READING ABILITY OF EFL LEARNERS:
THE CASE OF LEVEL 3 STUDENTS OF GULF COLLEGE, OMAN

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Abstract:

This study was conducted to analyze the reading ability of EFL learners which focused on the comprehension skill of level 3 students of Gulf College enrolled in academic English: ELP and EAPSS during the first semester of academic year 2016-2017. The aims of this study was to find out the level of reading comprehension of the students and identified what factors contributed to the poor comprehension and come up with an intervention to help students of level 3. In an effort to determine the reading comprehension of the level 3 students, the researcher used descriptive method of research and purposive sampling technique to identify their reading comprehension. A diagnostic reading test was administered to the two batches of level 3 students under him and all these students were the respondents of the study. These groups of students were given a teacher-made reading test to identify their comprehension ability in terms of noting details, inferring, predicting outcomes, getting the main idea, and vocabulary building. Result showed that 78 percent of the students are poor in predicting outcomes and getting the main idea. Inferring (75.6 %) was also another skill that students are low garnering 75.6 percent. Followed by vocabulary building and noting details with 56.2 percent and 53.6 percent respectively. This implies that the students have not developed their higher order thinking skill in reading and that most of the L3 students are struggling readers. Their high comprehension ability needs to be reinforced.

Keywords: reading, reading comprehension, reading skills, reading difficulties, interventions

1. Introduction

Comprehension is the ability of the students to understand and gain meaning from the text able to communicate this meaning to others. The term is often used in connection with tests of reading skills and language abilities. Reading comprehension is not only to

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identify the text but it involves the process of understanding what the printed text is trying to say. It is then essential to address the various factors that affect reading comprehension.

A reader who reads accurately exhibits automaticity, has an excellent grasp of phonics skills for sounding out new words, and does not substitute or omit words while reading. While Samuels (2007), stated that it is appropriate to use reading speed as a means to measure student reading progress, but only if the focus on speed does not interfere with comprehending text.

Khodadady, Pishghadam, and Fakhar (2010), conducted an empirical study using a microstructural approach to schema theory. They studied the relationship among reading comprehension ability, grammar and vocabulary knowledge taught at an intermediate level of language proficiency using micro-structural based approach to reading and comprehension.

Grabe (2008) said that reading comprehension is viewed as a process that involves meaning negotiation among text, readers, teachers, and other members of the classroom community, schema for text meanings, academic tasks, sources of authority (i.e., residing within the text, the reader, the teacher, the classroom community, or some interaction of these), and sociocultural settings are all brought to the negotiation task. The teacher's role is one of orchestration of the instructional setting, and being knowledgeable about teaching/learning strategies and about the world.

According to An (2013) reading comprehension operates in two directions, from bottom up to the top and from the top down to the bottom of the hierarchy. Bottom-up processing is activated by specific data from the text, while top-down processing starts with general to confirm these predictions. These two kinds of processing are occurring simultaneously and interactively, which adds to the concept of interaction or comprehension between bottom-up and top-down processes.

Reading comprehension is important because without it reading doesn't provide the reader with any information. For many students, reading comprehension is a major problem. It is from this context that the researcher is interested to find out the reading ability of the EFL learners enrolled in level 3.

2. Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to determine the levels of the reading comprehension ability of the selected Level 3 block 2 students enrolled during the second semester of AY 2016-2017 at Faculty of Foundation Studies of Gulf College.

Specifically this study sought to answer the following questions:
1. What is the level of the students' reading comprehension ability in terms of the following:
    a. Noting details
    b. Inferring
    c. Predicting Outcomes

      d. Getting the Main Idea

      e. Vocabulary Building

2. What are the problems that contribute to the poor comprehension of the Level 3 students?

3. What intervention is to be done to develop or enhance struggling readers?

2.1 Objective of the Study

This study aims to determine the level of reading comprehension of selected level 3 students of Gulf College-Muscat, Oman to come up with a possible ways to improve reading difficulty to prepare students for the formative and summative reading test. The formative test is given during the 10th week of` the semester while the summative test is given on the 16th week as part of their final examination.

2.2 Scope and Limitations

The respondents of the study are the level 3 block 2 students enrolled in the two batches in ELP and EAPSS modules during the second term of academic year 2016-2017.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the schema theory and reading comprehension. Bartlett (1932) considered schemas as structures of knowledge stored in the long-term memory. He illustrated schemata as "building blocks of cognition" that are used in the process of understanding sensory data, in repossessing information from memory, in organizing aims and sub-goals, in allocating resources, and in leading the flow of the processing system. According to him, Schema theory is an explanation of how readers use prior knowledge to comprehend and learn from text. He first used the term "schema" as an active organization of past reactions or experiences. Later, schema was introduced in reading by Rumelhart (1980) when discussing the important role of background knowledge in reading.
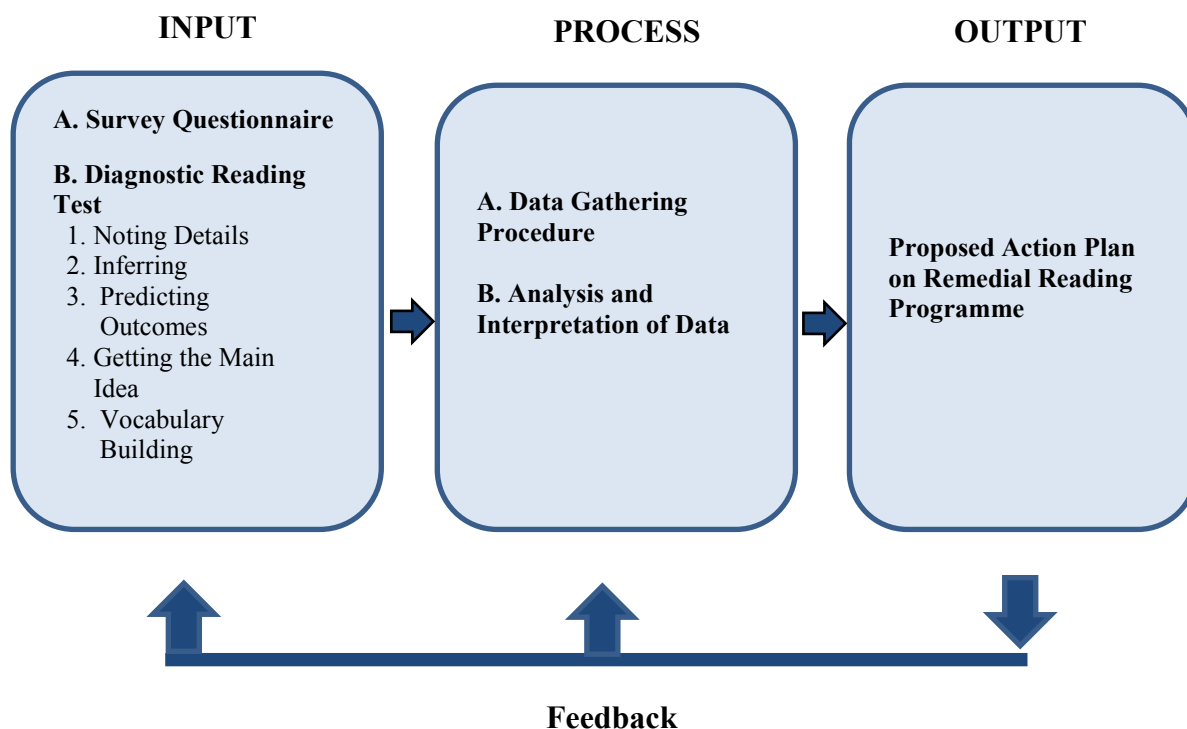
2.4 Conceptual Framework

There are five types of reading comprehension ability involved in this study. These are the noting details, inferring, getting the main idea, vocabulary building, and predicting outcomes levels. An action plan on reading enhancement program is the output variable. Acquiring reading skills is dependent upon the mastery of a wide variety of reading skills.

      The input of the study included the perception of respondents on the problems that contribute to the poor comprehension of the Level 3 students and an analysis of the diagnostic test on reading passages administered in the classroom during the second term of the AY 2016-2017.

      The process included data-gathering, determining the level of comprehension and analysis and interpretation of results. The output included the proposed reading enhancement for beginner level students to improve reading proficiency.

Figure 1: Schematic Diagram of the study

INPUT	PROCESS	OUTPUT
A. Survey Questionnaire **B. Diagnostic Reading Test** 1. Noting Details 2. Inferring 3. Predicting Outcomes 4. Getting the Main Idea 5. Vocabulary Building	**A. Data Gathering Procedure** **B. Analysis and Interpretation of Data**	**Proposed Action Plan on Remedial Reading Programme**

Feedback

2.5 Research/Sampling Method Used

This study utilized the descriptive method of research which described the nature of a situation existed at the time of the study (Calmorin, 2000) using purposive sampling technique. It involved collection of data and administration of diagnostic test on reading to the target samples to find out the level of comprehension of the students. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method and it occurs when "elements selected for the sample are chosen by the judgment of the researcher. (Dudovskiy, 2016)

2.6 Respondents

The respondents of the study were the selected two batches of Level 3 Block 2 of Gulf College-Oman enrolled in the ELP and EAPSS modules during the second term of Academic Year 2016-2017.

2.7 The Data Gathering Instrument

The research instrument used in the study was a 35 – item reading comprehension diagnostic test. The test was composed of five selections. Each selection has five sets of questions of different levels namely: noting details, inferring, predicting outcomes, getting the main idea, and vocabulary building.

2.8 Research Procedure

The 35 – item test was administered to the 41 students by the researcher himself as part of the guided learning activity in reading. The purpose and importance of the test were explained to the students and instructions were given clearly to the respondents.

The questionnaire is composed of five passages having 35 questions representing the five levels of comprehension the students were given individual set of questionnaire and were asked to answer the comprehension questions which measure their abilities. The students were given one hour to answer. The questionnaires were checked and the scores were tallied using frequency and percentage and were interpreted accordingly by levels.

2.9 Scoring Procedure

The reading comprehension ability of the students was measured using the 35 – item reading test composed of five selections. This would determine the ability of the respondents to comprehend the selections given by answering the five levels of comprehension questions provided. All questions in each selection were encircled by the respondents and their scores were interpreted as follows:

Noting Details (5 items)		Inferring (10 items)	
Score	Equivalent	Score	Equivalent
4-5	High	8-10	High
2- 3	Average	4- 7	Average
0-1	Low	0-3	Low

Predicting Outcomes (5 items)		Getting the Main Idea (10 items)	
Score	Equivalent	Score	Equivalent
4-5	High	8- 10	High
2- 3	Average	4-7	Average
0-1	Low	0-3	Low

Vocabulary Building (5 items)		Over-all reading ability (35 items)	
Score	Equivalent	Score	Equivalent
4-5	High	31- 35	High
2- 3	Average	11- 30	Average
0-1	Low	0-10	Low

2.10 Statistical Treatment

Frequency and Percentage distribution were used to determine the level of the students' reading comprehension ability. Student's score were tallied and interpreted.

3. Results and Discussion

A. Level of Reading Comprehension Ability of L3 Students

Table 1 shows the achievement level of students in noting details. In noting details, students produce knowledge of what the author said. They have to decode words,

determine what each word means in a given. At this level, the learners are expected to identify the basic information and form ideas or meanings directly stated in the selection. These ideas are elicited by questions beginning with what, when, where, who, etc.

Table 1: Reading Comprehension ability of L3 Students with regards to
Noting Details

Scores	Frequency (N= 41)	Percent	Level of Achievement
8- 10	8	19.6	High
4 – 7	11	26.8	Average
0 – 3	22	53.6	Low
Total	**41**	**100**	

It is shown from the table that 53.6 percent of the students are low in noting details and 26.8 percent got an average level of achievement. Only 19.6 percent of the students got high level of achievement. This result indicates that students are poor in noting details ability the fact that questions related to this skill are basic information that elicit ideas or meaning directly mentioned in the selection.

Table 2 reveals the students reading comprehension ability in terms of inferring. Inferring or reading between the lines is a skill or ability in reading to identify what the author is said in order to derive, infer, and imply meaning from a statement. The learners are tasked to discern the implications of the passage by inference to track ideas or meanings indirectly or implicitly stated in the selection.

Table 2: Reading Comprehension ability of L3 Students with regards to
Inferring

Scores	Frequency (N=41)	Percent	Level of Achievement
4-5	6	14.6	High
2 – 3	4	9.8	Average
0 – 1	31	75.6	Low
Total	**41**	**100**	

As reflected in the table, a big percentage is shown in which 75.6 percent of the students performed low in inferring ability. This shows that the students have difficulty to comprehend ideas which are embedded between or among the lines. That also shows that they lack the ability to interpret the meanings implied in the passage.

Table 3 portrays the achievement level of students in predicting outcomes. Predicting outcomes or evaluative level refers to reading beyond the lines. In this

ability, the students give reaction, judgment and evaluation of what is written. It involves how they can distinguish the literal meaning of words from suggestions or intentions expressed in the selection. It ultimately deals with the evaluation of what is read. It lets the reader comprehend by making him analyze, compare and contrast, etc.

Table 3: Reading Comprehension ability of L3 Students with regards to
Predicting Outcomes

Scores	Frequency (N=41)	Percent	Level of Achievement
4-5	5	12.2	High
2 – 3	4	9.8	Average
0 – 1	32	78.0	Low
Total	**41**	**100**	

As reflected in Table 3, most of the students achieved low in predicting outcomes with a high percentage of 78 percent. This result shows that students" ability to make prediction and evaluation is poor. They can't make judgments on the ideas and meanings the way they are presented in the selection. Irvin, et. al (2003) says that students who are poor in predicting outcomes can't give reaction and judgment on what they are reading.

The student's creative reading ability or ability in getting the main idea is shown in table 4. Getting the Main Idea got the high level of comprehension because it needs creative talent and some practical or theoretical knowledge.

Table 4: Reading Comprehension ability of L3 Students with regards to
Getting the Main Idea

Scores	Frequency (N=41)	Percent	Level of Achievement
8-10	3	7.3	High
4 – 7	6	14.6	Average
0 – 3	32	78.0	Low
Total	**41**	**100**	

As displayed in Table 4, majority of the students achieved poorly in their creative ability or "getting the main idea" as supported with the very high percentage of 78 percent. This is similar to Tizon's study (2011) showing that *students lack the ability to create new ideas and to use what they have comprehended from the text. They could not read well beyond the printed lines and going further as to exceed the limits of knowledge and find new methods of demonstrating their thoughts and explaining them.*

Table 5 depicts the students' ability in vocabulary building. This skill refers to the skill of the student to understand key vocabulary used in the text by previewing the vocabulary before reading the text and reviewing the vocabulary during and after reading the text.

Table 5: Reading Comprehension ability of L3 Students with regards to
Vocabulary building

Scores	Frequency (N=41)	Percent	Level of Achievement
4-5	12	29.2	High
2-3	6	14.6	Average
0- 1	23	56.2	Low
Total	**41**	**100**	

As presented in Table 5, almost half of the students achieved low in vocabulary building. It can be noted that students find difficulty in identifying the meaning of the words as it was used in the context. This result is similar to, Wahiba Babaiba Medjahdi (2015) revealed that students suffer mainly from understanding vocabulary. Insufficient vocabulary leads to many obstacles in reading comprehension since lexis has a very important role for a successful reading. This implies that if the student has a large vocabulary, he will not face problems in understanding the whole reading text. Vocabulary is significant for EFL learners. It affects to their comprehension development. Calderon (2007) asserts that pre-teaching vocabulary is a key to reading comprehension development of EFL learners.

It can also be supported by Jalongo and Sobolak (2010) that there is a strong correlation between vocabulary and reading comprehension. The probability of learning a word from context increases substantially with additional occurrences of the word.

Table 6 below exhibits the Level of the reading comprehension ability of the 41 L3 students.

Table 6: Overall Level of Reading Comprehension Ability of the Students

Scores	Frequency (N=41)	Percent	Level of Achievement
31 - 35	3	7.3	High
11 - 30	4	9.8	Average
0 - 10	34	82.9	Low
Total	**41**	**100**	

As revealed in Table 6, a very high percentage of 82.9 is achieved by the students in their over- all level. It shows that students of L3 have a poor level of reading comprehension ability. This impression is best supported in Table 7 showing the summary of the students' levels of reading comprehension.

Table 7: Summary of the Reading Comprehension Ability of the Students

Achievement Level	Noting Details		Inferring		Predicting Outcomes		Getting the Main Idea		Vocabulary Building	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
High	8	19.6	6	14.6	5	12.2	3	7.3	12	29.2
Average	11	26.8	4	9.8	4	9.8	6	14.6	6	14.6
Low	22	**53.6**	31	**75.6**	32	**78.0**	32	**78.0**	23	**56.2**
Total	41	100	41	100	41	100	41	100	41	100

It is clearly shown in Table 7 that students of L3 are poor in reading and comprehension. It can be gleaned that predicting outcomes and getting the main idea are the two skills that most of the students have low level of ability with 78 percent respectively. Next in rank is inferring with 75.6 percent. Followed by vocabulary building and noting details with 56.2 percent and 53.6 percent respectively.

This shows that the students have not yet developed their higher order thinking skill. It also clearly reveals from the summary above that L3 students are struggling readers. Their comprehension skill needs to be strengthened. Judith L. Irvin, et. al 2003 says that students who are struggling readers are those who do not create mental images as they read. They can't even identify what the author says and means from the statement. Struggling readers give up when reading text is long, difficult and uninteresting.

B. Problems that contribute to poor reading comprehension of the students

Table 8 below reflects the problems that contribute to the poor comprehension of the students.

Table 8: Number and Percent Distribution of Problems that Contribute to Poor Reading Comprehension by Rank

	Problems Encountered	Number (N=41)	Percent	Rank
1	Difficulty in reading English texts.	**34**	**83**	**1**
2	Difficulty to recall important details of the text.	**27**	**65**	**4**
3	Difficulty to predict outcomes of the story.	**23**	**56**	**7**
4	Difficulty in getting the main ideas.	**25**	**61**	**5**
5	Difficulty in reading unfamiliar words in the story.	**21**	**51**	**8**
6	Inadequate knowledge of English vocabulary words.	**24**	**59**	**6**
7	Lack of interest in reading.	**15**	**37**	**10**
8	Vocabulary words used in the text are too difficult.	**31**	**75**	**2**
9	Selections are too long.	**29**	**71**	**3**
10	Troubles to visualize the main thought of the text.	7	17	11
11	Lack of focus when reading.	5	12	12
12	Lose track of what line should read next	**19**	**46**	**9**

Table 8 highlighted the top 10 problems that contributed the poor reading comprehension of the students. It can be noted from the table that 83 percent of the students has difficulty in reading English text. It indicates that almost all the students are not used to read passages written in English which need extra attention.

Another factor that contribute to the poor comprehension of the students include: vocabulary words used in the text are too difficult (75%), selections are too long (71%), difficulty to recall important details of the text (65%), difficulty in getting the main ideas (61%), inadequate knowledge of English vocabulary words (59%), difficulty to predict outcomes of the story (56%), difficulty in reading unfamiliar words in the story (51%), lose track of what line should read next (46%), and lack of interest in reading (37%).

It implies that 83 percent of the L3 students are struggling readers. This is one of the challenges in teaching English to speakers of other language. Students who are considered struggling are those readers typically read one or more years below their current level but do not have an identified learning disability of any kind. They are often perceived as lacking the skills other students possess and use with little difficulty such as analyzing information, defining vocabulary words, or applying comprehension strategies. (Irvin, et al, 2003)

These can be a contributory factor in their low level of reading comprehension. Ability to remember details of what has been read and ability to predict outcomes and get ideas from the text would not be a problem if students are able to read in English and understand the passage being read through the English vocabularies used in the selection. Readers, according to Gough, begin by translating the parts of written language into speech sounds, and then piece the sounds together to form individual words, and then piece the words together to arrive at an understanding of the author's written message (Gough (1972).

As part of the community of practice (CoP), this challenge can be addressed through an intervention program to help struggling readers.

3. Intervention to develop or enhance poor comprehension

Since poor comprehension is identified, reading remediation program is designed to help struggling readers learn the skills they lack so they can become competent readers. If students' reading skills improve, they will have greater success throughout their academic career and into adulthood, so effective reading programs are vital. Research supports the effectiveness of remedial reading programs that incorporate certain elements. Beyond this, this program helps to make students more confident, independent, and efficient readers. The program is designed to improve reading skills by teaching students more vocabulary, how to summarize effectively, and how to increase speed of reading and reading comprehension.

Valencia and Buly (2004) identified a group of students exhibited a range of difficulties when it comes to reading. According to them, some students had difficulty

with both decoding and comprehension (these students were referred to as "struggling word callers"), some students could decode with ease but had difficulty with comprehension ("automatic word callers"), and some students struggled with decoding but not with comprehension ("word stumblers"). They also added that other students who struggled with fluency and decoding ("slow comprehenders") or fluency and comprehension ("slow word callers"), and still other students who had extreme difficulty with decoding, comprehension, and fluency ("disabled readers").

In their argument, students would benefit from different types of reading instruction to become better readers. Because students who struggle with reading do so for different reasons, reading interventions must be tailored to meet the specific, but always complex, needs of individual students. This intervention can be a priority to those struggling readers. Below is the action plan tailored to the Level 3 struggling readers:

4. Proposed Action Plan on Reading Intervention (For Struggling Readers)

Phase	Goals And Objectives	Learning Activities	Person Involved	Resources Needed	Time Frame	Success Indicator
1. Identification (Struggling Readers) **A. Identification of students at risk in reading**	to identify students whose reading proficiency is below the expected learning outcomes.	Reading formative exam	Reading tutor	Formative Assessment Questionnaire	Mock Exam	Student's level of acceptance
2. Implementation (Reading Intervention) **A. Academic Advising**	to provide academic advising support to students at risk in reading	Pastoral support	Academic Adviser	Academic Advising Hour	One week	Level of support by the Academic Adviser
B. Remedial Reading	1. to conduct remedial classes in reading	Remedial classes in reading focusing on reading with understanding using SQ3R strategy • peer tutoring • group story mapping (based on Schema Theory) • Reconciled reading • story grammar • Story telling • Q & A	Remedial reading teacher	Various reading materials	Four Weeks	Effectiveness remedial teacher and cooperation of students
	2. to re-assess the reading ability of the students by giving pre- and post-test in reading	Assessment of student's reading ability/level	Remedial reading teacher/ Reading Tutor	Assessment papers (Reading and Comprehension)	Two days	Progression Report

	comprehension					
	3. to increase the reading proficiency of students	Reading Intervention using word game	Remedial Reading teacher/ Reading tutor	IPTV, Word Puzzle Chart	Two weeks	Maximum level of participation by students
	4. to encourage students to read reading materials in English	Reading at home (as a habit)	Self-discipline, guidance of the elders	Books, newspapers, magazines, tabloids, and other reading materials	Daily/ weekly	Level of interest in reading
3. Evaluation and Monitoring	to evaluate the improvement of the student's reading ability and or proficiency	Evaluation of reading level of the students	Reading Tutor	Summative Assessment Questionnaire in Reading	One day (as per Final Exam Timetable)	**Student's Final Mark (IELTS 6.0)**

The above action plan can be carried out in the reading class by the reading tutor or it can be one of the programs to be offered by the Centre for Languages and Cultural Studies. This reading intervention can be of help to those struggling readers to prepare them for their further studies in the next level.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

In light of the findings, the researcher found out that one of the challenges in teaching English as a foreign language to EFL learners is the difficulty of students to read and understand what they have read. The students' higher order thinking skill as shown in the result needs to be developed. It is also concluded that 83 percent of the respondents are struggling readers. Their high comprehension ability needs to be reinforced as they do not perform well in answering the questions relative to noting details, inferring, predicting outcomes, getting the main idea, and vocabulary building.

It is therefore recommended that module tutors of reading element should make sure that students are ready to read as far as reading ability is concerned before giving them reading passages in the classroom which are IELTS based related reading texts. The Centre for Capacity Building (COB) should come up with an action plan on reading intervention to address the issue as part of the community of practice (CoP) of Gulf College. Creation of the English language club can also be done to provide opportunities for students whose level of English language skills is low for them to gain confidence that learning English is fun and easy through various activities that would enhance their oral and written communication.

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