-building, many systems are available as well as means of incorporating such systems in SL classrooms. However, as in the case of word-based

and phrase-based exercises, rate-building should be done on a limited scale and with consciousness-raising. The main purpose this can serve is according to Eskey and Grabe (1988), “the breaking down of any psychological barriers to reading faster in English“.

One issue concerning rate-building exercises is the role of words, specially unknown words. If there are too many unknown words, the text become inaccessible to readers. But SL readers have to encounter some unknown words in most texts they read. Although this is the best way of increasing their control of the vocabulary (through meaningful texts), readers do become anxious about the occurrence of these words and they stop reading to look them up in dictionaries, thereby interrupting the reading process.

5.2.2 Authentic materials

It has been emphasized that to provide a FL learner with authentic materials is to make sure that students are exposed to real life events and situations.

It has been stressed that enriching the textbook with different types of authentic materials will make learners become aware that different types of texts use different text organization, language structure, vocabulary, grammar and level of formality. As such, learners will be able to use the language in different situations and for different purposes communicatively (Morrow, 2003).

Research in SL acquisition points out that since a child acquires his mother-tongue by exposure to authentic language, so the FL learner should do the same (Abbott and Wingard, 1991). However, Eskey (1997) has pointed that care must be taken to provide an authentic SL cultural context for the interpretation of meaning (Dubin and Olshtain, 1996).

It is always stressed that SL/FL materials should be related to the sort of things students are likely to want or need to do outside the classroom (Cunningsworth, 1984 and William, 1986) like listening to the news, announcements or to songs; reading different kinds of texts such as letters, newspapers, reports, encounters with people, and knowing how different types of texts are written. It has been reasonably argued that considering learners' interest is very important for motivation and developing competence in reading (Krashen and Terrell, 1992). This indicates that it is beneficial for our students to be exposed to authentic language that is usually used outside the classroom even if they face difficulties at first.

5.2.3 Contextual approach

FL learners are greatly helped in developing their reading skills by contextualizing reading situations. Traditionally, learners are prepared for reading by listing a number of vocabularies to be recognized and memorized. Johnson (1982) found that pre-exposure to the definitions of difficult vocabulary items did not generally affect SL readers' comprehension. More important, such pre-teaching, when combined

with glossing of the same low-frequency words in a text, seemed to interfere with global comprehension of a text. Under these conditions, readers will be less able to grasp the overall gist of the passage.

Carrel (1988), Eskey (1997), McCarthy (1999) and Cross (1991) emphasized that readers are greatly helped by visual aids, discussions, role play, preparations for the reading task and do not benefit as much from the vocabulary preparation method. In fact, for FL readers like the Middle Eastern respondents, illustrations help a majority of them understand a text.

Vocabulary development and word recognition as seen by Carrell (1988) focus on the current thinking that converges on the notion that a given word does not have a fixed meaning, but rather has a variety of meanings around a common core, and that these meanings interact with context and background knowledge. According to Carrell, if readers do not have background experience associated with certain types of things or actions, then the comprehension of the lexical items and the sentence as a whole will be affected.

Thus, in this respect, knowledge of individual words is strongly related to conceptual knowledge. Knowledge of vocabulary, thus, entails knowledge of the schemata in which a concept participates, knowledge of the networks in which that word participates, as well as, any associated words and concepts (Carrell 1988).

Carrell's views on vocabulary also find support in research specific to SL reading instruction that has shown that merely presenting a list of new or unfamiliar words to be encountered in the text even with definitions does not guarantee the

learning of the words or the concepts behind these words or of improved comprehension of the text passages. In this case, the strategy of checking the meaning of words in a dictionary which is often used by more than half of the Middle Eastern students surveyed may prove to be futile.

It is stressed that visuals help learners to use more of their previous world knowledge in real and familiar situations. The pictures, diagrams and sketches provide clear clues of what to expect before reading. This encourages the development of prediction skills. This is an important point i.e. pre-reading tasks indicating the relevance of using contextual visuals to develop RC skills where RC development depends mainly on the readers' effective use of his background of the world knowledge 'schemata script' (Stott, 2001).

5.2.4 Appropriate tasks

It has been widely agreed (Smith, 1982, Harri Augestein et al, 1982, EL-Daly, 1997) that reading strategies are determined by one's reading purposes. In other words, one's reasons for reading influence one's way of approaching the reading materials.

Reading purposes can be specific e.g. looking for a telephone number, a certain term or name (which requires scanning), or general as in the case of reading for pleasure where one needs to skim instead of looking for minor details. On other occasions, we may need to read intensively to understand everything as in reading legal documents or scientific texts, where different steps must be followed accurately

in order to carry out an experiment. Recent reading materials give importance to authentic reading reasons that are not concerned with language learning, but with the use to which we put reading in our daily life (Davies and Whitney, 1979, Nuttal, 1982) such as advertisements, forms, timetables and weather forecasts.

The question arises as to what makes purposes so important. One of the reasons is that they specify what to look for and direct the learners' attention to information they might not consider as important. They also, as suggested above, help in choosing appropriate strategies. It has also been maintained that not only do purposes help us to check our understanding of what we read but they also guide us to evaluate our strategies and tactics (Harri-Augestien et al, 1982, Carrell, 1998). Hence, the clearer and more precise our purposes are, the more efficient and successful readers we can be. This has obvious implications for a teaching methodology as reading exercises are best prepared a round task where students are challenged to do certain kinds of responses to show their understanding.

In the present study, the reading purposes for the students are more to succeed in their studies, to get a better job rather than focusing on being a good reader generally. This is shown in Chapter Four (refer Table 18) where 50.0% of the students claimed that their main intention to learn reading skills is for study purposes. Due to this reason, indirectly they are quite good at certain skills such as identifying with the topic (refer Table 22 in Chapter Four). However, whether the actual reading tasks given to them in the classroom are appropriate or not can be the subject of another research project.

Badrawi (1995) and Hafez (1995) suggest that reading tasks should also be graded carefully in terms of purposes, aiming to train rather than to test. Simple tasks that require immediate (e.g. pointing, crossing) and short responses should precede more difficult ones that require long responses such as summarizing facts and opinions. By adopting such techniques, one of the main components in learning i.e. success, will be achieved. This does not only improve students' willingness to tackle another reading task but also ensures the effectiveness of the reading practice given (Ellis, 1985).

5.2.5 Reading strategy instruction

Reading strategies are of interest not only for what they reveal about the ways readers manage their interactions with written text, but also for how the use of strategies is related to effective reading comprehension.

The immediate concern here is strategy training or strategy development. Many activities have been suggested by a number of researchers. In all of these, the teacher identifies and assesses the strategies students are already using, then explains the strategy and provides opportunities to practice it (Carrell, 1989, Slataci & Akyel, 2002).

Carrell (1989) conducted a study in the SL context to examine the combined effects of cognitive and metacognitive strategy instruction on reading

comprehension. High intermediate level adult ESL students of varied native language backgrounds participated in the study. The students were trained either in semantic mapping or the experience-text-relationship method to activate background knowledge. Each group of students also received training in metacognitive awareness and regulation of the two strategies. Results showed that the combined effects of metacognitive and cognitive strategy instruction were effective in enhancing RC.

The findings of Slataci's & Akyel's (2002) study offer several pedagogical implications for reading lessons in EFL/ESL contexts. First, the think aloud method provides teachers with an excellent means to evaluate students' comprehension processes and makes their strengths and weaknesses visible and thus allows teachers to help students adjust their strategies. Second, readers, especially those with lower level language proficiency, might benefit from an instructional procedure such as Reciprocal Teaching and experience-text-relationship where they learn to monitor their comprehension and use their background knowledge with the help of a teacher who models the steps of the instructional process, where they discuss their strategies while reading the text. Raising students' awareness about when, where and how to use reading strategies obviously can make them 'strategic' readers (Paris, Lipson & Wixon, 1983). The reading teacher in this kind of instruction assumes the role of a guide, model or stimulator rather than the provider of the correct answers to comprehension questions.

Paris, Wasik, and Turner (1991) said that it is very difficult to get researchers to agree on a concise definition of reading strategies. There are many reasons for this

due to a variety of persisting problems such as differentiating reading strategies from other processes like thinking, study or motivational strategies.

- a. determining the scope of strategies – are they global or specific?
- b. deciding if strategies involve intentionality and consciousness.

Thus, researchers have referred to reading strategies in various ways and have mostly described what the strategies are. However, it is a requirement to have a broad understanding, at least, of what reading comprehension strategies are in connection to the current study. Barnett (1989) said that reading strategies deal with the "mental operations" involved when readers approach a text purposefully with the intention of making sense of what they read. In other words, reading strategies uncover the readers' resources for comprehension and show how readers envisage a task, what textual cues they pay attention to, how they process the meaning of what they read, and what steps they take when comprehension fails them (Block 1986). The approaches range from bottom-up vocabulary strategies, for instance, simply rereading problematic segments and deducing the meaning of an unknown words from context or consulting the dictionary for the meaning of difficult words, to more comprehensive strategies like summarising and connecting what is being said or read to the reader's background knowledge (Janzen, 1996). In essence, reading strategies are "plans for solving problems encountered in constructing meaning" (Duffy, 1993). Research on reading strategies show a shift in attention from stressing on the product of reading, e.g., the score obtained on a reading comprehension test, to process-oriented studies which focus more on determining the strategies that readers actually use while they are reading. Interest in reading strategies are appreciated for what they

disclose about how readers manage their interaction with the written text and how these strategies are related to text comprehension (Carrell, 1989).

For the present study, some of these strategies have been incorporated in the questionnaire which has provided a glimpse of the strategies the respondents perceived to have used and to what degree they have used them.

5.3 General recommendations

In addition to the foregoing criteria, the results of the study support the following recommendations.

1. Exposure to appropriate methods and materials

To develop the ability to understand written English, it is essential that FL learners have a sufficient amount of exposure to authentic materials. More emphasis should be given to activities that would develop student's creativity particularly in the skills of constructing meaning, predicting topic development and getting the gist of the passage. Adequate information related to reading context through contextual visuals and discussions should be provided especially before and during reading.

2. Integrating reading and writing

Reading and writing are the skills that are inseparable and interdependent in the way that we frequently use them in our native language. According to Kary

(1988), integration can be understood as taking place ‘between the addressor or the writer writing a text and the addressee or the reader reading one’. The reader is no longer seen as a passive receiver of knowledge but rather as an active builder of meaning. It is hoped that by fully integrating reading and writing instruction with realistic tasks, students will come to understand the ways in which both readers and writers compose text (Silberstein, 1994).

3. Extending reading courses

As reading is one of the most important skills in language learning, it is recommended that it be taught throughout the first and second year of tertiary education. Reading is an essential skill and needs to be trained intensively and gradually to develop as many RC skills as possible, and to cover as many real world situations as possible.

Besides all the recommendation above, to improve students’ reading comprehension, it has to start during the early stages of reading acquisition. The material used to build children reading skills should be geared to their decoding skills, with attention to meaning. While decodable texts can be meaningful and engaging, they will not build children's comprehension skills nor teach them new vocabulary to the extent that might be needed. Comprehension strategies and new vocabulary should be taught using stories more sophisticated than the early decodable text. The teacher should read this text to the children and discuss the meaning with them. After the children become fluent decoders, the children can

apply these comprehension strategies to their own reading. From this, the children will grow to become better readers in the future.

As reading comprehension is among the most important measures of reading skill as it addresses directly the desired end product of the reading task: the extraction and processing of meaning from the text is an important factor to be considered. However, students with reading comprehension difficulties present a diverse and conflicting profile with regard to motivation. Depression and anxiety had negative associations with most motivational and cognitive variables, and the effects were slightly more pronounced for the typical student group.

The findings from this survey lead us to conclude that students need to improve their reading habits. Prior to their entry to university, they have not read much (except while studying in schools). This is the feedback from the questionnaire (refer to Table 13) where 17 students claimed that they do not read a lot, which is between 5 to 10 books in a year. It may be beneficial to have a record of their reading habits in order to make predictions about their academic success.

It would be helpful to course lecturers and administrators to have a heightened awareness of the reading comprehension difficulties faced by students. One of the steps that can be taken to minimize reading comprehension problems would be to incorporate study skills components within the courses or to make reading lists more manageable. This activity can assist in the promotion of autonomous learning and make students more independent and resourceful. The researcher hopes all "reluctant readers" will continue to read after graduation when

the pressure to read is absent, thereby helping to foster a reading culture in the society.

5.4 Suggestion for future research

There are a few recommendations for future research. This study concentrates on RC skills. However, one cannot say that all reading skills are investigated. Collection of data was restricted to students from Libya, Yemen and Saudi Arabia who are studying at the University of Malaya because of the present researcher's experience with the environment and the students. The sample of the study can be widened by focusing on more nationalities from various universities to get an insight into their problems, skills, views and needs towards reading comprehension.

In addition, the questionnaire also can be administered to the teachers to get feedback from not only the students but from both sides involved in the teaching and learning process of reading. Besides that, the questionnaire can also be distributed to administrators and persons in charge in the Ministry of Education to get a better understanding about their perception and interest in helping the teachers and students to solve the reading comprehension problems and to achieve the purpose and target of reading.

5.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, although much has already been learned about the L₁, SL and FL reading process, so much more lies undiscovered. With regard to the Middle Eastern students, it can be concluded that despite their general perception that they only have a slight or moderate level of difficulty in reading, their performance in the test reveals that they still need a lot more help to upgrade their skills.

Finally, although they claim to be practicing a few of the important strategies, more exposure to higher level processing strategies can help them cope better with the reading texts that are compulsory reading for them at the tertiary level of education.

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APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Respondents,

*I am a final year student of Master in Linguistics at University of Malaya, and now I am conducting a study entitled “**Reading Comprehension Difficulties among Middle Eastern Students**” at University of Malaya. This research is for the partial fulfillment of completing my postgraduate study.*

I would appreciate it if you could spare some time and thought in completing the survey questionnaire. I hope that you would co-operate in completing the questionnaire with the best of your ability.

This questionnaire consists of five parts. For Part A, there are 6 questions about your personal background. Part B is about English language learning experience and interest with 8 questions. Meanwhile Part C has 7 questions about your views on reading in English language. Next, Part D, consists of 3 questions asking in greater detail about strategies used while reading in English language and the last is Part E with also 3 questions about difficulties you face while reading in English language. You need to answer all questions given. Your response will be treated as confidential and used for research purposes only. There is no right or wrong answer. Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study.

Questionnaire

The aim of this questionnaire is not to test you or your ability but to gain an insight into your interest in reading and to identify the problems you have in reading in English. Please think very carefully before you answer each question. Please tick (✓) the most appropriate answer and state answers based on your own views and opinions where applicable.

PART A (Personal Information)

The questions below are related to your personal background.

1. Nationality : _____

2. Gender

Male	
Female	

3. Age (years)

< 18	
19-24	
25-30	
> 30	

4. Faculty : _____

5. Previous university/college/institute : _____

6. TOEFL/IELTS marks (if any) : _____

PART B (English Language Background)

The questions below are related to your English language learning experience and interest.

1. At what age (years) did you start to learn English?

< 4	
5-10	
11-15	
>15	

2. Where did you first start to learn English?

At home	
Primary school	
Secondary school	
College / University / Institution	

3. Is English language a compulsory subject in the following institution of studies in your country? (*You may tick more than one*)

Primary school	
Secondary school	
College / University / Institution	

4. Have you taken any English courses outside of the formal learning in formal institution of studies in your country?

Yes	
No	

If yes, please state level : _____

5. Are you interested to learn English?

Yes	
No	

If yes, please state purpose : _____

6. Years of learning English in your country

< 5	
6-10	
11-15	
> 15	

7. Your aimed proficiency level

Elementary	
Intermediate	
Advanced	

8. How do you think that you can achieve the level aimed at?

PART C (General Views on Reading in English Language)

The questions below are related to your view on reading in English language.

1. Do you like reading in general?

Yes	
No	

2. How many books do you read in English in a year (outside of assigned reading)?

None	
1-5	
5-10	
> 10	

3. What do you always read in English (outside of assigned reading)?

Magazines	
Newspapers	
Books	
Novels	

Others (please state) : _____

4. Do you have any problem understanding English texts?

Yes	
No	

5. How would you rate your reading ability in English?

Excellent	
Very good	
Good	
Not very good	

6. Which of the following do you like to be trained in?

Developing ability to answer the questions given	
Developing ability to use the dictionary	
Developing ability to overcome problems while reading	
Developing ability to identify main ideas	
Developing ability to guess meaning from context	
Developing ability to identify supporting ideas	
Developing reading speed	

Others (please state) : _____

7. From your point of view, for what reasons are reading skills important?

Job	
Study	
Travelling	

Others (please state) : _____

PART D (Strategies Used While Reading in English Language)

The questions below are related to strategies used while reading in English language.

1. When you are reading in English, do you ...

No	Strategies	Answer			
		Always	Often	Rarely	Never
a	... read word by word?				
b	... read sentence by sentence?				
c	... read and try to understand in English?				
d	... read and try to understand in Arabic?				
e	... read and try to check every word in the dictionary to understand meaning?				
f	... focus on meaning?				
g	... focus on grammar item?				
h	... focus on sentence structure?				
i	... focus on vocabulary?				
j	... refer to the illustration to make you understand the text?				
k	... refer to the glossary to understand meaning of words?				
l	... ask someone to translate the text to help you to understand it?				
m	... translate the information in your mind to help you understand it?				
n	... consult a teacher to help explain it to you?				
o	... consult your friends for help?				
p	... discuss the text with a native speaker to understand it better?				

2. When you read, which of the following do you do?

No	Approach	Answer			
		Always	Often	Rarely	Never
a	If the passage has a title, I think of what the passage might be about.				
b	When I read, I predict what might come next in the passage.				
c	When I begin reading a passage, I think about what I already know about the topic of the passage.				
d	I read the first and the last paragraph of the passage before I read it all.				
e	I mark words or phrases I do not understand (by underlining, circling, etc.).				
f	I stop to summarize ideas from time to time either in writing or mentally.				
g	I read the whole passage once and then reread it.				
h	I make inferences and draw conclusions while reading.				
i	I underline parts of the passage I think are important.				
j	I read the whole passage once, and then reread the difficult parts only.				
k	I read straight through a passage and do not reread.				

3. If you are reading in English and are having problems understanding the content, what do you do?

No	Situations	Answer			
		Always	Often	Rarely	Never
a	If a paragraph contains several words I do not understand, I guess the ones that I think are most important and neglect the others.				
b	If a paragraph contains several words I do not know, I stop reading for a while.				
c	If I come to a word I do not know, I try to guess what it might mean and then continue reading.				
d	If I come to a word I do not know, I skip the word and come back to it later.				
e	To guess what an unfamiliar word might mean, I try to understand what the rest of the sentence says.				
f	To guess what an unfamiliar word might mean, I look at the grammatical form of the word (e.g. whether it is a verb or a noun, etc.).				
g	To guess what an unfamiliar word might mean, I note whether the word looks like another word I know.				
h	When a passage is difficult, I read it slower than when I read an easier passage.				
i	When a passage is difficult, I read it quickly then reread it.				
j	When the passage contains parts I do not understand, I				

	guess what they mean by reading parts that come before and after.				
k	When the passage contains parts I do not understand, I just move to the next part.				

PART E (Reading Skills in English Language)

The questions below are related to difficulties you face while reading in English language.

1. Are you aware that there are reading skills in English?

Yes	
No	

2. Do you have difficulties with the following skills when you read in English? If you do, please indicate how difficult each one is by putting a tick (✓) in the appropriate column.

No	Skills	Level of difficulties			
		Not at all	Slightly	Moderately	Most
a	Understanding words				
b	Understanding grammar				
c	Inferring information				
d	Getting main ideas				
e	Deducing meaning from context				
f	Selecting specific relevant information				
g	Predicting information				
h	Identifying with topic				
i	Handling lengthy text				
j	Recognizing writing style				

3. If you have difficulties in reading English texts, do the following contribute to your problems? (You may tick more than one).

No	Skills	Level of difficulties			
		Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
a	Low motivation in learning another language				
b	Language problem				
c	Difficult words in a text				
d	Difficult sentence structure				
e	Difficult subject matters				
f	Being slow in reading				
g	Lengthy text				
h	Complicated grammar structure				
i	Not knowing what to do				
j	Lack of patience				
k	Lack of interest in reading in English				
l	Lack of vocabulary				
m	Lack of background/content knowledge				
n	Lack of time				
O	Lack of interesting reading material				
P	Lack of effort to learn				
Q	Lack of support (personal, parents, peers and teachers)				
R	Lack of exposure of English				

THANK YOU FOR YOUR FEEDBACK

APPENDIX B

READING TEST

Dear Respondents,

*I am a final year student of Master in Linguistics at University of Malaya, and I am now conducting a study entitled “**Reading Comprehension Difficulties among Middle Eastern Students**” at University of Malaya. This research is for the partial fulfillment of completing my postgraduate study.*

I would appreciate it if you could spare some time in completing these reading tests. I hope that you would co-operate with the best of your ability.

These reading tests booklet consists of three Reading Comprehensions. For each Reading Comprehension, there are seven questions. You need to answer all the questions given within two hours. Your response will be treated as confidential and used for research purposes only. Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study.

Reading Comprehension 1

Questions 1 to 7 are based on the following passage.

There are ways of owning your own business without starting it yourself. One way is to buy an existing business. The purchaser of an existing business is seeking to bypass the sometimes time consuming and involved process of establishing and building a business. Ideally, the purchaser is hoping to be able to build from someone else's efforts. Another market entry strategy is to purchase a business prototype or a franchise. Franchising has experienced a boom in recent years as people with no business experience of their own contract to use someone else's prototype. However, while buying a business or a franchise can provide a certain shortcut to ownership, do not take any shortcuts in evaluating *either business opportunity*.

Franchising involves a contractual relationship between a franchisor and a franchisee. The franchisor is the owner of a particular service or product. The *franchisee* is interested in offering the product or service in a particular market. The *franchise* is the exclusive right to offer that product or service in a particular market. In return for granting that particular business opportunity for the local distribution, the franchisor receives a payment from the franchisee.

Take, for example, a typical fast-food franchise. In this case, the franchisee has contracted with the franchisor to offer the food products of the franchisor in a particular market. The agreement will also require the franchisee to conform to quality standards. This type of agreement would be a business format franchise, which is one of the more popular forms of franchises today. In this case, the franchising goes beyond a particular product and assumes a contractual, ongoing business relationship between the franchisor and the franchisee. In addition, the franchisor supplies the franchisee with many documents, which include a procedures manual and a marketing plan. The franchisor can also provide assistance with the business development. The business format franchise is a more complex way of franchising in that it involves the sale of an overall way of doing business as opposed to the rights to distribute a product.

Payments for the franchise opportunity can go up to hundreds of thousands of dollars. In addition to initial outlay, more funds are required to build up the franchise operation. In view of the huge investment involved, a franchise opportunity is a way of minimizing risks. You are decreasing your risk in the particular business by buying the franchisor's know-how and their business methodology in setting up your business.

The number of franchises is increasing dramatically throughout the world. New opportunities and innovation in certain computer software, environmentally safe products and even bagel making have been emerging. In addition, some hard-fought battles to ease the imbalance of power between franchisors and franchisees have had some effect. Also, some franchisees have been beefing up their encroachment policies to guarantee the franchisees more territorial protection. In the United States, there have been more disclosures required by franchisors, such as complete details about past litigation against the franchisor, supplier rebates, computer systems, revenues, and training programmes.

(Adapted from Tim Burns, 1999, *Break the Curve*, International Thomson Business Press)

1. In paragraph I, the writer recommends
 - A starting a new business.
 - B taking short cuts when starting a business.
 - C evaluating the options to having your own business.

2. The phrase *either business opportunity* (lines 9 and 10) refers to
 - A buying an existing business or franchising.
 - B purchasing a business or building your own.
 - C franchising or establishing your own business.

3. The following statements describe franchising **except**
- A the franchisee has to pay the franchisor.
 - B the franchisor transfers ownership of the business to the franchisee.
 - C the exclusive rights to offer a particular product or service is a franchise.
4. *The business format franchise is a more complex way of franchising* (lines 26 and 27) because it involves
- I the overall operations of the business
 - II the local distribution of a particular food product
 - III an ongoing relationship between the franchisor and franchisee
- A I and II.
 - B I and III.
 - C II and III.
5. In paragraph IV, the main idea is that
- A setting up a franchise business is costly.
 - B there are less risks involved in franchising.
 - C by franchising you are buying business know-how.
6. The concluding paragraph is mainly about
- A the increase in protection of the franchisor and franchisee.
 - B the success of franchisees in gaining territorial protection.
 - C the dramatic increase in franchising opportunities.
7. The purpose of this passage is to
- A compare the roles of franchisor and franchisee.
 - B explain how franchising works.
 - C promote franchising.

Reading Comprehension 2

Questions 8 to 14 are based on the following passage.

To the untrained eye, the Aquascape artificial reef does not appear terribly impressive, considering that they have spent some two years in the sea off Pulau Tioman, Pahang. It looks like not much has grown on them, with the exception of oysters which smother some of the cement structures, built to resemble a mound with three ridged peaks of varying heights.

But then again, corals are slow-growers. These marine organisms live in colonies consisting of many individual coral polyps, and some grow a mere 1 cm a year. In fact, 10 years can pass before structures dumped into the sea to form reefs can take semblance of the real thing, says environmental science graduate, Wong Leong Sze of University Putra Malaysia (UPM).

Having kept a close watch on the Aquascape reef, he is optimistic and happy with the coral growth so far. Coral fragments, which he had transplanted onto the cement mounds as part of his research programme, have grown between 1 mm and 8 mm. A few have sprouted an impressive 2 cm. but what satisfies him most is the large number of coral juveniles which have settled on the Aquascape, most of which are too tiny to be discernible to non-scientists. After all, this was the whole reason behind placing the Aquascape in the sea – to provide a hard surface or substrate for coral larvae to attach themselves to and grow.

Apart from corals, various species of marine invertebrates such as sea urchins, sea cucumbers, crinoids and cushion stars, as well as marine snails and fish have sought refuge at the Aquascape reef. Damsel fish, butterfly fish, wrasses and groupers dart around the structures while schools of breams, snappers, fusiliers and barracudas swirl above. Moray eels, hawksbill turtles and even a nurse shark have made the occasional appearance. A species of shellfish has even laid eggs inside the cavity of one Aquascape. “There are a lot of positive results,” says UPM marine scientist Dr. H. M. Ibrahim, who is supervising Wong’s research on marine ecology. “Coral growth has been quite good and the artificial reef is not only able

to support diverse reef life, but is attracting other reef dwellers.”

The promising results have prompted courier company DHL Malaysia, which had sponsored 10 Aquascape units in June 2004, to add another 58 units two weeks ago. “After placing the 10 units, we watched carefully their development to see whether they deliver the promise to grow and form part of the reef. They did, so we are adding more,” says DHL chief.

Artificial reefs may have proven their worth in restoring ailing coral reefs but they are not always the best remedy for marine conservation – not when expenses remain high. Each Aquascape unit costs RM500 to manufacture but deploying just 10 of them can chalk up a bill of RM200, 000 because of surveys on site suitability, installation and monitoring.

Projects on artificial reefs are much-loved by sponsors because they grab public attention but in the past, some schemes proved to be failures as site suitability studies were not done; neither were there checks to see if the reef was indeed, growing. Thus, a nagging thought is whether funds pumped into artificial reefs might be better spent on promoting sustainable coastal development, environment-friendly tourism activities and pollution prevention.

Malaysian Nature Society official Andrew Sebastian says ill-thought out projects divert attention from the core issue – the need to protect coral reefs and prevent their destruction. “Artificial reefs should only be done in sites with highly degraded reefs. Why invest in them if the area already has a healthy natural reef? They might cause migration of animals from natural reefs, resulting in changes to marine life behaviour or habitat,” says Sebastian, who heads the parks and special projects unit.

There are also other ecological concerns. Some artificial reef structures have rusted away, broken loose from storm and wave action, or leached harmful chemicals into ocean waters. And in the Tioman reef restoration project, two Aquascape units were inadvertently dropped over the reef, breaking stag horn corals.

Marine scientist Dr. H. M. Ibrahim agrees that artificial reef projects soak up resources but says costs can be brought down by involving volunteers. “Creating artificial reefs will not hurt. It promotes awareness and a sense of ownership. And it is one way to get corporations involved in conservation.”

(Adapted from *The Star*, May 9, 2006)

8. The reef *does not appear terribly impressive* (lines 1 and 2) because
- A it is man-made.
 - B there is limited growth.
 - C oysters have covered the surface.
9. The main idea of paragraph II is
- A corals grow very slowly.
 - B it takes 10 years for an artificial reef to look real.
 - C a reef is made up of coral polyps living in colonies.
10. The main purpose of paragraph IV is to
- A identify the types of marine creatures attracted to man-made reefs.
 - B explain how marine creatures have benefitted from man-made reefs.
 - C provide evidence that man-made reefs do support many marine creatures.
11. Artificial reefs are *not always the best remedy for marine conservation* (line 35) because
- A they cost a lot.
 - B they involve monitoring.
 - C they require suitable sites.

12. The phrase *a nagging thought* (line 42) means that something is
- A puzzling.
 - B worrying.
 - C controversial.
13. The following are advantages of artificial reefs **except**
- A they can replace natural coral reefs.
 - B they create public awareness of marine conservation.
 - C they encourage corporations to sponsor marine projects.
14. Which of the following statements best describes the author's intention?
- A More conservation efforts are needed to restore ailing coral reefs.
 - B The building of man-made reefs can be justified on many grounds.
 - C While there are benefits in building artificial reefs there are problems to it.

Reading Comprehension 3

Questions 15 to 21 are based on the following passage.

They say that elephants never forget, and it could be that they are using their memories to exact revenge on people who make their lives a misery. A new study says the usually gentle giants may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) brought on by frightening experiences at an early age.

In parts of Uganda, they have raided villages, demolished huts and destroyed plots, not in an effort to get at food but to scare the people living there. Such attacks have become more frequent in Bunyaruguru, western Uganda, where only two years ago, villagers would think nothing of cycling to the nearby township of Katwe to meet friends and do business. But they have to be more careful now because elephants regularly block the roads, and villagers are too afraid to cycle past.

According to the *New Scientist* report, elephants across Africa seem to be turning on their human neighbours in ever-increasing numbers. In the past, such attacks were always seen as a side-effect of elephants competing for food and lands, as a result of human population encroaching on elephant land.

Dr. Joyce Poole, research director at the Amboseli Elephant Research Project in Kenya, said: "They have good enough memories to take revenge. Wildlife managers may feel it is easier to just shoot so-called "problem" elephants than face people's wrath. So an elephant is shot without realizing the possible consequences on the remaining family members, and the very real possibility of stimulating a cycle of violence.

Poole and her colleagues claim that many elephants are suffering from PTSD brought on by experiencing stress at an early age, thought to be the first time it has been diagnosed in wild animals. Experiments and observations of captive animals suggest that stress experienced during their early years can lead to neurological and behavioural changes that resemble PTSD in humans. Dr. Felicity

de Zulueta, a consultant psychiatrist at the Maudsley Hospital in London, who specializes in trauma therapy and grew up in Uganda with an orphaned elephant as a pet, believes the theories have a basis of truth. She said that one cause of PTSD in humans is the failure of a child to bond or “attach” properly with its primary care giver.

“Prematurely separating an elephant from the family tribe will have very powerful effects in terms of the attachment system. One of these effects would be aggression,” she said.

Poaching has ravaged elephant numbers in Uganda’s Queen Elizabeth National Park, which borders Bunyaruguru, by 90 per cent over the past 30 years. Now only 400 remain - a third of them under five years old and many of them orphans.

Richard Lair, a researcher of Asian elephants at Thailand’s National Elephants Institute, said the same problems are being seen in India, where villagers, particularly in West Bengal, live in constant fear of bull elephants that the villagers claim attack the village to kill people.

(Adapted from *The Times*, New Straits Times, March 19, 2006)

15. *They say that elephants never forget* (line 1). *They* refers to _____ source.
- A a confidential.
 - B an important.
 - C an unknown.
 - D a reliable.

16. The main idea in paragraph II is that
- A villagers are avoiding the elephants.
 - B elephants have changed their behaviour.
 - C elephants are finding it difficult to get food.
 - D villagers are afraid to cycle to town for business.
17. The root cause for the *cycle of violence* (line 21) is
- A man killing elephants.
 - B man depriving elephants of food.
 - C man driving elephants from their habitat.
 - D man capturing elephants for experiments.
18. From the study conducted by Poole and her colleagues, it can be concluded that
- A captive animals are more stressed than wild ones.
 - B PTSD affects both animals and humans.
 - C bonding with the villagers is essential.
 - D orphans have behavioural problems.
19. The argument that elephants suffer from PTSD is supported through the following **except**
- A anecdotes.
 - B experiments.
 - C expert testimonies.
 - D writer's personal experience.

20. The writer's intention is to

- A create sympathy for the affected villagers.
- B highlight that elephants are getting extinct.
- C warn us about the vengefulness of elephants.
- D appeal for better understanding of elephant behaviour.

21. From the passage we can conclude that the writer believes that

- A man is responsible for the way elephants behave.
- B villagers are exaggerating the stories about elephants.
- C evidence is inconclusive as to why elephants are aggressive.
- D failure in bonding is the main cause for attacks by elephants.