Investigating EFL Reading Problems and Strategies in Post-Basic Schools and University Foundation Programmes: A Study in the Omani Context

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ABSTRACT

This study is aimed at investigating problems that Omani post-basic and university foundation programme students face in reading in English and identifying strategies they use to help them deal with their reading problems. The study administered a questionnaire on EFL reading problems and strategies to 1114 students from grades 11 and 12 in post-basic schools and to 317 university foundation programme students. The statistical and descriptive analyses of the results of the study indicate that students in both contexts face multiple problems with reading, especially with vocabulary. They associate their reading comprehension mainly with their ability to understand the meanings of words presented in a text feeling this is a more serious concern than other higher level processes such as inferring meanings or dealing with a text's cohesion and coherence. The findings indicate a higher use of reading strategies by foundation programme students compared with school students; however, both groups tend to use more support and problem-solving strategies than global/meta-cognitive strategies. The study makes a number of recommendations and suggests that mechanisms of collaboration between post-basic schools and the university need to be put in place in order to make real progress in students' advancement in their reading skills.

Introduction

In foreign language learning contexts where exposure to the target language in its spoken form is not widely available, reading in its different forms (paper and electronic) becomes an indispensable tool towards learners' advancement in their English proficiency levels and development of their socio-cultural competence (Al-Brashdi, 2002; Ansarin, Zohrabi & Zeynali, 2012; Dornyei, 1990; Walqui, 2003). According to Dornyei (1990), in these contexts because of the lack of contact with the target language community the integrative motivational system is much more determined by "… more general attitudes and beliefs, involving an interest in foreign languages and people, the cultural and intellectual values the target language conveys, as well as the new stimuli one receives through learning and using the target language (p.4). And here reading plays a crucial role.

Reading becomes even more crucial in academic settings as it is connected with knowledge transmission and expansion. Reading is also a tool for fostering academic success among students (Linquanti, 1999). However, concerns have been raised in different EFL contexts about students being unprepared for the reading demands placed upon them in university and college contexts. The educational system at the school level has been accused of covering too many topics without targeting the essential knowledge and skills required for college readiness (Cahyono & Widiati, 2006; Moss & Bordelon, 2007). We have little understanding of whether and how the reading situation at higher education institutions builds upon what is presented and taught at schools. Therefore, there is a high need for studies that investigate the reading situation at both secondary and tertiary education contexts and suggest ways that could help efforts toward aligning standards and curriculum.

This paper aims to investigate the type of reading problems that Omani students encounter at post-basic education and later on at foundation programmes in their first year of university education. It also looks at the kind and frequency of use of a range of reading strategies that students employ in their reading. Specifically, this paper intends to answer the following questions: Do students in university foundation programmes have similar reading problems to the ones their counterparts at secondary education have? Similarly, do students within the two contexts use the same set of reading strategies? It is hoped that the comparative analysis can give insights on how best to align the efforts exerted at both educational levels and how best to build bridges.

Review of literature

Reading is perhaps one of the most researched areas in EFL. Hundreds of studies have been conducted across the globe to investigate, examine and explore various issues pertinent to EFL reading, all driven by a genuine desire to understand reading and the reading process better. The ultimate goal is to help learners become better readers who are capable of utilizing reading for their personal, academic and professional advancement. Regardless of the context where these studies were conducted, observations have been almost constantly made about learners' difficulties with reading (Floris & Divina, 2009; Kayaoglu & Turgut, 2011; Mourtaga, 2005; O'Sullivan, 2004; O'Sullivan, 2009) and the general poor reading proficiency levels (Al Khamisi, 2014; Deutsch, 2005; O'Sullivan, 2004; Sidek, 2011).

In the Arab world, the issue of the reading problems of the language learners received some attention. Several studies were conducted in various Arab countries. In Jordan, Al Khawaldeh (2012) used a survey to investigate the reading problems of the secondary school students. The most problematic areas as identified by students were: lack of familiarity with vocabulary items, mismatch of some reading material with the students' life, the ineffectiveness of related reading teaching methods, lack of co-operative learning in reading instruction, teacher-related mal-practices in teaching reading comprehension, lack of connection between intensive and extensive reading activities, and incongruence between learner's pre-knowledge and existing ideas in the passage. In Yemen, Balfakeh (2009) found that dealing with unknown words was by far the most problematic area among secondary school students, a result that echoes those found in several other non-Arab countries such as Turkey (Kayaoglu & Turgut, 2011) and China (Lin, 2002).

There are also a few studies that were conducted in the Omani context. Some studies were conducted in school settings. Al Khamisi (2014) raises an alarm about the very poor EFL reading proficiency levels of Omani school students. She reports on poor test results in national reading exams where the mean scores of grade four students were equal to F in the Ministry of Education grading system while grade ten students' scores fit in the D category (p.72). Al Ajmi (2003) investigated the reading difficulties of Omani students soon after they graduated from their secondary education. According to the students in her study, the most encountered difficulties were lack of content/background knowledge and the lack of automatic recognition skills that enable students to recognize sounds and words. At the university level, Al Brashdi (2002) reports that difficult vocabulary was the most encountered challenge faced by Omani university students.

O'Sullivan (2009) argues that reading problems, which EFL students have, - Emirati students in the context of his study - are very fundamental. They can be attributed to two main issues: the first one is deficient lower level processes such as letter and word identification; the second one is vocabulary and lexis. He further proposes that resources and energy should be refocused on these two areas. Kayaoglu and Turgut (2011) believe this is a "failure of conception" of what reading means as students in their study limited their reading difficulties to vocabulary and grammar. Mourtaga (2005) argues that this misconception could largely be attributed to teachers and their teaching practices. According to him, teachers' misunderstanding of the reading process and the way reading is taught at schools could be the cause of many difficulties their students face (p.3).

Another area that received wide attention in reading research is reading strategies. In order for the reading process to be successful, learners need to have not only a command of a wide range of reading skills such as decoding but also a strategic ability to solve reading problems and the knowledge and experience to know what strategies to use at what times (Malcolm, 2009). According to Cohen (1990), cited in Zhang and Wu (2009), reading strategies are "those mental processes that readers consciously choose to use in accomplishing reading tasks" (p.39) and are regarded as being conducive to successful reading comprehension. They, however, can cover a wider and broader range of techniques that can indicate how readers perceive a task, what they do to construct meaning from text and what they do when comprehension breaks down. Most of the current understanding of reading strategies has been influenced by research that investigated differences between

successful and less successful readers (Karbalaei, 2010). Successful readers are portrayed as active, purposeful and flexible in their strategy use while less successful ones are portrayed as less actively involved in guiding and controlling their learning (Al Ajmi, 2003). More recent research on reading strategies argue that both successful and less successful readers are aware of their reading problems, can identify their source, and can describe the strategies they use to solve these problems. The main difference between the two groups is in the frequency and variety of use of these strategies (Malcolm, 2009).

A number of classifications of reading strategies exist in the literature. Perhaps the most common one is the distinction between cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies. The first type normally refers to a set of strategies that learners use to help them construct meaning from the text. These could involve both top-down and bottom-up strategies (which is yet another classification). Meta-cognitive strategies, on the other hand, help learners to monitor and regulate the cognitive strategies they use for text comprehension. They reflect more consciousness of the learning process and that learners can manage their cognitive processes to ensure realization of learning goals.

Another common classification of reading strategies puts them in three broad areas: global strategies, problem-solving strategies and support strategies (Karbalae, 2010; Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002). Global reading strategies are more general than the other two and they set the stage for the reading act. Examples include setting a purpose for reading and predicting what the text is about. Problem-solving strategies, as the name indicates, are used when students have problems in understanding textual information such as rereading the text. Support strategies are used as aids for comprehension. Examples are note-taking, underlining and using reference materials such as dictionaries. Studies adopting this classification for their investigation of EFL students' use of reading strategies report different results. For example, postgraduate Libyan EFL students (Omar, 2014) were found to use problem-solving strategies more often than they use support strategies perhaps because they have mastered an English proficiency level that is beyond their need for support strategies. Malcolm (2009) in her investigation of reading strategies used by first year and fourth year medical students in Bahrain uses the term "meta-cognitive" to refer to global strategies and the term "cognitive" to refer to problem-solving strategies. She found that students overall reported a high level of use of all three categories and that cognitive/problem solving strategies were the most used by both years. One support strategy – underlining - was also at the top list for both groups of students.

Generally, studies reviewed in this section have either looked at reading problems or reading strategies. There are very rare studies that looked at the two issues together. On a similar vein, studies have either examined these issues in a secondary school context or a university context. To the best knowledge of the researchers, there are no studies that compare the two educational contexts. The present study intends to fill in this gap by comparing the reading problems and strategies of foundation programme students with those of post-basic students. The insights gained from the present study are hoped to provide a better understanding of reading and the reading process for educationalists from both contexts which would ultimately aid in students' transition from post-basic education to university education.

The study

The study reported here is part of a larger scale research project supported by Sultan Qaboos University, a leading academic institution in Oman. Inspired by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos's speech given at the inaugural ceremony of the Sultan Qaboos University's Cultural Centre on December 18, 2010, which highlighted the special significance attached to each level in the march of education from the early stages till the postgraduate studies stage, the project looked at teachers' and students' views with regard to a number of aspects pertinent to the teaching and learning of the reading and writing skills in secondary and tertiary educational contexts.

Context of the study

This study aims – as indicated earlier – to investigate the EFL reading problems and strategies in two distinct yet interrelated settings: secondary and tertiary education, in particular, Omani post-basic schools at one end and foundation programmes in Omani universities at another. According to "The drive for quality" document (2013) jointly prepared by Oman's Ministry of Education and the World Bank, the post-basic education was first initiated in Oman in the academic year 2007/2008. This marks the first academic year of the first batch of eleventh graders in post-basic education. The umbrella goal of the two-year post-basic stage is to equip the students with practical and strategic skills in the English language in order to either enrol in tertiary education or join the labour market.

Reading is highly emphasized as a major part of the post-basic curriculum. According to the Ministry of Education Curriculum Framework (n.d.), two specific reading objectives for grades 11 and 12 are:

• Learners should be able to read a variety of text-types and genres. Examples of texts are magazine articles, e-mails, short stories and informational texts.

• Learners should be able to select appropriate reading strategies when reading for different purposes. Examples of mentioned strategies are previewing and predicting, skimming and scanning and guessing meaning from context (p.26).

The school textbooks are heavily weighted with reading materials. Units contain reading texts of different lengths accompanied by tasks which students are expected to respond to in one way or another (Emery & A Thehli, 2014).

To provide access to a larger number of Omani students to tertiary education, higher education institutions have expanded in number and have also worked at various levels to insure its quality. For example, a Ministerial Decision that states that all private and public higher education institutions in Oman must have a foundation programme was issued in 2008 (Oman Academic Standards for General Education Programs, 2008). This foundation program (FP) is designed to meet the academic requirements of English-medium higher education providers, improve students' skills for further studies and develop their linguistic competency and cognitive skills (Goodliffe, 2010).

Most students who join higher education institutions in Oman are expected to do an English foundation programme that could range from one to four semesters depending on students' proficiency level upon entry. In these foundation programmes, reading is considered a crucial component and is often assigned more contact hours in students' timetable, as is the case in Sultan Qaboos University's foundation programme. Students at all proficiency levels are provided with commercial reading books or integrated skills series for language learning, in-house reading materials, SRA reading kits, on-line reading materials, sample tests and exercises on Moodle learning platform (Foundation Program Curricula, p.14). They are also encouraged to do a lot of extensive reading. Examples are graded readers or simplified novels that come with accompanying Moodle quizzes (Tuzlukova et. el, 2014).

Indeed, the effective teaching of English as a foreign language is one key strategy that Oman has adopted for its continuing development (Al Jadidi, 2009). Be that as it may, one of the important factors, which needs to be taken into account, is an isolation in which post basic and foundation programme's English teaching works. Both sectors still function as two different educational contexts with their own specific characteristics, e.g. nature of requirements, materials used, mode and status of English, methods and approaches, etc. Another factor that is equally important is the need to establish a system of peer collaboration between secondary school and university English language teachers. Such system is currently non-existent. We believe that conducting research that aims to better understand the type of concerns in both contexts and disseminating research results is one step towards establishing channels of communication between them.

Instrument

Content of the questionnaire

Data discussed in the present study were obtained from two sections that a questionnaire used for the large funded research project study included. The questionnaire was developed based on readings of the literature on EFL reading problems and strategies.

The section on reading problems used an endorsement five point forced-choice Lickert scale that ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". In this section, students were asked to self-report of their reading problems, and to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed that the listed points constituted problems for them.

The reading problems investigated in this section were the following: a) pronouncing new words in read texts; b) identifying meaning of words; c) connecting ideas; d) reading topics that handle issues related to other cultures; e) relating read text to previous knowledge and experiences; f) telling the difference between main and supporting points and g) inference.

As for the type and frequency of reading strategies employed by school and foundation students, a frequency scale ("always", "often", "sometimes", "rarely" and "never") was employed. Although fewer in number, the investigated strategies roughly fall under the three areas examined by Malcolm (2009) and Mokhtari and Reichard (2002) who used The Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) and classified strategies as global/meta-cognitive, problem-solving/cognitive and support strategies. Statements in the questionnaire that

belong to the global/meta-cognitive group were those that asked about students use of prediction, examining a text to identify specific information, reading a text to identify the main idea and critical reading of a text to identify important and less important points. Problem-solving/cognitive strategies were addressed through statements that asked about guessing meaning of words from context, identifying connecting ideas by looking at transition signals and rereading a text for better understanding. The questionnaire also asked about students' use of two support strategies: underlining and using a dictionary.

Pilot of the questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed in the English language. It was then piloted on two different groups of students. The first group consisted of two classes each of grades 11 and 12 in a post-basic school in Batinah South, one of the governorates included in the study. The total number of students in both grade levels was 126 students. The second group consisted of one hundred forty seven foundation programme students from Sultan Qaboos University. Based on feedback received during the administration of the questionnaire at the pilot stage, few modifications were made to the questionnaire. The questionnaire was then translated into the Arabic language to make sure students understood the statements well.

Validity of the questionnaire

Given the large scale of the research and its involvement of participants from two diverse contexts across three different regions in Oman, a panel of judges representing different levels of education were involved in checking the validity of the questionnaire. The panel included EFL instructors from the foundation programme of Sultan Qaboos University, senior English teachers from post-basic schools, curriculum experts from the Ministry of Education and professors from the Curriculum and Instruction Department of College of Education at Sultan Qaboos University.

Procedures

Arrangements were made with the Directorates of Education in three governorates in Oman, namely in Muscat, Batinah and Dhakeleya to conduct the study in their classes. Similar arrangements were made with the administration of three Foundation Programmes in three Omani universities: Sultan Qaboos University, Nizwa University and Sohar University. With the help of classroom instructors in all institutions involved in the study, the Arabic version of the questionnaire was administered and filled in by students during regular class periods. After collecting the questionnaires from all participants, SPSS was used for the statistical analysis of the data.

Participants

The questionnaire was administered to students from both educational levels: grades 11 and 12 in post-basic schools and foundation programmes in three Omani universities (see Table 1 that shows the distribution of students from each group and in each governorate for more information).

Table 1. Distribution of students in post-basic schools and foundation programmes

Post basic schools	Number of students	Foundation programmes	Number of students
Muscat governorate	229	Sultan Qaboos University (Muscat)	134
Batinah South governorate	271	Sohar University (Batinah)	96
Dhakeleya governorate	614	Nizwa University (Dhakeleya)	87
Total	1114	Total	317

Results and discussion

Reading Problems

Both groups of post-basic and foundation programme students acknowledge that they have problems reading and understanding English texts with mean scores that were a little higher for the foundation programme students (see Table 2 for more information). In a similar study conducted by the same researchers (Al Seyabi & Tuzlukova, 2014) to investigate writing problems between the two settings, the same result was also revealed. It seems that overall, once students reach the first year of their university education and come face to face with the more rigorous demands of their reading courses, they become more aware of the reading problems they face.

Table 2. Reading problems as perceived by students in post-basic schools and foundation university programmes

Statement	Mean for post-basic students	SD	Mean for FP students	SD
1) I have problems reading and understanding English texts.	3.29	1.26	3.37	1.06
2) My biggest problem in reading is that I struggle when reading words and I don't know how to pronounce them.	3.33	1.27	3.47	1.16
3) My biggest problem in reading is the vocabulary I don't know the meaning of.	4.00	1.71	3.99	1.21
4) My biggest problem in reading is how to connect the ideas together.	3.26	1.35	3.19	1.30
5) My biggest problem in reading is that texts often handle topics from other cultures I know very little about.	3.41	1.24	3.44	1.24
6) My biggest problem in reading is finding ways to relate the topic to my own knowledge and experience.	3.23	1.19	3.22	1.15
7) My biggest problem in reading is seeing the difference between main points and supporting details in a text.	3.17	1.19	3.17	1.25
8) My biggest problem in reading is inferring information from a text.	3.11	1.24	3.25	1.18

A closer look at the mean scores of grades 11 and 12 students in Table 2 shows that the top five reading problems could be put in the following descending order: 1) vocabulary problems caused by not knowing the meaning of words presented in reading texts, 2) reading texts that handle topics students know little about, 3) vocabulary problems caused by not knowing how to read and pronounce words, 4) connecting ideas, and 5) finding a way to connect the read topic to previous readings and experiences.

Vocabulary problems were in fact at the top of the list for both groups of students and seemed to be a source of concern at both educational levels: post-basic education and later on at foundation programmes. For example, school students rated not knowing meanings of words as their first biggest problem and not knowing how to pronounce words as their third biggest problem. Further analysis to students' responses to the same issue in an open ended question in the questionnaire revealed that "pronouncing" long and difficult words was one of the most frequently mentioned statements by school students. There are two points that can be taken from this finding. First, while this result goes in line with several other studies conducted in similar contexts (Al Brashdi, 2002; Al-Seyabi & Tuzlukova, 2014; Kayaoglu & Turgut, 2011; Mourtaga, 2005; O'Sullivan, 2004; O'Sullivan, 2009; Shen, 2013; Tuzlukova et al., 2014), it is still surprising to see that at both levels, students associate their reading comprehension mainly with their ability to understand the meanings of words presented in a text. In fact they felt this was a more serious concern than other higher level processes such as inferring meanings or dealing with a text's cohesion and

coherence. Second, while having the ability to read and understand individual words might be considered by some as a lower level, "decoding" skill, finding that it is students' biggest problem is a warning sign for educationalists at both levels.

With regard to the nature of these reading problems of Omani students at both post-secondary and foundation programme levels, they can be partially linked to the lack of understanding of the concept of reading on the part of the students "as a more complex process than simply decoding the written words in a text" (Hellekjær, 2009, p.199). Research by Hellekjær (2009) indicates that bottom up processes such as word recognition "provide the basis for higher-level processing, that is, the creation of meaning in an interactive process between the information in the text being read, the reader's knowledge of the language and content, and his or her processing skills and strategies" (p.199). Perhaps more training is required on vocabulary learning skills especially vocabulary building and vocabulary retention. It might be difficult to take students beyond this basic level when they still think of it as their biggest challenge and when they remain "word bound", as Anderson (2005), quoted in O'Sullivan (2009), puts it (p. 47).

According to Oman's Ministry of Education Curriculum Framework (n.d), English in post-basic education is presented as an international language and the themes and topics of the curriculum provide an international outlook as they cover a range of issues that have a global impact. Students in their English classes are encouraged to reflect on these global issues and relate them to their own Omani experience. Some students, however, seem to have problems with that and have considered this as their second biggest problem after vocabulary. Various research studies indicate that readers' culture-bound background knowledge plays a facilitative role in their reading comprehension (Davoudi & Ramezani, 2014; Boadhar, 2012) as well as incidental vocabulary acquisition (Pulido, 2004). Yet, unfamiliarity with the rituals, beliefs or traditions presented in a reading text may lead to unsuccessful interpretation of the text (Pulido, 2004). Another related problem faced by grades 11 and 12 students was connecting the topic to their previous knowledge and experiences. It is quite possible that students were referring mainly here to topics that have cultural references that students are not familiar with. Research on schema theory indicated that it is quite possible for learners to fail if they cannot access or do not possess appropriate existing schematic knowledge necessary to understand the text (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1988). Such difficulties encountered by students do not by any means mean that reading texts should cover only what is known or what is familiar to students. Rather, as Carrell and Eisterhold (1988) suggest "every culture-specific interference problem dealt with in the classroom presents an opportunity to build new culture-specific schemata that will be available to the EFL/ESL student outside the classroom" and enhance not only their language development but also their knowledge repertoire" (p.89 cited in Stott, 2001, n.p.).

It was interesting to find that the same group of items identified by school students as the most problematic seemed to create similar concerns at the foundation level. As can be seen in the table, problems facing FP students came in the following order: words they do not know their meanings, words they do not know how to read and pronounce, reading texts that handle topics they know little about and connecting read topics to previous knowledge and experience. The only additional area that foundation programme students found to be problematic and was rated among the top five, compared to school students, was

"deducting information from the read text". One possible explanation is that students at this level are more likely to encounter tasks that require them to do so.

Reading strategies

As for the second area investigated in the present study - reading strategies- it was quite clear that the importance of their effective use is recognized by most students. Table 3 below presents descriptive statistics (means and SDs) for students' perceived use of reading strategies in both settings. Here strategies scoring a mean ranging between 5.0-3.5 were considered high strategies, those scoring means between 3.4 and 2.5 were medium use strategies and those scoring less than that represented low use.

Table 3. Reading strategies used by students in post-basic schools and foundation programmes

	Reading Strategies	Post-basic schools Mean	SD	FP Mean	SD
1	I use some reading strategies to help me understand what I read.	3.46	1.04	3.67	1.07
2	My English teachers taught me some strategies that could help me with reading.	3.42	1.29	3.32	1.32
3	I try to predict the content of a text before starting to read it.	3.55	1.19	3.63	1.12
4	I scan a text to look for specific information.	3.72	1.19	3.87	1.07
5	I skim a text for the general idea.	3.27	1.32	3.55	1.25
6	I use a dictionary to find the meaning of unknown words.	3.81	1.18	3.94	1.32
7	I try to guess word meanings by using context clues as well as word formation clues.	4.07	1.23	3.87	1.06
8	I finish assigned readings on the time allotted by the teacher.	3.43	1.19	3.51	1.15
9	I recognize connecting ideas in a reading text by looking at connectors and key words.	3.16	1.17	3.37	1.02
10	I underline important information in a reading text.	3.80	1.28	3.95	1.18
11	I can criticize a reading text and identify what is important and what is less important.	3.06	1.18	3.29	1.14
12	After reading a text, I reread and make notes for a better understanding.	3.31	1.79	3.61	1.13

The data suggest that students enrolled in the foundation programmes from all three universities were more active users of reading strategies than students doing grades 11 and 12 at schools. Their mean score for the general statement: "I use some reading strategies" fell within the high range of strategy use (Mean= 3.67) compared with the medium use indicated by the mean score of 3.46 for school students. Moreover, a closer look at the mean scores of the individual items in this section reveals that, overall, with the exception of one item, the means obtained by the foundation programme students were consistently higher than those of school students. In fact, 8 items out of 10 reflected a high use for the foundation programme students compared with 5 items for school students. FP students'

reporting of using reading strategies at a higher rate reflects more awareness on the part of university students; a result that is similar to several other studies that examined university contexts such as Malcolm (2009) and Karbalaei (2010). In fact, Malcolm (2009) reports that awareness of reading strategies and their use increases as students' progress in their university education.

The top five most used reading strategies by school students came in the following order: 1) using a dictionary to find the meaning of unknown words, 2) guessing meaning of new words from context, 3) underlining important information, 4) scanning a text to look for specific information, and 5) predicting content before starting to read. It was not surprising to find that students in grades 11 and 12 opted to use more strategies that can help them address their vocabulary problems: The first being a support strategy and the second a problem-solving one. Although the statement in the questionnaire did not specify a particular kind of dictionary (e.g. bilingual vs. monolingual), it is quite possible that students were mainly referring to bilingual dictionaries since these tend to be more widely available in the classroom. As for the foundation programme students, it was interesting to find that the same highest strategies used by the students in post-basic education occupied the top five scores among the foundation programme students but in a slightly different order. For example, similar to school students, foundation programme students were also concerned with the strategies that could help them with their vocabulary problems. However, unlike school students, students who take foundation courses at the university tried to guess meanings of unknown words more often than they opted to use a dictionary. In a study by Prichard (2008) to test university students' dictionary use, it was found that dictionaries were used only selectively and in combination with other vocabulary learning strategies such as guessing words from context. This might indicate that as students' progress in their academic study and advance in their English proficiency level, they feel more confident to experiment with problem-solving strategies and reduce their reliance on support strategies, if both can be used for the same purpose, in this case dealing with unknown vocabulary.

Students in foundation programmes have also chosen underlining, another support strategy as their highest used one. Similar results were found by Zhang and Wu (2009) and Malcom (2009). Although underlining might seem quite a simple process, it does reflect students' ability to distinguish what is important and what is less important. Obviously, foundation programme students feel it is an indispensable aid to reading comprehension. It was not surprising to find that "guessing meaning from context" was the second highest used strategy considering that vocabulary, especially dealing with new words was the most problematic area for them. In the third rank came two strategies. The first was the support strategy using a dictionary, which seems to be another means that students used to deal with their vocabulary problems. It also seemed that students read to locate specific information in a text more often than reading to identify main ideas. Although this is normally determined by the requirements of the task that students are involved with, it might reflect a stronger confidence on the part of the foundation programme students in identifying specific rather than main ideas.

Making predictions, a global/meta-cognitive strategy that involves using other information in a text such as titles, headings and diagrams was another highly used strategy by the

foundation programme students, followed closely by rereading and writing down notes. Similar to underlining, the latter is another support strategy that students indicated using.

As for the least used reading strategy, it was disappointing to find that critiquing (evaluating) a text and deciding what is important was the least frequently used strategy by both groups of students, in spite of it falling under the range of medium use. Literature on reading strategies puts critiquing a text and evaluating it under meta-cognitive strategies (Ediger, 2008). These strategies tend to be purpose-oriented. Ediger (2008) argues that the strategy of critiquing a text and evaluating it can be used by students not only to help comprehend a text but more importantly to regulate and aid their learning process in general. However, as indicated earlier students do this less often as they feel the need to use more support and/or problem solving strategies that are more likely to help them with their more pressing reading problems such as dealing with vocabulary.

Conclusions and implications

Three major findings that emerged from the study need to be highlighted. The first one concerns the types of reading problems that Omani students encounter. It seems that the same group of problems that students have at school continue to pose similar concerns for students doing their university foundation programmes. The second finding concerns vocabulary. As evident in the study, dealing with vocabulary continues to pose a problem for students after moving to the foundation programme and seems to be a predominant obstacle both in terms of identifying their meanings and decoding. Students at both levels seem to equate their ability to comprehend a text with being able to recognize its individual words without realizing that such recognition does not necessarily mean being able to interpret their meaning (Lin, 2002). A third finding is that as students' progress through their educational levels, they find themselves in need of employing a wider range of learning strategies to help them cope with the complexity of the tasks required of them and the diverse demands of their university education.

A number of educational and pedagogic implications can be drawn from the study. Given the fact that vocabulary seems to be a central concern for students at both educational levels, serious attention needs to be given by educationalists from the two contexts not only to what vocabulary is taught but more importantly to the vocabulary learning strategies that students should be equipped with to deal with their biggest reading problem. O'Sullivan (2009) makes a similar call when he argues that "a systematic and elaborated approach to vocabulary needs to be a key priority at the heart of the teaching and learning process of English language courses for Gulf Arab learners" (p. 48). Another area that needs attention is the inclusion of exercises that activate students' prior knowledge on both content and cultural issues and are linked to other subject areas that students take during the academic year. The present study's findings on reading strategies suggest that more work on strategy awareness needs to start at the school level. In both contexts, students need to be shown that there is a wide array of strategies that could aid their reading and that their strategy use does not have to be limited to support and problem-solving strategies only. Some global/meta-cognitive strategies can be very helpful as well especially as students' progress in their academic study and have to deal with more rigorous demands of their university education.

More importantly, these suggested recommendations can only work more effectively if educationalists from the two contexts come together instead of working in isolation. Clear mechanisms of collaboration between the two contexts need to be put in place in order to be able to make real progress in students' advancement in their reading skills and their readiness to university education.

Acknowledgements

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