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Exploring Problems Experienced by Malay Learners of Arabic in Reading: Implications for Strategic Instruction

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Abstract

Reading strategy instruction or strategic reading instruction (SRI) has proven to help facilitate effective reading skills among language learners, which will consequently enhance learners' reading comprehension. The main concern of this research, thus, is to promote strategic teaching and learning of reading amongst instructors and learners of Arabic as a second/foreign language (AFL). This research is a part of a larger design and development study that engages in designing and developing a SRI that is tailored to the needs of Malay AFL learners. Hence, the purpose of this research is to use the *analysis objective* to summarise problems experienced by AFL learners drawn from the needs analysis. The problem of AFL learners in reading were examined from both the learning and the teaching aspects through an extensive literature review of the problem. In addition, 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 reading. Findings suggest that there is a crucial need to develop a SRI programme that is contextualized to the particular needs of Malay AFL learners. This study believes that when implemented with all the critical characteristics drawn from the needs analysis, the SRI has the potential to inculcate in learners a more strategic approach towards Arabic reading. The research then

concludes with some implications and recommendations for the design of SRI in the teaching and learning of Arabic reading.

Keywords: Strategic Arabic Reading, Strategic Reading Instruction, Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL), Language Learning Strategies (LLS), Design and Development Research

Introduction

Several studies (e.g. Harun & Zawawi, 2014; Mustapha, 2011) have shown that most Malay learners of Arabic exhibit weak Arabic reading skills despite years of learning the language. Moreover, given that instructional practices in many Arabic language classes reflect a primary focus on grammar (Al-Batal, 2006), strategic reading instruction (SRI) is deemed to be quite challenging for most instructors. This research is actually a part of a larger design and development study that engages in designing and developing a SRI that is tailored to the needs of Malay AFL learners. Being a part of the needs analysis, this study supports the crucial need to analyse learners' existing problems in Arabic reading before exposing them to strategic instruction. Several factors have prompted this study's design and development of a SRI programme for AFL learners: the importance of reading skills in the Malaysian AFL context, the realisation that AFL learners desperately need a more strategic approach towards reading Arabic, and the lack of guidance for incorporating strategic teaching in AFL classrooms.

The Importance of Acquiring Reading Skills in the Learning of Arabic

In terms of language learning, the importance of acquiring reading skills is unquestionable. Among the four skills of language learning – listening, speaking, reading, and writing – reading is seen as the most powerful skill which provides a language learner with a strong foundation so that higher levels of language proficiency may be reached (Krashen, 2004; Ṭu'aymah, 1989). Reading is also claimed to be the source of much of one's vocabulary knowledge, writing style, advanced grammatical competence, and spelling (Krashen, 2000). Cohen (1990) asserts that skillful reading can accelerate language learning while poor reading will simply frustrate and discourage learners from reading altogether.

Similarly, realising the powerful effects of reading in enhancing one's competency in the Arabic language, most Arabic language experts assert that reading is the most essential skill to be mastered by a learner of Arabic (Ṭu'aymah, 1989; Ryding & Johnson, 2003). For instance, regarding the teaching of Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL) in the United States, Kadah (2005) asserts that to promote better and faster literacy in Arabic, the teaching of Modern Standard Arabic and Classical Arabic places much emphasis on developing students' reading skill before developing other skills. As Ryding and Johnson (2003, p. 63) put it, "most schools and universities choose to focus on literacy in Arabic as the basic skill". Hence, the acquisition of reading skills is of sheer importance, especially for those involved in Islamic religious education. It is important, thus, for Malay AFL learners to know how to read skillfully and to be able to deal with an Arabic text independently.

Dilemma in the Learning of Reading in AFL Contexts

Despite the importance of skilled reading in the learning of Arabic, a review of the literature related to the teaching and learning of reading in AFL contexts reveal several observations. The first observation concerns the characteristics of Malay AFL learners when reading Arabic. The literature suggests in general that these AFL learners demonstrate:

1. negative attitudes towards reading in Arabic (Mustapha, Mustapha, & Chik, 2006; Mohd Noor, 2009);
2. low levels of Arabic reading comprehension (Shaari, 1996; Abdul Sattar, 2000; Haji Abdullah, 2006; Musa et al., 1999);
3. a lack of awareness and use of reading comprehension strategies in their Arabic reading (Mustapha, 2011; Mustapha et al., 2009; Hussin, 2003).

Even though these studies were conducted in specific settings which limit the generalisation of findings, still, these studies provide crucial insights on the fact that Malaysian AFL learners demonstrate poor reading skills. For instance, Musa et al (1999) suggest that a great number of students who reach the university level of religious education still face difficulties in understanding simple Arabic texts despite many years of exposure to the Arabic language in religious schools. The researchers believe that the problem stated is still prevalent as a recent study conducted by Harun and Zawawi (2014) suggests that the mastery level of Arabic vocabulary size among religious secondary school students is still weak and remains at a low level.

Dilemma in the Teaching of Reading in AFL Contexts

The second observation concerns the teaching of reading in AFL contexts. Informal observations (Abidin, 1993; Mohamad, 2005; Pilus, 2002) and a few descriptive studies conducted to investigate AFL learners' level of comprehension (e.g. Shaari, 1996; Abdul Sattar, 2000; Abdullah, 2006; Mustapha, 2011; Musa et al., 1999; Sweedan, 2004) indicate that the practice of teaching reading in Arabic classrooms does not stress the development of essential reading skills and strategies. It is believed that instructional practices in many Arabic language classes "reflect a primary focus on grammar as the bedrock for developing proficiency in Arabic" (Al-Batal, 2006, p. 332). According to Hassanein (2003), the main focus of Arabic language teaching is on prescribed text teaching. Thus, it can be concluded that very little explicit attention is paid to strategic aspects of text processing and comprehension that could impede the development of reading skills among AFL learners.

This phenomenon has already been observed and reported in other language contexts (Durkin, 1978; Paris & Oka, 1986; Pressley, 2006). Classroom observations in these studies showed that hardly 1% of the instruction time addressed reading comprehension strategies. Similar research evidence is not available in the Malaysian AFL context, but informal observations and interviews with experts¹ in the field indicate strongly that the situation is no different (Kamarul Shukri Mat Teh², personal interview, 2010; Abu Bakar³, personal interview, 2010; Mustapha⁴, personal interview, 2010).

¹ One to one interviews were conducted with five lecturers of Arabic who have knowledge and expertise in the field of language learning strategy research. These interviews were part of a needs analysis done to further understand Malaysian AFL learners' problem in Arabic reading.

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⁴ Dr. Nik Farhan Mustapha is a senior lecturer specialising in the teaching of AFL at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia.

A Case for Strategic Reading Instruction for AFL Learners

Despite the dilemmas in the teaching and learning of reading in AFL contexts and the emphasis by experts on the importance of acquiring reading skills in Arabic learning, research in the teaching and learning of reading in the AFL context has not received the attention it deserves (Alosh, 1997; Brustad, 2006). In comparison with the proliferation of studies on the teaching and learning of reading in other language contexts, there have been very few attempts to address this issue in the AFL context. With the exception of a few studies (e.g. Alosh, 1997; Aweiss, 1993a; 1993b; Khaldieh, 1999; 2001), there is a scarcity of research that dwells on the reading strategies and processes of AFL learners (Brustad, 2006). Brustad (2006) stresses that research in every aspect of reading in Arabic is greatly needed. More importantly, she asserts that research on reading processes of AFL learners begun by Alosh (1997); Khaldieh (1999; 2001); Aweiss (1993a, 1993b, & 1993c) deserve further attention. Moreover, due to the different nature of the Arabic language and its learning and teaching contexts, instructors and learners from the field should not depend solely on information gleaned from research directed by ESL and European languages as they “do not necessarily reflect all the needs of Arabic instructors and learners” (Brustad, 2006, p. 351).

In light of the above observations, it can be concluded that emphasis should be made on the teaching and learning of effective reading strategies that can facilitate Arabic text reading comprehension, which this study addresses as strategic reading instruction (SRI). This research views that a shift towards a more process-oriented approach in teaching Arabic reading is needed to resolve the pedagogical dilemma discussed earlier. Research has explicated that, in addition to the more fundamental skills frequently associated with reading instructions (e.g., phonemic awareness, word analysis, fluency), most reading programmes would benefit considerably from SRI which is currently rarely provided. Also, because many AFL learners have completed years of Arabic language education without developing necessary fundamental reading skills, researchers have proposed that Arabic language educators develop, test, and implement effective instructional methods in the teaching of Arabic reading (Mohmad Rouyan et al., 2009a; 2009b; Mohmad Rouyan et al., 2010).

Enhancing the teaching of reading in the AFL context, thus, is considered one of the crucial issues facing educators in the field of Arabic teaching and learning today. What can be done to improve AFL learners’ reading comprehension? Which skills and strategies should be imparted to learners? How can this be operationalised?

Research Questions

In line with the research purpose, the objective of the study was pursued in accordance to the analysis objective of the study which explore problems experienced by AFL learners drawn from the needs analysis. Based on the objective, this study seeks to investigate the following research questions:

1. What are Malaysian AFL learners’ major problems in reading Arabic texts which hinder them from comprehending Arabic texts effectively?
2. What is the current situation in the teaching of Arabic reading in Malaysian AFL classrooms?
3. What are the recommendations for effective strategic reading instruction based on the needs analysis?

Methodology

In design and development research (DDR) in education, the identification and exploration of a significant educational problem is a crucial first step. It is this problem that creates a purpose for the research, and it is the creation and evaluation of a potential solution to this problem that will form the focus of the entire study (Herrington et al., 2007). The analysis phase, which is the first phase from four phases of study altogether, is an exploratory phase in which AFL learners' problem in reading was examined. Accordingly, provided that practitioners may have deep insights into a problem, the problem is also defined in close collaboration with practitioners.

As it is important in DDR to explore different dimensions of a problem in practice, the problem of AFL learners in reading were examined from both the learning and the teaching aspects. In this research, the analysis phase began with an extensive literature review of the problem. In addition, 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' reading problems and strategy use in Arabic. The experts interviewed were PhD holders and lecturers from five local universities. The lecturers were identified as experts in the field of language learning strategy research in the AFL context via their extensive publication in the field and through years of experience in the teaching of AFL. Their insights were crucial in establishing the relevance of developing an effective SRI programme.

Findings and Discussion

The focus of the analysis phase was to obtain a snapshot of the major problems in AFL reading from both the learning and the teaching perspectives in order to address Malay AFL learners' particular needs in Strategic Reading Instruction (SRI). Critical characteristics of effective SRI practice were then delineated based on a critical reading of the literature and recommendations from experts.

1. Major problems faced by Malay AFL learners in reading Arabic texts

Literature

In order to inform the design decisions of the module, a range of literature in the fields of second/foreign language reading, AFL learners' reading strategies and processes, and LLS and reading strategy instruction was reviewed. Several key characteristics of Malaysian AFL learners' use of LLS were identified. Among the findings that are worth mentioning in relation to this study are as follows:

1. Students demonstrate a relatively low level of LLS awareness (Teh, 2009; Mustapha, 2011; Che Haron, 2011).
2. Students have a narrow range of strategy use (Teh, 2009; Mustapha, 2011)
3. Some students have some knowledge regarding LLS, but this knowledge is not effectively developed and is not successfully applied in language learning (Mustapha, 2011).
4. There is a positive relationship between the use of LLS and Arabic language proficiency (Ibrahim, 2007; Teh et al., 2009; Mustapha, 2011; Haron, 2011; Hussin, 2011).
5. The effectiveness of strategy use is closely related to students' metacognitive awareness. Students who have a higher level of metacognitive awareness apply LLS more effectively (Mustapha, 2011; Haron, 2011).

6. The successful completion of a language task depends on the quality of strategy use and not the quantity of strategies used. In other words, learners' ability to complete a language task successfully is related to their ability to coordinate the use of a set of appropriate strategies (Mustapha, 2011).
7. Students have the tendency to apply common-used strategies that do not involve a lot of thinking skills (Yasim & Abd. Ghani, 2011; Mustapha, 2011; Arshad & Abu Bakar, 2012).
8. Students' use of LLS in Arabic learning is partly influenced by Islamic elements such as reading *basmalah* before starting a task, reading the Qur'an, praying, etc. (Teh, 2009; Mustapha et al., 2009; Mustapha, 2011; Arshad & Abu Bakar, 2012). This aspect can be regarded as an added value among AFL learners because Arabic is the language of the Qur'an (Teh, 2009).

Observing these studies, it is noteworthy that most LLS studies in the Malaysian AFL context were descriptive. Although such studies are deemed crucial for understanding the profile of Malaysian AFL learners' LLS use, research into LLS training should also be given serious consideration. Moreover, the brief profile of Malay AFL learners' LLS use as presented above demands that such instructional studies be critically addressed.

Therefore, in light of the above profile, this study aims at providing LLS instruction for Malay AFL learners, focusing on the reading skills as a means for providing strategic instruction. The reading skill was selected because it is considered the most critical skill to be mastered in the Malaysian AFL context (Yusoff, 1999; Yusoff & Abdul Ghani, 2002). It was already pointed that reading is specifically important in the current Malaysian AFL context for purposes of understanding religious texts (Zainal Abidin, 1993; Raja Musa et al., 1999) and for fulfilling social needs (Omar, 1982). Providing strategic reading instruction for Malay AFL learners, thus, could be regarded as a good start.

Interviews with Experts⁵

All five lecturers⁶ interviewed 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'. Lecturers E1, E3 and E5 revealed that AFL learners have the tendency to read Arabic texts in a myopic manner, or in other words, in a linear fashion, 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 proposed that some AFL learners believe that reading is synonymous with decoding and pronunciation of isolated words, regardless of whether they process text in an oral or silent way. 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, thus they fail to construct meaning. This approach also results in their lacking the ability to make inferences, to identify referent pronouns, to use context clues, to monitor comprehension, and to repair comprehension or vary strategy to purpose.

⁵ One-to-one interviews were conducted with five lecturers of Arabic who have knowledge and expertise in the field of language learning strategy research. These interviews were part of a needs analysis done to further understand Malaysian AFL learners' problems in Arabic reading.

⁶ The five experts are labelled as E1, E2, E3, E4, and E5.

Generally, these experts' perception of AFL learners' approach towards Arabic reading resemble the characteristics of Malay AFL readers as described in the studies of Mustapha (2011); Mustapha et al (2009); Musa et al (1999); Hussin (2003). It is interesting that 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. Grabe, 2004; 2009). In a discussion with a prominent reading expert, he asserts that less skilled readers of different languages and across different cultures generally appear to share a number of similar characteristics (James Dickins, personal communication, 2010). Thus, it is not surprising that the characteristics of Malay AFL learners gathered from the needs analysis parallel those of less skilled readers as documented by the literature. An overview of the main findings of learners' major problem in Arabic reading from both the literature and the experts' interview is presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Malay AFL learners' major problems in reading

Learners' major problems in comprehending Arabic texts	Source of findings	Supporting researchers/authors
<p>Learners are not reading for meaning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Often pursue finishing the task as primary objective</i> • <i>Have misconceptions about reading</i> • <i>Focus on decoding single words earners thus fail to link ideas across passages</i> 	<p>Studies: Mustapha (2011)</p> <p>Expert interviews: E1, E2, E3, E4, E5</p>	<p>Brustad (2006); Cohen (1990); Khaldieh (1999);</p>
<p>Learners' lack comprehension monitoring skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Lack awareness of how they think when they read), thus are not aware when their comprehension breaks down</i> 	<p>Studies: Mustapha (2011); Hussin (2003)</p> <p>Expert interviews: E1, E2, E3, E4, E5</p>	<p>Brustad (2006); Cohen (1990); Khaldieh (1999); Nambiar-Gopal (2002); Mustapha (2011);</p>
<p>Learners lack awareness of reading strategy use</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Most students are not aware that they can employ certain strategies to help them in the construction of meaning and in solving comprehension problems</i> 	<p>Studies: Alhaqbani & Riazi (2012); Hussin (2003); Mustapha et al. (2009); Mustapha (2011);</p> <p>Expert interviews: E1, E2, E3, E5</p>	<p>Cohen (1990);</p>
<p>Learners lack knowledge of appropriate/correct strategy use</p>	<p>Studies: Hussin (2003); Mustapha et al</p>	<p>Duke & Pearson (2002); Grabe (2004); Adler (2001);</p>

-
- *Inappropriate and ineffective use of reading strategies* (2009); Mustapha (2011)
 - *Some students are aware of certain strategy use but the actual skill of using strategies are not well developed* **Expert interviews:** E1, E2, E3, E4, E5
-

Difficulties in reading are likely to derive from a variety of *cognitive deficits*, such as:

- *weakness in understanding vocabulary*
 - *failure to parse syntax correctly*
 - *having difficulty making inferences, regardless of prior knowledge*
 - *lacking ability in identifying referent pronouns*
-

Studies:

Brustad (2006); Abu Bakar (2008); Khaldieh (1999).
Mustapha (2011); Hussin (2003)

Expert interviews:

E1, E2, E4, E5

The Current Situation for the Teaching of Reading in the AFL Context

Apart from analysing learners' problems in Arabic reading, the needs analysis also sought to obtain an overview of AFL instructors' approaches in the teaching of Arabic reading.

Literature

As noted earlier, the literature points to the absence of instruction in comprehension reading strategies in many AFL reading classrooms (Ismail, 1993; 1999; Alhaqbani & Riazi, 2012; Pilus, 2002).

Interviews with Experts

All experts interviewed were of the opinion that most AFL educators do not incorporate the teaching of strategies in their classes. AFL instructors were also viewed as lacking the knowledge of how to teach students to approach Arabic text strategically. Experts also expressed concern that despite the emphasis on the communicative approach to Arabic language teaching, Arabic instructors frequently revert to methods of teaching derived solely from their own experiences as students (E2, E3, E5). AFL instructors normally provide almost all information for students, thus unconsciously treating students as passive learners. Table 1 summarises the findings of the needs analysis generated from both the literature and the interviews with experts.

Table 1: AFL instructors' approach to teaching reading

AFL instructors' approach to teaching reading	Source of findings	Supporting researchers/authors
<p>Instructors lack knowledge on how to teach effective reading skills</p>	<p>Studies: Ismail (1993); Kadah (2005); Kamarulzaman et al (2002);</p> <p>Expert interviews: E1, E2, E3, E4, E5</p>	<p>Brustad (2006); Cohen (1990); Khaldieh (1999);</p>
<p>Instructors tend to test reading and not teach reading</p>	<p>Studies: Ismail (1993); Hassanein (2003)</p> <p>Expert interviews: E1, E2, E3</p>	<p>Brustad (2006); Cohen (1990); Khaldieh (1999); Nambiar-Gopal (2002)</p>
<p>Instructors focus primarily on grammar and not on the construction of meaning.</p>	<p>Studies: Al-Batal (2006); Pilus (2002); Mohmad Rouyan et al (2010).</p> <p>Expert interviews: E1 & E2</p>	<p>Cohen (1990);</p>
<p>Instructors tend to treat learners as passive readers</p>	<p>Studies: Ismail (1993); Pilus (2002); Mohmad Rouyan et al (2009; 2010).</p> <p>Expert interviews: E1, E2, E4, E5</p>	<p>Cohen (1990);</p>

2. Recommendations for Effective Strategic Reading Instruction

Apart from analysing learners' reading problems from both learning and teaching perspectives, the needs analysis also determined several recommendations for effective SRI drawn from the literature and interviews with experts to help in the design and development of the proposed solution.

Interviews with Experts

Generally, experts' recommendations included the need for rectifying Malay AFL learners' misconceptions about reading, providing contextualised instruction of strategies and placing emphasis on building learners' strategic thinking skills such as reasoning and making inferences (E1, E2, E3 and E5). Similar to the literature, experts maintained that students must not only be taught the 'whats' and 'hows' of reading strategies but also the 'whys' (E1, E2, E3 and E4). They asserted that without solid understanding of the value of reading strategies, students will not benefit fully from strategy instruction.

Above all, experts suggest that in promoting strategic reading to AFL learners, instructors should be provided with a comprehensive, flexible and practical guide. They stressed that this concern should be seriously addressed as most AFL instructors lack critical knowledge of strategic teaching options. Table 3 provides proposed solutions as suggested by the literature and experts based on the major problems in the teaching and learning of Arabic reading drawn from the needs analysis.

Table 3: Proposed solution and initial design principles

Critical Area to be Addressed based on the Findings of the Needs Analysis	Proposed solution	Initial Design Principles
<p>Learners do not read for meaning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Often pursue finishing the task as primary objective</i> • <i>Have misconceptions about reading</i> • <i>Focus on decoding single words thus fail to link ideas across passages</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Make learners aware of the purpose for reading (to construct meaning of text) ii. Encourage students to adopt a multitude of strategies that can help them construct meaning iii. Create awareness on the importance of monitoring reading comprehension 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote learners toward <i>strategic reading</i>
<p>Learners lack comprehension monitoring skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Lack awareness of how they think when they read), thus are not aware when their comprehension breaks down</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Create awareness on the importance of monitoring reading comprehension 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop learners' metacognitive awareness
<p>Learners lack awareness of reading strategy use</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Most students are not aware that they can employ certain strategies to help</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Identify, activate and enhance learners' currently used strategies ii. Create awareness on the diversity of reading strategies and help students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expose learners to a wide range of strategies

<p><i>them in the construction of meaning and in solving comprehension problems</i></p>	<p>notice how these strategies intersect and work in conjunction with one another</p> <p>iii. Help learners select appropriate reading strategies appropriate for the text</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote learners’ active involvement in the construction of meaning
<p>Learners lack knowledge of appropriate/correct strategy use</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Inappropriate & ineffective use of reading strategies</i> • <i>Some students are aware of certain strategy use but the actual skill of using strategies are not well developed</i> 	<p>i. Provide explicit instruction on reading strategy use (showing how)</p> <p>ii. Provide adequate scaffolding to support learners in managing strategy use</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide direct, explicit instruction of processes • Support learners in managing strategy use (scaffold) • Promote learners’ active involvement in the construction of meaning
<p>Difficulties in reading are likely to derive from a variety of language deficits,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • weakness in understanding vocabulary • failure to parse syntax correctly <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - have difficulty making inferences, regardless of prior knowledge - lack ability in identifying referent pronouns 	<p>i. Pay attention to the development of important language knowledge crucial for effective reading comprehension (e.g. morphology)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pay attention to the development of important language knowledge crucial for effective reading comprehension (e.g. morphology)

-
- lack skill in using context clues, especially when abstract thinking is involved

Teachers lack strategic teaching skills

- i. advocate a more process-oriented approach to teaching reading
 - ii. provide a comprehensive guide to help instructors focus on process
- **Provide direct, explicit instruction of processes**

Implications and Recommendations for Strategic Arabic Reading Instruction

The above findings led to the following implications and recommendations:

The Need to Analyse Learners' Existing Strategy Use

This study supports the crucial need to analyse learners' existing strategy before exposing them to strategic instruction. Such an analysis will provide useful insights on learners' existing strategy in the sense that it will ensure that the design of the strategic instruction is geared towards addressing learners' major needs (Suhaili & Haywood, 2017). In addition, this analysis will also provide insights on the most appropriate strategies to be included in the instruction.

Focus on Building Strategic Skills

This study recommends that in earlier stages of strategic instruction, developing learners' strategic skills must be given the utmost priority. This study proposes that it is acceptable if learners fail to arrive at the correct meaning in the early stages of any strategic instruction, provided that they show improvements in adopting strategic thinking skills. The underlying assumption behind this is that learners should succeed in reaching the correct meaning once their strategic skills are enhanced. For instance, in the context of SRI, reading strategy use should be seen not as a means to pursue a 'correct' in-the-text meaning, but as long-term means to personal understanding and interpretation of text that is, nonetheless, based on the text (Carrell, 1998). Or, as Pressley and Afflerbach (1995) label it, the reader should be able to come to a 'constructively responsive' reading of the text.

The Need to base the Design of the Instruction on Sound Principles

The findings of this study suggest that the effective design of strategic reading instruction can be achieved through careful application of design principles. Therefore, this study advocates that any attempt in designing strategic instruction should be based on sound design principles. Careful observation of design principles will facilitate in designing an instruction programme that addresses almost all critical aspects of effective SRI which will finally result in a valid, practical and effective SRI environment.

Explicit Instruction of Processes

This research strongly suggests that strategic instruction should be direct and explicit. According to most researchers, L2 competence pertaining to strategic thinking skills and effective use of language is primarily a matter of implicit knowledge (Ellis, 2008). Given that implicit knowledge is procedural and held unconsciously, it can be verbalised only if it is made explicit (Ellis, 2008; Yilmaz, 2011).

Conclusion

From the learning perspective, the findings from the literature and interviews with experts suggest that Malay AFL learners generally lack strategic reading skills. Learners show a tendency to regard reading as a decoding process, resulting in their being occupied with trying to translate every single word in the reading passages. Such a myopic approach towards reading hinders them from linking ideas across passages and hence results in failure to construct the meaning of text.

With regard to learners' use of reading strategies, it was found that they are not exposed to effective strategies that can enhance the construction of meaning, especially those higher order interpretive strategies that demand reasoning and critical thinking. As a result, when confronted with reading problems, they often resort to simple straightforward strategies such as referring to the dictionary to find the meaning of words or they may use passive social strategies such as asking teachers and peers for help. Nonetheless, when learners attempt to use strategies, it was observed that their use of strategies is not well developed.

Malay AFL learners' problems in reading are also compounded by the absence of strategic reading instruction (SRI) in many AFL reading classrooms. Findings of the literature and interviews with experts support the fact that most AFL instructors fail to show learners how to effectively process Arabic texts. This finding implies that the focus of AFL instructors in the current teaching of Arabic reading is perhaps more on the product of reading rather than on the process. By not paying due attention to learners' reading processes, AFL instructors fail to develop strategic AFL readers who read for meaning.

In sum, this study supports the crucial need to analyse learners' existing strategy before exposing them to strategic instruction. Such an analysis will provide useful insights on learners' existing strategy in the sense that it will ensure that the design of the strategic instruction is geared towards addressing learners' major needs. In addition, this analysis will also provide insights on the most appropriate strategies to be included in the instruction. In line with other studies which promotes the enhancement of reading and vocabulary skills (Yunus et al., 2016; Reutzel et al., 2014; Pressley & Allington, 2014), this study recommends preparing students with explicit strategic reading instruction, particularly in the beginning semester of an Arabic language programme, to meet the academic and professional needs of Arabic major students in reading Arabic texts.

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