

## Reading Literature and its Major Problems: A Qualitative Analysis of EFL Students' Perceptions.

القراءة الادبية و مشكلاتها الرئيسية:  
تحليل نوعي لآراء طلبة الانجليزية كلفة أجنبية

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### Abstract

Teaching and learning language skills is a complex enterprise. Reading is one of the skills that require interaction between the reader and the reading material, aiming at the creation of meaning in a comprehensive way. Factors such as cultural knowledge, linguistic proficiency and motivation make EFL reading more challenging than L1 reading. In a reading context dominated by orality and lack of reading habits, EFL reading becomes a challenging experience. The present study shows that EFL students face many reading problems in that they are not only slow readers, but unskilled in comprehending the meaning of literary texts. Here appears the significance of this study which takes place in an Algerian EFL context, (department of English, University of Batna2). The qualitative collection and analysis of data reveals that vocabulary words are the main problems for readers and the paper offers recommendations for further research.

**Keywords:** Reading as a Complex Process, EFL Students, Literary Texts, Reading Problems.

### ملخص

يعتبر تدريس وتعلم مهارات اللغة من العمليات المعقدة والقراءة هي واحدة من هذه المهارات التي تتطلب تفاعلا بين القارئ ومواد القراءة بهدف خلق معاني بطريقة فعالة وشاملة. ان عوامل مثل المعرفة الثقافية، الكفاءة اللغوية ومحفزات التعلم تجعل القراءة في اللغة الاجنبية أكثر تحديا منها في اللغة الام حيث تصبح أكثر صعوبة لكونها تمارس في سياق تحكمه العادة الشفوية وكذا عدم الاهتمام بالقراءة. من هذا المنطلق، تظهر اهمية الدراسة الحالية والتي توصلت الى أن طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية، كلفة أجنبية، يواجهون عدة مشاكل متعلقة اساسا ببطء القراءة وغياب القدرة على فهم معاني النصوص الادبية. وقد تبين من خلال التحليل النوعي للمعطيات ان المفردات الادبية هي المشكل الرئيسي للقراء، وتقدم الدراسة بعض التوصيات لاجراء مزيد من البحوث في هذا المجال.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** القراءة كعملية معقدة، طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية، نصوص ادبية، مشاكل القراءة

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## **Introduction**

Reading is a complex cognitive process in which the reader, through interaction with the text, constructs meaning. During the last two decades, advances in research have improved our understanding of the reading process. Although researchers might disagree about the exact nature of the processes involved in skilled reading, it might be generally agreed on the fact that the most important parameters of reading are word recognition and comprehension. In identifying and making sense out of the words being read, readers employ strategies, together with the knowledge and expectations they bring to the reading material. Thus, reading is the skill that empowers other skills and is necessary for learners' academic success.

Reading is neither a mere decoding process that depends on identifying linguistic signs on the page, nor is it a linear process. It is featured by interaction between the reader and the reading material in the framework of meaning creation (Grabe, 1991). Besides, the reader's own culture and background knowledge is closely related to the social and ideological layers underpinning a written text. These layers interact in a way that provides the reader with textual messages. Processing information from embedded textual messages and the dependence on the reader's background knowledge and other features are often referred to as bottom-up and top-down processing. Fluent reading was described by Grabe and Stoller (2002, p.17) as:

- |                           |                            |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| “1. A rapid process       | 6. An evaluating process   |
| 2. An efficient process   | 7. A purposeful process    |
| 3. An interactive process | 8. A comprehending process |
| 4. A strategic process    | 9. A learning process      |
| 5. A flexible process     | 10. A linguistic process”: |

It has been found that L1 readers' weaknesses were due to word recognition skills, irrelevant sources of knowledge, and the use of ineffective reading strategies which lead to confusing and inefficient reading practices. As concerns weak EFL readers, these need to rely on

a variety of factors when exposed to a foreign language because of their limited lexical and syntactic knowledge, (Lin, 2002; Matsumura, 2010; Zhang, 2001) and the absence of semantic connections between their background knowledge and the one embedded in original materials (Bensoussan, 1998; Zhang, 2001). It has also been found that EFL low proficiency was likely to weaken “activation of the effective and global reading strategies” (L. Zhang 2001, p 270) employed by highly proficient readers. It was concluded, therefore, that slow EFL readers were text-oriented readers and limited in their use of reading strategies with no specific decision about what they lacked or possessed as reading strategies, (Lou, 2010; Malcolm, 2009).

Bell (2001) and Shmais (2002) have found that the majority of Arab students have difficulties with reading comprehension which originate in the absence of reading cultures and enthusiasm, poor vocabulary acquisition, low language proficiency and the ineffective strategies to teach the skills of reading.

## **1. Statement of the Problem**

The present paper investigates the reading problems faced by Algerian EFL students in a university context. By using a semi-structured interview, the main problems of reading were explored from the perspectives of students themselves. Eliciting students’ perceptions is important as it would offer a window into their metacognition; i.e. whether they are aware of the challenges or problems they face and the strategies they use to counteract them.

## **2. Research Question**

What are the students’ perceptions on the problems affecting their reading comprehension of EFL literature?

## **3. Literature Overview**

It was found by Cobb (1999) that Arab students, in general, did not reflect a good mastery of the reading skill and that poor vocabulary was the main reason for their demotivation in comprehending meanings of reading texts. Expert researchers, such as Hirsh and Nation (1992), believe that readers must know about 95% the vocabulary of an original

text in order to understand it. What is noticeable in Arab contexts is that students are not good readers of English and confront many problems of comprehension and lack of mastery of linguistic skills (Bell, 2001). This was highlighted by the fact that poor word recognition and a limited vocabulary amount are likely to produce slow and inefficient reading comprehension (Stott, 2001). Actually, the recognition of vocabulary words, for such learners, is not automatically done which makes their cognition and interest focused on a bottom-up process, with little emphasis on comprehension and other meta-cognitive skills.

O'Sullivan (2010) and Cobb (1999) noticed that both of linguistic inabilities and limited cultural knowledge are the main causes of poor and distorted reading comprehension processes. Besides, most Arab countries lack such culture as reading which makes Arab readers struggle when they attempt to make a transfer from L1 to L2, (Al-Mahrooqi & Asante, 2010; Bouzenirh, 1991; O'Sullivan, 2010; Shannon, 2003). Cummins, (cited in Scott, Bell and McCallum, 2009), believed that there is always an interdependence between L1 and L2 and thus, allowing for indirect or direct language transfer. Hence, Cummins asserts that learners experiencing difficulty in mastering a skill in L1 will also find the same difficulty in mastering the same skill in EFL which demotivates readers to get exposed to extensive reading in English as these students relate all kinds of reading to academic studies. It follows that EFL students develop no sense of appreciation of reading as the language transfer becomes difficult and challenging.

In another study conducted with students in Palestine, Mourtaga (2006, p. 16) reported saying: "our students find reading English a very complicated skill, and therefore they have many problems with it" (K. Scott, S. Bell, & R McCallum, 2009, p. 31). Four reasons were stated by the researcher in this respect: classroom teaching methods, which reflect the teachers' misunderstanding of the reading process; learners' low EFL proficiency; disparities between L1 and EFL; and the difficulty to assimilate the suprasegmental features and the structural properties of both of the mother tongue language and the foreign language.

The reading culture in Arab societies is heavily based on oral traditions, with concentration on spoken language and memorisation. Also, the teaching methods are teacher-centered, outdated and are built

on a focus on received meanings and interpretation. With reference to reading literature, it was believed by Widdowson as the negative outcome of literary studies that did not invest in such things as sensitivity or literary appreciation. Hence, the reading practice could be frustrating and demotivating for EFL students, who cannot cope with deep meanings of texts and are likely to fail in making associations and interpretations of different literary works. This could demotivate and frustrate students as they tend to feel sidelined and uninvolved in the interpretation, a task reserved only for the teacher. To deal with a literary text in a pure structural and intellectual way deprives students from the aesthetic experience inherent in such type of writings. The same goes, however, for the treatment of literary texts as products that require linguistic decomposition into main parts, which in turn hinders EFL readers to constitute a full image and consequently miss the whole reading experience.

## **4. Research Design and Methodology**

The researchers have chosen a qualitative approach for this study, recommended by McMillan and Schumacher (2006, p 315) to be followed in “an enquiry in which researchers collect data in face-to-face situations by interacting with selected persons in their setting”. It describes and analyses people’s individual and collective beliefs, social actions, and the meaning that they assign to them. The researchers employed an interactive qualitative method which used face-to-face techniques to collect data from people in their natural setting.

### **4.1. Participants and Sampling**

In qualitative studies, non-probability sampling methods are utilised and, in particular, purposive sampling techniques. In purposive sampling, a specific case is chosen because it illustrates a process that is of interest for a particular study. The researcher employed purposive sampling, whereby twenty students, studying English took part in the study. Subjects of the sample were targeted because they majored in English and were already initiated to literature courses in the Department of English, at Batna University.

## **4.2. Data Collection Method**

In addition to literature review, the semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The researchers conducted individual interviews with the participants by using an interview guide, semi-structured, and open-ended interviews to inform the research questions and to elicit participants' perspectives on the research problem. (A sample interview items are found in the appendix).The interviewees were encouraged to speak about their backgrounds as readers and the factors affecting their reading comprehension of literary works.

It is believed by Fettermann (1989) that interviewing is vital and is likely to yield more information because interviewees are given more freedom to talk than when they write. This is true when a shift is made between L1 and L2 as a means of conversation between the interviewer and the interviewees. Therefore, the Arabic language was occasionally used and helped the participants overcome the difficulties posed by lack of proficiency in English and encouraged them to reveal their perceptions.

Semi-structured interviews are deliberately chosen for their flexibility and their ability to get honest and accurate information as long as because they give the interviewer an opportunity to explain and clarify a point without losing focus. Researchers also assert that data gleaned from semi-structured interviews contribute well when compared with other data collection techniques in terms of the validity of the responses obtained because the possibility to meet justification is one of its advantages. The questions of the interviews were sometimes paraphrased in order to elicit more information. Prompts such as, "Can you give me an example?" or "Can you clarify that?" were used whenever necessary. Noval issues and questions appeared in the course of conversation. These emerging questions provided a follow up to the responses and helped the researcher to better understand the participants' perceptions. In order to avoid redundancy and repetition; some of the pre-determined questions were sometimes not asked as their answers could be found in answers or elaborations of other questions. Some other items were, however, rephrased to meet the interview requirements.

### **4.3. Data Analysis**

The interviewees were met individually by the researcher during the second semester of the academic year 2017-2018. The participants were told to take their time and feel free in expressing their views and perceptions. However, the average time of each interview ranged from 20 to 25 minutes. The researcher transcribed data and arranged the transcription into folders for easy access, then used a coding system as well as themes and sub-themes to analyse it. The researcher used the recordings made during the interviews to analyse the data and quoting the participants' responses verbatim in order to confirm or make a statement and to give substance to the findings. The researcher also recorded details of the context surrounding the problem, including the physical environment and other factors (historical, economic and social) with a bearing on the situation (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). After the transcription, analysis and categorisation of the interviews, the participants' profiles as EFL readers were drawn from their background factors and the problems they faced were put into categories according to themes and sub-themes affecting their reading of literature. In what follows, we account for the qualitative data analysis and discuss the findings simultaneously.

## **5. Findings and Discussion**

The presentation of the study findings starts with the presentation of the participants' profiles as EFL readers because through this we can get an insight into their backgrounds and socio-cultural setting which has an effect on their reading habits and abilities and is likely to impact their ways of approaching the reading of EFL literature. Furthermore, we clarify the problems and issues faced by EFL readers in relation to their background factors and motivation.

### **5.1. The Participants' Profiles as EFL Readers**

Arabic is the mother tongue language of all female participants in the present study and 10 of them speak some French. All the participants were educated in public schools and began learning English in the middle-school stage. Overall, the interviewees did not have opportunities to communicate in English outside classroom

settings. This limited use of English was emphasized by 15 out of the 20 participants, with the exception of 5 participants who indicated that they speak English sometimes at home because of the encouragement and interest shown by their family members in using English as a medium of conversation. However, these few participants declared that by starting to talk in English for a few minutes, they usually switch to Arabic as it suits them better in communication. Two participants (5 & 8) had brothers who studied medicine and had a good potential in English, and they seized every opportunity to converse in English. Participant 10 had also a cousin who mastered English and provided continuing support to her by creating authentic communicative situations. The same goes for interviewee (6) who had a sister with a mastery of the English language as she benefited from a scholarship to Britain where she carried on her doctoral research. So, she was a real source of inspiration to her sister as they devoted time and effort to rehearsal and practice of especially reading speaking skills.

The qualitative analysis of the the interviewees' background motives revealed that most of the participants grew up in the suburbs and distant areas from the capital Wilaya, and did not gain easy access to books or meet educated people to help them develop a taste for reading. All of the participants, except (1, 16, 4, 18 and 19) clarified that they studied with almost no textbooks throughout their middle-school stage, which they believed to have been the cause of their misfortune and failure in creating a basis in English as well as in Arabic. Participant 16 responded that she had no problem with books, but she was not really fond of reading. She stressed that listening to English songs and other material is more preferable to her than reading. Interviewee 4 was found to have many novels and books at home, but she rarely spent time reading one of her collection, the reason for which was the lack of interest and motivation. On the other side of the spectrum, however, only four interviewees expressed their avidity and true love of reading both of English and Arabic literatures. Besides, three other interviewees admitted to have regularly devoted more time for additional reading apart from the official assignments received in academic settings. These successful readers used to exploit their leisure time and summer holidays in favour of enjoyable reading and comprehension. Reading literary works was their favourite choice as



this was found to create a positive feedback for their specialization as EFL students. Actually, all the literary genres, such as novels, short stories and poetry constituted the raw material for these readers.

However, poetry was believed to be a hard business to do, i.e., both of its form and content present a challenge to readers, although it remains a formidable type of reading that teaches enjoyment, appreciation and a general mastery of English. Despite the fact that the interviewees explained their preconceptions and negative judgments about English poetry before they were introduced to it, they later changed their minds when they found how poems, such as *The Daffodils* by W. Wordsworth, are loaded with beautiful meanings, messages and human contemplation, all of which make them eager to read more poetry in English. The difficulty of diction or poetic words remained, nonetheless, the greatest challenge for the participants because difficult words hindered them in their attempt to enjoy, comprehend or figure out the intended meaning of English poetry.

It has also been found that the participants of the study read poetry with a variety of aims and purposes; some read to develop their reading and linguistic skills, others stressed the historical or cultural background conveyed in works of fiction, novels and short stories, while other interviewees showed their interest in acquiring new and sophisticated vocabulary items to be used in the practice of other productive skills namely; speaking and writing. Reading poems aloud was also found efficient in practicing pronunciation and related prosodic features. Of course, a few other interviewees were found to combine all of the preceding objectives and purposes when reading poetry in English. Now, regarding the interviewees' ability and potential in reading English, these were rated as good with a great possibility for improvement through their will and devotion to learn the necessary literary terms and figurative language, as these were described from the start as the main demotivators for the EFL interviewees. Another revealed fact concerned the participants' struggle with passages that were almost inaccessible to them, hence their tendency to think in Arabic, find equivalents and looking up keywords in dictionaries. However, all of the participants explained that translation of vocabulary words and thinking in Arabic were no longer

pre-dominant compared to when they were first introduced to reading EFL literature.

As concerns the English reading speed, all of the interviewees responded that they were somehow slow readers and that they were sometimes obliged to read stories many times to be able to understand their meaning. Other difficulties were attributed to the difference between the Algerian culture and the culture portrayed in the story or to the complexity of the writing style. Furthermore, watching English movies, documentaries and some news was another significant and motivating preoccupation of all the interviewees, however, they avowed to have lacked cultural immersion and awareness necessary to make them fathomed with the so many dimensions of the Western culture inherent in those movies and related material. The translation of English movies into Arabic subtitles had also been a concern of all the participants. They believed that English movies were a rich source of practice and knowledge, except that the translation deters their attention from the linguistic and cultural benefits of the movies and focus instead on translated lines.

### **5.2. The Interviewees' Perceptions of the reading Challenges**

The qualitative analysis of data has shown an interrelationship between language and culture, in that participants pointed out that linguistic and cultural factor sometimes present a difficult problem in comprehension and prevent involvement in reading the literary texts. In what follows, we account for the linguistic and cultural factors which, according to EFL students, affected their comprehension and involvement in the reading materials; this is in addition to the established connection between the two sets of factors as originally mentioned by the participants.

#### **5.2.1 The problem of Vocabulary Words: (Linguistic Factors)**

The female participants did not see themselves as proficient readers and, thus, focused on various linguistic factors which they considered as barricades in their attempt to read and understand literary

texts. The difficulty caused by vocabulary items was perceived as the main culprit in the reading process. All of the interviewees shared the same view about vocabulary as the biggest problem in reading comprehension, which meets study findings conducted by such researchers as Cobb (1999). Moreover, literary texts are loaded with new diction that writers use in a special and innovative way to create an effect on the reader. Dependently, the interviewees indicated that they would neither understand nor appreciate the reading materials, if the latter contained more than 30 percent of strange and clumsy words. The result, they believed, could be disinterest and giving up reading. One of the interviewees (interviewee 5) declared that she majored in English (during her first year) and was used to read English stories very often in the department library. However, the limited vocabulary scope made her unable to have easy access to the multi-layered meanings of stories and consequently, she found herself unable to proceed with what she started reading.

The pronunciation of new literary terms appeared to exacerbate the participants' already unskilled reading speed. This was confirmed by a participant saying: "Any reader finds himself obliged to use the dictionary to explain the meaning of some words, and also stops at every difficult word and tries to pronounce it correctly, which is, actually, time consuming and demotivating."

(Interviewee 4). In the same respect, another interviewee said: "A few weeks ago, I started reading a short story titled *Eveline* by the Irish Writer James Joyce, and I was surprised by the amount of new vocabulary items used by the writer in an artistic and innovative way. I was obliged to stop at every new word, search its meaning and pronounce, which takes a lot of time and slows my reading speed." (Interviewee 12). It follows that linguistic problems, new vocabulary words, were the main reason for students' failure and demotivation to read and enjoy literature in English. Besides, performing subvocalization and vocalization when reading and not understanding the figurative use of linguistic words are likely to affect the reading process by reducing the amount of comprehension and resulting thus into misinterpretations and lack of efficiency, along with psychological involvement (Mourtaga, 2006).

### **5.2.2. Idiomaticity, Proverbial expressions and Slang as Problems: (Cultural Factors)**

Language in use implies not only vocabulary words as linguistic elements, but also cultural elements too. These cultural elements in both forms- concrete and abstract- are embedded in every society, but require semantic mechanisms for intelligible communication. This fact has properly been perceived by the interviewees in that, all of them tackled such elements as dialects, colloquialism, slang expressions and proverbs and how these were significant in their attempts to read, understand and interpret meanings of literary texts. One important fact conceived by the interviewees was related to linguistic and cultural formulas and how the latter might either have or not equivalents in other cultures.

It has been reported by an interviewee that her teacher always uses idiomatic expressions in his oral expression class. She said: “At the beginning of every oral expression class, the teacher provides us with a few idioms and asks us to provide their equivalents in French or in Arabic. However, most of the classmates do not understand the meaning of these idioms and cannot provide equivalents even in Arabic (interviewee 3). In addition, to talk about idioms is to talk about fiction as the latter is a fruitful source of knowledge about idioms and how they function. Another participant said: “In the story “For Whom the Bell Tolls”, a novel by Ernest Hemingway, I and my classmates could not figure out the meaning of this idiomatic title until later when the teacher provided us with a historical, social and political background of the work that we understood that this is a book with death on the mind. It is about a war, and people die in wars. But it is also a meditation on death. Because of the war situation, all of the characters face their own death, and the possibility of having to inflict death on those they are fighting against, or fighting with” (Interviewee 7).

The use of colloquialism, slang, jargon and dialects in literature was found to be another hindrance for most of the participants in the present study. One participant stated: “It was really a hard experience to cope with words found in the book. It was the novel of J.D. Salinger, entitled “The Catcher in the Rye”, where all students were not at ease with the exact meaning of colloquial diction, and consequently missed

the cultural and psychological experience of the protagonist. For example, we couldn't understand the meaning of words like "phonies", "goddam", "Sleep tight, ya morons!" which required explanation and sustenance from the teacher" (Interviewee 14).

Many comments were made by the interviewees regarding the difficulty posed by old English in classical works of literature. One of the participants commented in this respect: "The study of Shakespeare's works is a good and interesting thing, but very challenging. You know, we studied last year a sonnet titled "Shall I Compare thee to a Summer's Day" and most of the vocabulary words were difficult to understand. The figurative language such as, "Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade", presupposes certain reading skills and mastery of poetical functions of language; otherwise, the whole picture is missed" (Interviewee 11).

Among the different reading strategies that helped in acquiring new vocabulary items, was the frequency of word use. The participants believed that the words were repeated in a text, the more they retained them in the long-term memory. So, the memorisation of new words was likely to

simplify comprehension in future contexts. This memorisation was also found to be closely related to the interestingness of the literary work. Most of the participants favored stories that are loaded with dialogues as these helped a lot in understanding the chronology of narration as well the identification of motives. Besides, realistic fiction was of a paramount significance to the interviewees. Many of them commented that these stories resemble real life, and fictional characters within these stories act similarly to real people. This was confirmed by a participant saying: "Realistic fiction has plots that highlight social and personal events or issues that mirror daily life, such as falling in love, marriage, finding a job, divorce, alcoholism, etc" (Interviewee 10). It follows that the sense of realism that writers attributed to their literary works, especially fiction, created in readers a great belief in the utility of literature in peoples' lives and sharp their vision might grow through time.

### **5.2.3. The Problem of Stylistics**

It has been mentioned earlier that dialogues and dialogism were elements connected with the writer's chosen style for presenting his written material. So, the conversational and dialogic aspect of fiction summoned a bunch of comments about the impact of style on readers' understanding and involvement. The sophisticated styles of writing were viewed by the interviewees as obstacles in understanding stories. This is true when EFL readers are introduced to fiction works that do not follow the wherein the stories do not follow the traditional plot organisation; that is a beginning; a middle and an end, but start instead from the middle of things, or in "medias-res". Another problematic issue for most of the interviewees was the symbolic and ambiguous nature of literary works, which lies at the centre of the the writer's tone and diction to address his audience of readers.

The Arabic background knowledge of symbols and symbolism was perceived as inefficient in interpreting the symbolic meanings embedded in English literature. For instance, description of nature in William Wordsworth's poetry was acknowledged to be a challenging task for the participants. One majoring participant stated the "Daffodills", "is centred on the motifs of colour and movement. The poet adds to the "golden daffodils" other colourful elements of nature: cloud, vales, hills, lake, trees, and introduces the motif of light with "the stars that shine/ And twinkle on the Milky Way" and "sparkling waves", all of which were crucial to correct interpretation (Interviewee 4).

### **5.2.4. The Problem of Melting Pot; Style, Content and Culture**

Quite a number of reading problems were related by the interviewees to the fusion of style, content and culture. The participants thought that an easy style of writing generates an easy content that can be accessed by readers and perfectly understood. However, when the writing style is hard and complicated, the content is likely to appear inaccessible and the deep meanings hidden inside remain abstract and culturally void for EFL readers. Another significant issue, however, concerned the participants' views about the hard conceptualisation of unfamiliar events and settings which negatively affected their ability to

relate these elements to the development and growth of characters in their fictional world. One of the participants noted: "Every story is influenced by its setting. Therefore, it is important to consider a work's cultural context. Culture can refer to the beliefs, customs, values, and activities of a particular group of people at a particular time. Objects produced by a given culture express these values in both conscious and unconscious ways. Works of fiction are particularly good indexes of these values, in that they often engage the culture in depth (Interviewee 7). Another interviewee gave a good example in this respect, stating that "Works of the writer James Joyce are very significant and worth-studying. If you take, for instance, "A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man", you will find that it deals with Joyce's home, Dublin. To understand the culture of this city and read its meaning, one has to decipher it" ( Interviewee 8).What was said by the interviewee was by far relevant and consistent, in that the protagonist of the novel, "Stephen Dedalus", is one who deciphers the cultural signs such as paralysis, religion, prostitution and confession through his walking in Dublin. He considers them as nets of Dublin that he tries to escape from them.

According to the theory articulated by contemporary researchers, readers' schemata provide much of the input needed for their comprehension and learning of the ideas in the discourses (Bower & Cirilo, 1985; Rubin, 1995). Many interviewees expressed their perplexity about what to do with new elements of the story, which was an indication for the lack of relevant background knowledge. For example, one participant commented on the difficulty she and her classmates had experienced while studying "Lady Lazarus", a poem by "Sylvia Plath". She said: "When we were introduced to the poem, we were given enough time by the teacher to read it, and try to make interpretations and literary associations. The task was, however, very complex for us, and we did not manage to proceed with the analysis. I think we lacked certain knowledge in relation to this type of writing. So, we were not able to make associations on a psycho-analytical basis. I can give the exapmle of the oft-quoted metaphor, "dying is an art", which was seen by "Plath" as a declaration in which a perverted form of accomplishment is asserted, and the metaphor of the peanut-crunching crowd as an example of her exhibitionism that belongs to the

suicidal urge. You know, it was really hard to conceive of those things” (Interviewee 4).

### **5.2.5. The Problem of Literary Genres**

The study revealed that many of the participants favoured reading non-fiction works and occasionally some fictional stories. This leads to the fact that fictional genres, basically novels and short stories, presented another challenging problem in students’ reading comprehension of English literature. Intercultural connotations were also among the problems evoked by the participants in this present study. They all agreed upon the significance of English literature in providing them with a cultural background of the Western societies and institutions. However, cultural issues and phenomena should be carefully selected to avoid disturbing situations caused by obscene and taboo contexts such as sexuality, rape, eroticism and gayness. One evidence was taken verbatim from a participant, who said: “In the reading classroom, the culturally shocking situations are usually due to the teacher’s unintentional choice of literary works that are provocative and challenging to the students’ native culture. I remember when our teacher explained briefly some of the concepts recurrent in western culture, and gave an example from “Ulysses”, a famous novel by “James Joyce”, where obscene words like menstruation, defecation and urination were of a common use. Most of us could not really understand the various dimensions of this special style and consequently did not enjoy the situation.” (Interviewee 17).

However, the blunt ardor of Joyce’s literary works is more subtle and complex that an EFL reader will face the hardship of comprehension. The high cultural qualities of “Joyce’s’ works justified his frankness in presenting all the obscene processes mentioned by the interviewee. Besides, what the writer sought was a primal accuracy of response, unequalled in its truthfulness, so that for once at least the world might behold a man as he was within. Moreover, the genre of poetry was not really favoured by the interviewees. They declared their appreciation of non-fiction and fiction materials better than poetry. It is commonly accepted that the poetic diction of poems implies elaborate figures of speech, metaphors and artificial devices which are not easy to analyse and comprehend. So, EFL readres tend naturally to accept



straightforward writings that evoke interesting topics with less linguistic complexity.

### **5.2.6. The Problem of Language Proficiency**

It should be admitted that the various linguistic factors mentioned earlier had become problematic in relation to the language proficiency of the interviewees. As reported in the discussion of the participants' profiles, we showed that the interviewees were not proficient in language aspects such as vocabulary items, stylistic structures and other genre properties. Actually, the participants' loose and weak skills in English language originated from the differing nature of both EFL and their mother tongue languages. Many students described themselves as slow readers in situations where linguistic and cultural elements are met, which resulted into inefficient reading comprehension. The lack of English language proficiency was also stressed in the participants' accounts. Many of them stated that their failure in understanding the linguistic and cultural dimensions of texts in English makes them opt for Arabic translation. But, the immediate effect of translation was seen as negative because it creates in students a mechanical thinking and interpretation in Arabic, which distorts the whole picture of authentic texts.

A few participants, however, expressed their wish to become proficient readers of English literature by changing their former reading habits. Their linear and straightforward thinking and interpretation in Arabic hindered them from acquiring a sophisticated vision of how literature in English is universal and inclusive of "Weltanschauung"; a comprehensive conception or image of the universe and of humanity's relation to it. What remains significant, ultimately, is an attempt to lessen the negative effects of language shift by creating a framework of negotiation between the two cultures present in the reading process; the mother tongue and the foreign language culture.

## **6. Recommendations for Future Research**

It is recommended that researchers might conduct further research to better understand the learners' attitudes towards reading in English as a foreign language, compared to their motivation to read in

their mother tongue language. This can be done by using research methodologies that combine both quantitative and qualitative data gathering tools, triangulating the findings and ultimately achieve comprehensive and well-founded conclusions.

It is also recommended that further research in this field may shed more light on the process of effective reading comprehension and thus guide EFL teachers towards more effective instruction, especially in cases when readers exhibit a range of reading problems and challenges.

## **Conclusion**

As stated at the beginning of the paper, reading is a complex process with many interactive factors that form up meanings for readers to get from reading materials. This statement has been evidenced in the study findings. Besides, the interaction of various factors, such as style of writing, linguistic proficiency, genre, content and context, were found to be the parameters that determine the decisions of EFL readers about either proceeding with the reading material or simply giving up. The findings have also shown that vocabulary items were perceived by the participants as the main problems they faced in reading literature.

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## **Appendix**

Items of the semi-structured interviews:

1. Would you please tell me something about yourself as a reader?
2. How much do you love reading?
3. Do you practice reading now?
5. What about reading in English?
6. What do you exactly read?
7. What about reading in Arabic?
8. What do you exactly read?
9. How did you perceive English literature before being introduced to literature courses?
10. Do you face problems when you read literature in English? What kind of problems?
11. What about reading Arabic literature? Are there any challenges?
12. What could be your main problem when you read literature in English?
- 13- What is your main problem when you read literature in Arabic?
14. How would you rank these challenges?
15. Do you think you're a proficient English reader?
16. What about reading proficiency in Arabic?
17. Is there anything you wish to add about yourself as a reader?