Assessing the Reading Skills of the Saudi Elementary Stage EFL Learners

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The purpose of this research was to investigate the current practices of assessing L2 reading skills of Saudi EFL elementary stage learners. The research also attempted to offer more effective assessment tools of L2 reading skills than the current ones. For this purpose, a sample of (30) elementary stage EFL classes were observed, and (15) teachers of these classes were interviewed. The collected data were recorded, organized, coded, analyzed, and interpreted qualitatively. The findings revealed that most EFL learners and their instructors practice learning/teaching L2 reading skills driven by exams, focus more on bottom-up approach, and committed to the assigned reading materials ignoring extracurricular ones. Almost all the observations and interviewees' responses indicated that the assessment measures are affected by the poor learning/teaching practices of the L2 reading skills. It was implied that in order to improve the assessment tools of the L2 reading skills, the teaching practices must be improved first.

INTRODUCTION

Assessing reading ability in one's first language (L1) is inherently challenging and is even more so in a second language (L2) (Alderson et al., 2015, as cited in Brevik et al., 2016). L2 reading involves not only knowledge of the L2 but also intersects with one's L1 literacy (Koda, 2007). In a literate world, reading is a vital part of learning a language. Educators need to understand the importance of L2 reading to impart this understanding to their students. Simply through reading, L2 learners can improve their overall language performance; the more they read, the more learners are exposed to intra- and inter-sentential consistency. Reading can also increase vocabulary, text familiarity, self-esteem, and self-confidence, enhancing operational and cognitive processes. Educators should also teach L2 learners the importance of improving their reading skills beyond simply storing and recalling information. Good readers should be expected to play an active role by interacting with a text and using their experience, skills, and knowledge to draw authentic meaning from the text.

However, these ideal perspectives regarding addressing the reading abilities of EFL learners remain more theoretical than realistic until solid effective teaching practices and valid assessment measures take place. In practice, many countries have invested in L2 support to achieve political, educational, scientific, and economic goals; nevertheless, studies have indicated that L2 English learning, especially reading, often falls below expectations (Al-Karroud, 2005; Alshammari & Ahmed, 2019; Alshammari, 2013). Middle Eastern countries, in general, and Saudi Arabia, in particular, are all not an exception. For example, these countries have shown a discrepancy between national and international (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS) assessment of L2 proficiency. In fact, poor L2 reading performance in Saudi classrooms can be attributed to several reasons. Most students often read so that they can only pass exams because they lack authentic or attractive reading tasks. The reading materials they are exposed to are often so similar that they fail to challenge learners with new experiences, structures, and ideas. Furthermore, learners prefer memorizing reading tasks for exams to acquiring higher-order thinking skills including comprehension and critical thinking when dealing with new reading texts. Consequently, the current L2 reading assessment methods involve training students, indirectly and unconsciously, to be passive learners.

To address this problem, relevant studies must reconsider the assessment tools implemented in L2 classrooms.

Therefore, this study explored the possible tools that could be used to assess the English reading skills of EFL students in the Saudi context. In order to achieve this purpose, two research questions were attempted:

1. How is L2 reading currently assessed in Saudi elementary schools?
2. What could improve reading assessment at this stage?

BACKGROUND

L2 reading assessment has received greater attention recently, especially in terms of addressing gaps between theory and practice (Grabe, 2009). Reading as a major language skill should be assessed through valid and reliable tools to produce more accurate definitions of good and poor readers. Certain factors such as time given to complete a reading task should be, further, investigated and validated to improve L2 reading assessment measures. In addition, Cummins' (1979) linguistic threshold hypothesis indicated that a certain level of L1 knowledge could be positively transferred to benefit L2 learning. Such an advantage requires sufficient L2 knowledge to determine and describe what language level is needed for a task.

Reading involves drawing meaning from smaller units of a text, such as phonemes, morphemes, words, and grammatical recognition (Droop & Verhoeven, 2003). The reader must correctly connect sound and written symbols. Readers can extract the meaning of a text by repeating this process, thereby expanding meaning construction from smaller units to the whole text.

The nature of reading and creating meaning from a text is an interactive process between a reader's knowledge and the text itself. Areas of knowledge might include content, linguistics, and strategies for processing the text (Alderson, 2000; Bernhardt, 2011; Grabe, 2009). A mixture of the two former modules concluded with the interactive one. Interactive reading is when the meaning is created through the interaction between low-level (bottom-up) and higher-level (top-down) processes (Grabe, 2009; Koda, 2005). Alderson (2000) argued that poor readers rely too heavily on word-level (intra-sentential) rather than text-level (inter-sentential) information, whereas good readers have the opposite focus. Good readers can compensate for not knowing words, for example, by using available clues to the meaning (p. 41). When all reading elements are interactively processed, successful readers actively consult available resources to compensate for any weaknesses during reading (Stanovich, 1980).

Alshammari (2013) investigated how different time constraints affected L2 comprehension of an authentic reading task from the reading section of the TOEFL IBT. Three groups were given different times to complete the reading section: limited, extended, and unlimited time. The extended time group showed improved overall reading performance.

More recently, Alshammari and Ahmed (2019), in a similar context, exposed a sample of Saudi EFL learners to an English novel, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*. Learners who were given reading instruction over a span of three months improved their reading skills significantly. This study also concluded that Saudi EFL learners were more likely to view reading as the ability to decode a text. It was implied that redefining reading skills for EFL learners in a sense of being more connected to higher cognitive skills would help them interact and construct meaning from context. Unfortunately, it has been observed that most L2 reading classes tend to focus on storing and extracting information, while assessment measures indirectly encourage these practices by using familiar reading tasks for learners ignoring the importance of promoting their reading abilities and higher-order thinking skills. As a result, these traditional assessment methods failed to assess and encourage learners to deal with L2 reading skills appropriately and effectively since they mostly tend to measure their memorization ability instead.

METHOD

This qualitative study collected in-depth data about issues that could affect recurring L2 reading assessment. To this end, two instruments were employed: The first is an observation scale that covered 30 classes, and the second is an interview with 15 English instructors of the observed classes. Gathered data were recorded, transcribed, organized, coded, and analyzed qualitatively.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings under two categories: classroom observation themes and instructor interviews.

Classroom Observations

Learner's role

The analysis of the observations indicated that most participants did not engage in active learning/reading practices. It has also been found that almost all participants remained silent for most of class time, with few exceptions ($M = 3$). Further, it was observed that most learners were likely to focus solely on materials that would be included in the exam. This trend was evident in students' questions to their instructors regarding whether a reading task they were exposed to in class would be included in the follow-up exams. Interviewee 4 reported that "*if the task was not included on the exams, students would pay less attention to, if not at all*." This comment was supported by many other observations indicating that learners often lost interest in or failed to pay attention to reading texts that might not be beneficial for them in the assessment process. It was also found that most, if not all, classes were administered using students' L1 with little English. The observation analysis also revealed that regardless of their level, students judged good readers as those whose loud reading seemed to be properly pronounced, and their focus was more on words than sentences. Thus, learners in the 30 observed classes, generally, did not display significant knowledge of reading strategies.

Teacher's role

Most of the teachers were observed using an instructor-centered approach for reading tasks and activities. Only one teacher out of 15 implemented peer review and collaborative learning methods. Most teachers also translated new English vocabulary into Arabic (L1) for their students.

Lack of extracurricular activities

All instructors reported that they could not bring language materials into class from outside the assigned textbooks. Therefore, the observed extracurricular activities merely articulated the official materials in different ways. For example, one teacher used a PowerPoint presentation to display the content of the assigned textbook at a time an extra-curricular reading text could be used instead.

Extremely poor decoding

The observation indicated that most students could hardly pronounce common and familiar English words, such as "uncle," "grandfather," and "mother," and so on as shown below:
1. father /ˈfɑ·ðər/ was pronounced /ˈfɑ·ðɑr/ or /ˈfə·ðər/.
2. mother /ˈmʌð·ər/ was pronounced /ˈməð·ər/ or /ˈmɑð·ər/.
3. uncle /ˈʌŋ·kəl/ was pronounced /ˈjun·kəl/ or /ˈɑŋ·kil/.

Interviews

The interview findings are organized below by questions:

1. How do you usually assess reading ability?

The majority of instructors reported that they employed similar assessment methods, primarily by asking learners to read aloud. They also sometimes asked for the meaning of words expecting students to respond in their mother tongue. Part of the reading assessment measures was based on in-class activities that involved writing responses to questions listed in the textbook. Few routinely asked students to do homework, which was similar to what was usually given in class, such as limited-response questions including fill-in-the-blank tasks. Teachers 2 and 7 reported a complete absence of reading strategies. Some teachers doubted their understanding of what reading ability was. They said reading ability should be a moving object from smaller to larger, and their mission was to give students basic knowledge of English letters, sounds, and low-level vocabulary. Teacher 5 said, "I think learners only need to get the basic sounds and main introductory words in English."

2. What is the nature of the reading ability that you usually assess?

Most instructors defined reading ability as the ability to correctly pronounce the words in a written text. They justified this understanding by saying that learners were not expected to read longer passages, merely pronounce smaller texts, and know the meaning of some words.

3. Do you include any reading materials other than the ones included in the textbook?

Most participants reported that *they were not expected to do so,* adding that *"if there was any sort of such an external material, it should be based on the ones included in textbooks"*. Thus, any additional materials that were not included in textbooks should be only a smart reformulation of what was in textbooks.

4. Do you think you prepare students to pass exams or to be good readers?

Teacher 13 reported, "*Passing an exam is the first step toward being good readers.*" Teachers 4, 13, and 14 stated, "*Exams are the valid method we use to evaluate the reading ability of students and we cannot redirect our attention from it to achieve unattainable goals such as preparing them to be good readers.*" Teacher 9 said, "*I argue that most of my students are poor readers in the L1, so how would it be possible to make them good L2 readers?*"

5. What would you recommend to improve L2 reading ability?

Teachers agreed they needed some degree of freedom in creating their course syllabus. They were currently required to match the approved course plan regardless of the individual differences between their students that policymakers might not know about. As English instructors, they were expected to cover a number of lessons in a certain class time, and there would be English advisors evaluating their progress. A frequently mentioned recommendation was to reduce the number of students in each class to less than 20 because teachers felt unable to monitor the progress of all students.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current assessment of L2 reading skills in Saudi Arabia focuses on enhancing learner's capacity to store and recall information for exams. This orientation has failed to address authentic reading tasks or improve learners' reading comprehension skills. Unfortunately, some instructors associated good readers only with the high scores they obtained in shallow reading assessments, and students were mostly trained on reading materials expected to be on their exams. It is, thus, no wonder that many Saudi EFL learners have done poorly on reading proficiency exams such as the TOEFL since such exams expose learners to unseen reading materials and require them to use different reading skills and strategies.

The findings of this research revealed that there are many parties and complicated factors that play a crucial role in improving or hindering the Saudi EFL learners' acquisition of reading skills. These factors are mostly interrelated and can hardly be separated, broken down, and resolved individually. The teaching process of L2 reading is apparently driven by exams, which occupy the main priority and target for learners who have unlikely been exposed to L2 reading for learning

higher skills or enjoyment, for instance. However, learners especially those of the elementary stage are, in fact, the victims of poor teaching practices, out of date policymakers' orientation and inappropriate L2 reading materials. Therefore, the assessment process of L2 reading is merely a reflection of the current poor educational status which still focuses mainly on bottom-up readings at the elementary stage. Teachers also should encourage extracurricular reading practices amongst their students. They should also help them acquire reading as a habit rather than just an activity preparing them to pass exams. Curriculum designers and policymakers must also raise teachers' and learners' awareness regarding the importance of effective L2 reading skills through providing them with attractive curriculum and encouraging policies.

Once these aspects are addressed appropriately and effectively, the assessment of the EFL learners' reading skills would be promoted up to the standards assisting learners to develop their thinking skills positively. However, keeping asking students to read aloud, fill-in-gaps, responding to limited response questions and so on would not be helpful, and would even underestimate learners' reading capacities. Instructors must use unseen reading passages, authentic reading tasks, and higher-order thinking evaluations of reading tasks so that students can appreciate the L2 readings. A good example and implication of proposed L2 reading strategies represents in asking elementary students to practice reading short attractive stories and to evaluate these texts in a reading project in terms of layout, style, and so on that extends for a month. Paying attention to the time given to students is vital for their learning L2 reading. Doing so could help distinguish good from poor readers. This is supported by Grabe (2009), Koda (2005), Stanovich (1980), Alshammari and Ahmed (2019), and Alshammari (2013) who all called for offering L2 learners attractive reading texts along sufficient span of time so that they can interact with them efficiently. Generally speaking, in order to improve the assessment tools of L2 reading skills, various parties including teachers, curriculum designers, policymakers and learners should improve the teaching/learning practices first.

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