Developing Strategic Reading Skills Among University Students Of Arabic As A Foreign Language In Malaysia

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Abstract: Many learners of Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL) in Malaysia lack the necessary skills and strategies to comprehend Arabic texts. It is important, thus, for Malaysian AFL learners to know how to read skilfully and to be able to deal with an Arabic text independently. Therefore, this study aims to explore the Malaysian AFL learners' major problems in reading Arabic texts and determine the appropriate set of design principles for effective strategic reading. The study employed a qualitative approach in which semi-structured interviews were conducted. The problems of AFL learners in reading were examined from a teaching perspective. The interview participants consist of a purposively selected sample of five Arabic language experts from the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). The study found that the AFL learners' approach towards Arabic reading is similar to those described in the previous studies as poor comprehension and lack of reading skills. Based on these findings, design principles for effective strategic reading were developed. These design principles represent a significant contribution to the development of Arabic reading, particularly in the Malaysian context.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Improving reading instruction in the AFL context is recognized as one of the serious concerns of instructors in the teaching and learning of Arabic language (Brustad, 2006). Research shows that reading ability is more important compared to other language skills (Ryding & Johnson, 2003; Krashen, 2004; Alfassi, 2004). Thus, accomplishing the reading ability is paramount as reading provides language learners with a solid background to develop language proficiency (Ṭuᶜaymah, 1989; Krashen, 2004). Reading is also seen as the source of language learners' vocabulary development, spelling competency, writing ability, as well as syntactic knowledge (Krashen, 2000). Extensive and skilful reading in a foreign language could help learners to develop proficiency of the target language (Krashen, 2000; Grabe, 2009). More emphasis is placed on the improvement of learners' reading abilities compared to other language skills (Ryding & Johnson, 2003; Kadah, 2005). Despite the significance of reading ability in the Arabic language learning, previous studies revealed that most AFL learners have negative attitudes toward Arabic reading (Mustapha, Mustapha, & Chik, 2006; Mohd Noor, 2009), low level of Arabic reading comprehension (Abdul Malek, 1996; Abdul Sattar, 2000; Abdullah, 2006), and poor reading comprehension (Hussin, 2003; Mustapha, Mustapha, & Daud, 2009; Mustapha, 2011).

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Although these studies were carried out in particular contexts that limit the findings to be generalized, they still offer important insights into the notion that many AFL learners in Malaysia have poor reading performance. Therefore, the achievement of reading abilities represents an important aspect of language proficiency, particularly for students of Islamic studies. Skilful reading of Arabic text is, therefore, paramount among AFL learners in Malaysia. A few studies were conducted to determine the level of comprehension among AFL learners (e.g., Abdul Malek, 1996; Abdul Sattar, 2000; Abdullah, 2006; Mustapha, 2011; Musa, Ahmad, & Embi, 1999; Sweedan, 2004). Most of these studies demonstrate that the teaching reading in the Arabic classroom has not focused on the improvement of the necessary reading abilities and strategies. It has been established that lessons in the AFL classroom "reflect a primary focus on grammar as the bedrock for developing proficiency in Arabic" (Al-Batal, 2006, p. 332). Instructors of Arabic language often devote most of their time interpreting texts instead of the teaching the reading abilities and skills. These practices demonstrate that less consideration is given to the aspects of strategic reading and comprehension. Since many AFL learners have spent years of education without acquiring the basic skills for reading comprehension, researchers have suggested that there is a need for teachers of Arabic language to design and implement operational methods of instruction in the teaching of Arabic reading (Rouyan, Ahmed, Mustapha, & Abu Bakar, 2009; Rouyan, Ahmed, Ahmad, Zainuddin, & Abu Bakar, 2010). There is an inadequacy of research focusing on the AFL learners' reading abilities (Alosh, 1997; Brustad, 2006), and hence research on strategic reading in the Arabic classroom could be of great significance (Brustad, 2006). Instructors of Arabic language have not regarded the development of strategic reading as important, and therefore, many AFL learners do not possess the basic skills and strategies for the comprehension of Arabic texts (Hussin, 2003; Mustapha et al., 2009; Mustapha, 2011). The traditional approach employed by teachers has, perhaps, influence the students to become passive readers who lack the necessary abilities to read Arabic texts for comprehension. To address the abovementioned problems, this study aims to develop appropriate design

principles for AFL reading instructions in the Malaysian context. Specifically, this study aims to explore the AFL learners' problems in the comprehension of Arabic texts and determine the appropriate design principles for strategic reading. Therefore, this study is concerned with the development of Arabic reading comprehension toward a more process-oriented approach. Specifically, the following questions were raised.

Q:1 What are the Malaysian AFL learners' major problems in reading Arabic texts which hinder their comprehension of Arabic texts effectively?

Q:2 What is the appropriate set of design principles for effective strategic reading instruction?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies that examined Malay AFL learners' use of reading strategies suggest that the students lack reading strategies to cope with target language texts (Hussin, 2003; Mustapha, 2011; Mustapha et al., 2009; Abdullahi, Rouyan, Almetairi, & Hassan, 2020; Essa, Hassan, & Ramlee, 2020). Besides, several empirical studies which investigated the level of reading comprehension of Malay AFL learners suggested that many of these learners lack effective reading comprehension skills despite six years of secondary Arabic education (Abdul Sattar, 2000; Sweedan, 2004; Abdullah, 2006; Mustapha et al., 2009; Mustapha, 2011). Similarly, some studies found that despite many years of exposure to the Arabic language, many AFL learners still struggle with reading comprehension (Musa et al., 1999; Abdul Sattar, 2000; Nik Yusoff, & Abdul Ghani, 2002; Nordin, 2006). Malay AFL learners' unsatisfying performance in reading might have stemmed from poor reading skills. However, despite the AFL learners' setbacks in reading comprehension, not many studies have addressed AFL learners' reading skills, or more specifically, their use of reading comprehension strategies in the reading of Arabic texts. Alhaqbani and Riazi (2012) assert that "there is a paucity of research into the strategies employed in reading Arabic as L2, especially in academic contexts" (p. 232). Alhaqbani and Riazi (2012) investigated AFL students' awareness of reading strategy when reading Arabic academic texts. The participants in the study were 122 undergraduate students at King Saud University in Saudi Arabia. Using a 30-item Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002), they found that students perceived problem-solving reading strategies to be more useful than global and support strategies. Learners' preference for text-driven problem-solving strategies over global and support strategies suggests that the students gave more attention to the text and vocabulary while reading. Using a reading comprehension test and interviews, Hussin (2003) compared the reading strategies used by six AFL students divided into three groups: good, average, and poor. The study found that good readers demonstrated more use of reading strategies than average and poor readers. This finding has ready support across the literature. Hussin's findings also supported that Malay AFL learners often resort to strategies that do not require much reasoning and inferential skills. The most popular strategies found among the participants were 'word meaning', 'literal comprehension' and 'forming judgment' strategies. Conversely, as expected, strategies that demand more thinking and reasoning such as 'drawing inferences from single and multiple strings' and 'interpretation of metaphors' were found to be less popular strategies. Malay AFL learners' prime preference for less interpretive and inferential strategies

was also demonstrated by findings of some studies (Rouyan, 2004; Alhaqbani & Riazi, 2012). Most students are better at comprehending Arabic texts at 'lexical' (the meaning of a word in isolation) and 'literal' (meaning obtained directly by reference to a phrase or a sentence in the text) levels, but lack skills in comprehending texts that require higher-level interpretive processes to infer the meaning of 'textual' and 'inferential' words. It is a common misconception that the judgment strategy is merely about guessing, discounting the real notion of the guessing strategy (Ahmad & Asraf, 2004). Besides, Mustapha et al. (2009) found that male participants demonstrated higher and better usage of strategies compared to their female counterparts. Accordingly, they were able to accomplish their reading task in a shorter time than the female learners. This supports the notion that effective usage of strategies can accelerate reading comprehension. Female participants, in contrast, started reading without any purpose in mind. Focusing on decoding single words, they seldom looked ahead or back in the text to monitor and improve comprehension (Mustapha et al., 2009). Furthermore, Mustapha (2011) stressed the importance of strategic reading amongst for AFL learners. Through a think-aloud protocol involving 14 Malay AFL learners, Mustapha found that all learners, both proficient and less proficient, were mainly engaged in word by word translation in their effort to understand the whole text. Their preoccupation with vocabulary prevented them from considering the text beyond sentence level, which resulted in their inability to understand paragraphs in their entirety and concerning the main theme. Previous research shows that learners' comprehension was also confounded by many language deficits such as poor vocabulary and relevant syntactical and morphological knowledge (e.g. Alhaqbani & Riazi, 2012; Mustapha et al., 2009; Hussin, 2003; Qrqez & Ab Rashid, 2017). They were limited to compensatory strategies such as using context to guess the meaning or to make judgments. Besides, Mustapha's (2011) research indicates that instruction on metacognition is essential in enhancing AFL learners' reading comprehension. Through an experimental approach, Abdul Razak (2008) focused on strategic instruction for Malay AFL readers. The study suggested that memory improving technique not only helps students in acquiring vocabulary more easily but also develops the students' motivation in learning Arabic vocabulary. Abdul Razak's study provided empirical evidence that strategic instruction does pose positive effects on Malay AFL learners. In sum, previous studies found that students lack reading strategies to cope with target language texts despite many years of pre-university studies. Besides, a few studies have addressed AFL learners' reading skills (Hussin, 2003; Abdul Razak, 2008; Mustapha, 2011; Mustapha et al., 2009) and none of the previous studies focused on designing and developing a module for Arabic strategic reading using SRI, particularly in the Malaysian AFL context.

2.1 Theoretical Approach

Interestingly, one of the recent trends in strategy instruction research is the increased emphasis on translating 'research-based' strategy instruction into 'workable, learning-centered' interventions for classroom practices (Paris & Paris, 2001; Lau, 2006). It is based on this premise that a Design and Development Research (DDR) approach was adopted to frame the design and development of strategic reading for AFL

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learners. One of the key arguments on research within the educational setting is that it focuses on educational 'problems' rather than on 'solutions' (Alias, 2007). DDR approach is perceived as a systematic study focusing on designing and developing educational interventions, such as teaching-learning strategies as solutions to educational problems (Plomp, 2009, p. 9). Because of the "lack of relevance of much educational research for educational practice" (Plomp, 2009, p. 9), the need for a research approach that offers solutions for complex problems in educational practice has been promoted by researchers in various education domains. The Design-Based Research Collective (2003) claims that educational research is often "divorced from the problems and issues of everyday practice – a split that results in a credibility gap and creates a need for new research approaches that speak directly to problems of practice and that lead to the development of 'usable knowledge" (p. 5). Van den Akker (1999) asserts that an important reason for DDR stems from the complex nature of worldwide educational reforms. The basic assumption behind the conduct of this research is that 'what' and 'how' to read should go hand in hand so that students not only understand 'what' they are reading but also know 'how' to understand the text independently. Besides, the present educational system in Malaysia—being exam-oriented—is focused more on summative evaluation rather than formative, thus teachers are used to spoon-feeding the students. Hence, this study proposes that undertaking a research design aimed at developing a solution to a problem is far better than conducting descriptive studies that compare methods. Adopting DDR is regarded as appropriate and even highly recommended when "the problem facing learning and teaching is substantial and daunting how-to-do guidelines for addressing the problem are unavailable" (Kelly, 2009, p. 75). Hence, this research aims to design and develop a practical research-based instructional module on strategic Arabic reading as a proposed solution to help AFL undergraduates develop a more strategic approach to interacting with Arabic texts. The module, which is designed based on a synthesis of theories on Strategic Reading Instruction (SRI) and relevant literature, exemplifies strategic reading lessons that provide a step-by-step guide for instructors of Arabic on how to teach strategic reading to learners of Arabic.

3 METHODOLOGY

While it is anticipated that the provision of SRI training will help AFL learners comprehend Arabic texts better, the main focus of this study is to conceptualize 'guiding principles' for SRI and to identify ways that AFL instructors may operationalize them. This is an exploratory study in which AFL learners' problem in reading was examined. Accordingly, provided that practitioners may have deep insights into a problem, the problem is defined in close collaboration with practitioners. The problems of AFL learners in reading were examined from both the learning and the teaching aspects. The analysis began with an extensive literature review of the problem. The literature was mainly interrogated to draft the key design principles. One-to-one interviews with five experts in the field of Arabic language learning strategy research were conducted to gain insights of practitioners regarding AFL learners' problems and strategy use in Arabic. It was decided that the best form of solution to tackle the AFL learners' reading problem was through the provision of a more strategic approach towards the teaching of Arabic reading. Thus, a strategic reading instruction

environment underpinned by themes identified and explored in the literature and interviews of experts was designed. 3.1 ParticipantsIn this research, five experts were selected and interviewed based on the objectives of this study and their availability as well as willingness to participate (Alias, 2007). Given that this developmental research employed mainly a qualitative mode of inquiry, the number of participants involved in this research is relatively small (Patton, 2002). All the participants were PhD holders and lecturers from five local universities. For interviews, the five experts were coded as E1, E2, E3, E4, and E5 throughout the process. Only those who "have had experiences relating to the phenomenon" under investigation (Kruger, 1988, p. 150) were selected as participants.

3.1 Validity and Reliability

Every qualitative study must consider validity and reliability (Golafshani, 2003; Patton, 2002). In this research, internal validity was enhanced through the triangulation of data from different sources of data from experts and AFL learners (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For 'external validity', several techniques such as a thick and rich description of the learning environment and an extensive literature review assisted in enhancing the level of external validity (Alias, 2007). On the other hand, reliability is the degree of dependability or consistency that the instrument or procedure demonstrates, suggesting that the same thing is repeated or recurred under similar situations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Neuman, 2003). In this research, reliability refers to how accurate the research methods and the techniques used to produce data. Hence, a detailed description of how the data were collected, the procedures documented, and the categories derived is provided throughout the research. Member checking was done by obtaining confirmatory feedbacks from the informants themselves (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Guba, 1981).

4 FINDINGS

The analysis was set out to obtain a snapshot of AFL learners' reading problems and a proper design for solutions. RQ1 asks "What are the Malaysian AFL learners' major problems in reading Arabic texts which hinder their comprehension of Arabic texts effectively?". The main sources of input for this particular question came from an intensive review of the literature and interviews with experts. All five lecturers interviewed in this study expressed deep concern regarding students' lack of fundamental ability to comprehend Arabic texts. A prominent theme that emerged across the interviews regarding AFL learners' approach in reading Arabic texts is "learners' inability to make sense of what is being read". Respondents E1, E3, and E5 stated that AFL learners tend to read Arabic texts in a myopic manner, where they struggle to translate every single word in the text, thus preventing them from reading for meaning. This finding is in line with what was partly revealed by the literature. E5 explained that some AFL learners believe that reading is synonymous with decoding and pronunciation of isolated words, regardless of whether they process text orally or silently. E1 stressed that the reason for learners' linear processing is their preoccupation with the demands of finishing certain reading tasks such as answering comprehension questions. This approach to reading results in learners being unable to understand paragraphs in their entirety. This approach also results in their inability to make inferences, identify referent pronouns, use context clues,

monitor comprehension, repair comprehension or vary strategy to a purpose. An overview of the learners' major problems in Arabic reading from both the literature and the experts' interview is presented in Table 1.
Generally, experts' perceptions of AFL learners' approach towards Arabic reading resemble the characteristics of Malay

TABLE 1
AFL LEARNERS' MAJOR PROBLEMS IN READING

Learners' major problems in Arabic text comprehension	Source of findings	Supporting researchers/authors
Often pursue finishing the task as a primary objective	Mustapha (2011) E1, E3, E4	Brustad (2006), Abdullahi et al. (2020)
Have misconceptions about reading	E1, E2, E3, E4, E5	Farrel (2002), Nuttall (2005)
Focus on decoding single words earners thus fail to link ideas across passages	E1, E2, E3, E4, E5	Farrel (2002), Nuttall (2005)
Lack of awareness of how they think when they read, thus are not aware when their comprehension breaks down	Mustapha (2011), Hussin (2003), E1, E2, E3, E4, E5	Brustad (2006), Nambiar-Gopal (2002)
Most students are not aware that they can employ certain strategies to help them in the construction of meaning and in solving comprehension problems	Hussin (2003), Mustapha et al. (2009), Mustapha (2011), E1, E2, E3, E5	Harvey & Goudvis (2000), Cohen (2003), Essa et al. (2020)
Some students are aware of certain strategies but they have not developed the actual skill of using such strategies	Hussin (2003), Mustapha et al. (2009), Mustapha (2011), E1, E2, E3, E4, E5	Adler (2001), DeCorte et al. (2001), Duke & Pearson (2002), Chamot (2005) Abu Bakar (2008)
Difficulties in reading are likely to derive from a variety of cognitive deficits such as: Weakness in understanding vocabularies and; Failure to parse syntax correctly: ○ Having difficulty making inferences regardless of prior knowledge ○ Lacking ability to identify referent pronouns ○ Lacking skills to use context clues, especially when abstract thinking is involved	Hussin (2003), Brustad (2006), Mustapha (2011), E1, E2, E4, E5	

AFL readers as described in the previous studies (Musa et al., 1999; Hussin, 2003; Mustapha et al., 2009; Mustapha, 2011). Logically, the characteristics of Malay AFL readers as perceived by these experts and as documented in the literature are more or less similar to the characteristics of poor comprehenders or less skilled readers as noted by studies in other language contexts (e.g. Maarof & Yaacob, 2011; Zare & Othman, 2013). Less skilled readers of different languages and across different cultures generally appear to share a number of similar characteristics. Thus, it is not surprising that

the characteristics of Malay AFL learners gathered from the analysis parallel those of less-skilled readers as documented in the literature. RQ2 asks "What is the appropriate set of design principles for effective strategic reading instruction?" Design principles, design guidelines, and design rules are alternative terms used to describe the rules of thumb to help with the design process (Alias, 2007). This section suggests seven general recommendations for the SRI design principles. These recommendations were compiled based on suggestions drawn from the experts' interviews and literature on strategic instruction. They are offered in the spirit of what Stenhouse (1975) called 'provisional specifications'. Therefore, the guidelines are intended to provide instructors with a basis for guidance and reflection and not as a set of prescriptions or proscriptions about how to teach strategic reading. Table 2 provides a summary of the design principles proposed for the operationalization of an effective SRI.

TABLE 2
DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR STRATEGIC READING

Principles	Elaboration of Principles
Promote strategic reading	○ Make learners aware of the purpose for reading (to construct the meaning of texts) ○ Create awareness on the importance of monitoring the construction of meaning ○ Encourage students to adopt a multitude of strategies that can help them construct meaning
Expose a wide range of different strategies	○ Identify, activate and enhance learners' currently used strategies ○ Create awareness on the diversity of reading strategies and help students notice how these strategies intersect and work in conjunction with one another ○ Help learners select appropriate reading strategies appropriate for the text
Develop metacognition	Emphasize on monitoring strategies so that learners are aware of any comprehension breakdown, by helping learners to: ○ Plan which strategies to use; ○ Monitor use of strategies in the construction of meaning; ○ Use appropriate strategies in solving comprehension problems; ○ Assess use of strategies.
Provide direct, explicit instruction of processes	○ Explain five metacognitive elements of strategies introduced (what, how-to-use, why, when and where, and evaluation) ○ Provide access to expert performances and the modeling of

It is imperative to note that the presentation of the design guidelines does not suggest that these characterizations are finite and fixed. Nevertheless, the integrated nature of the elements suggests that these characteristics reflect the essence of successful SRI. Removal of any element would not necessarily disable the SRI but would somehow make the operationalization of other elements more challenging. In sum, the seven broad principles, when combined, facilitate the critical

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elements of SRI to be operationalized.

4 DISCUSSION

Researchers and practitioners agree that the strategic processing of text is critical to reading comprehension (Nuttall, 2005; Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Cromley & Azevedo, 2007). The present study has shown how strategic instruction contributes to strategic reading processes. The findings of this study have also revealed that providing adequate scaffolding to support learners in managing their reading strategy helps develop learners' strategic reading skills. Especially for Malay AFL learners, their need for support in managing strategy use is critical given that most of them have been immersed in the product-oriented approach to teaching and learning for quite some time. This kind of approach is generally fostered in AFL classes (Abdul Ghani, Abdul Razak, & Embi, 2002; Mohamad, 2005; Ismail, 2007; Ahmad, Marip, & Pawi, 2008). Being constantly spoon-fed in almost all AFL classes, learners may have greater difficulty in adopting the kind of experiential approach required by process-based language teaching. Thus, strategic teaching options such as the SRI would probably be rather challenging for them without adequate scaffolding. The present study also suggests that Malay AFL learners often read either to accomplish reading tasks or to merely answer comprehension questions. Furthermore, some Malay AFL learners even equate reading to merely matching sounds to orthographies in texts. This implies that learners are predominantly engaged in the act of 'decoding' Arabic texts rather than processing the texts to construct meaning. The problem that arises when learners do not read for meaning is the failure to connect ideas between sentences and paragraphs, resulting in learners' inability to comprehend the particular Arabic text in its entirety. These findings warrant that AFL instructors should take steps to rectify these reading practices and propel learners towards reading to construct meaning. Ellis (2008) asserts that there are several reasons why learners need to focus on meaning. First, it is only when learners are engaged in decoding and encoding messages in the context of actual acts of communication that the conditions are created for acquisition to take place. Second, to develop true fluency in an L2, learners must have opportunities to engage in real communication Furthermore, this study demonstrates that the AFL learners' language deficiencies seem to have played a major role in their emphasis on localized reading at the sentence level rather than trying to connect it with the general framework of ideas from the text. These cognitive deficits include weaknesses in understanding vocabulary and syntax, failure to identify key vocabulary words, difficulty in making inferences regardless of prior knowledge, lack of ability to identify referent pronouns, lack of skills to use context clues, and failure to parse syntax correctly. More or less, similar findings were also observed in studies concerning AFL reading (Hussin, 2003; Mustapha et al., 2009; Mustapha, 2011; Alhaqbani & Riazi, 2012). As a result, the present study stresses that a strategic approach to reading instruction ought to highlight linguistic knowledge that is essential for Arabic reading comprehension such as basic morphological knowledge for identifying keyword vocabulary and syntactical knowledge that can help learners better identify referent pronouns. Brustad (2006) asserts that "the key to successful reading is applied grammar; grammar put to its proper use in the service of constructing meaning" (p. 343). In

sum, the effectiveness of strategic reading could be primarily realized by the application of the specified design principles.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated reading problems amongst AFL learners and developed design principles for effective strategic reading in Arabic from a teaching perspective. According to the findings of this study effective SRI could enhance the students' approach towards reading. Integrating strategic instruction into AFL classrooms is a challenge that all language teachers should take up because not only does it help develop more efficient learners, but it also provides a meaningful way for instructors to enhance learners' language skills. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that although learning strategies have the potential to be a powerful learning tool, providing learners with strategic instruction should be kept in perspective. The selected research approach is deemed capable of addressing two pertinent needs that form the directions of this research: first, the need to help AFL learners to acquire strategic reading skills in reading Arabic texts; and second, the need to provide Arabic instructors with a step-by-step guide on how to facilitate strategic reading in Arabic reading classrooms. Thus, the most significant contribution of this study is the provision of a practical step-by-step guide for instructors of Arabic on how to teach strategic reading in AFL classrooms. Research in the domains of education in general, and Arabic language education in particular, should put more emphasis on providing 'prescriptions' that are useful in tackling educational problems instead of 'descriptions' that have characterized many research approaches such as experiments, surveys, and correlational analyses.

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