



Pre-Reading Questions and Their Effect on Comprehension: A Study of EFL Learners' Engagement with Text

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This study inspects the effect of pre-reading questions on Saudi EFL learners' reading comprehension and engagement, grouping both cognitive and emotional responses. Deep-rooted in schema theory, the research employs a mixed-methods approach to analyze quantitative and qualitative data from pre- and post-tests, as well as student interviews. Sixty students from grade 4 participated in this study. The results disclose that pre-reading questions ominously increase learners' ability to identify main ideas, sequence information, and recall details, while their effect on vocabulary acquisition remains limited. Qualitative data analysis highlights that pre-reading questions reduce anxiety, boost confidence, and provide a structured framework for approaching texts, although some students report challenges such as narrowed focus and overwhelm when questions are overly complex. The findings of the present study support existing literature on the benefits of pre-reading strategies while contributing new insights into their application in Middle Eastern EFL contexts. Limitations include a small sample size and limited exploration of question types and text complexities. Future research may address these gaps by incorporating larger samples, objective measures, and longitudinal designs to refine the use of pre-reading questions. The present study underscores the value of pre-reading questions as a pedagogical tool to improve comprehension and engagement, offering practical implications for EFL instruction.

Keywords: pre-reading, strategies, skills, comprehension, questions, EFL

INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the four essential language skills for individuals acquiring English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL). EFL students must study English books to acquire information for careers and academic pursuits. The capacity to understand texts that constitute the majority of their foreign language education is, hence, crucial for all learners. The inadequate English reading proficiency of EFL students is frequently acknowledged in the classroom. Multiple factors have been discovered concerning the inadequate English reading skills of EFL students. These encompass insufficient reading resources, an absence of a robust reading culture, a deficiency in knowledge of reading strategies, and educators' employment of ineffective teaching methodologies.

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Research demonstrates two things that significantly influence students' comprehension of a text: sufficient vocabulary and relevant prior knowledge. A greater vocabulary enhances pupils' comprehension of a material (Nation, 2001). Also, the greater the prior knowledge and experience students possess on a specific issue, the more effectively they comprehend the material. Nation (2001) contends that while language comprehension does not equate to reading comprehension, the latter is unattainable without vocabulary and understanding.

Conversely, Ajideh (2006) asserts that a significant challenge encountered by EFL students is their lack of familiarity with the subject matter of the reading material, rendering their efforts to respond to reading comprehension questions mostly ineffective. The issue lies not in the absence of underlying knowledge, but rather in the activation of such knowledge. Ajideh (2006) asserts that most English teachers disregard pre-reading activities. These activities, grounded in schema theory, address the challenges faced by EFL students by facilitating knowledge acquisition and the activation of prior knowledge.

Employing diverse ways and tactics is essential for improving pupils' reading comprehension abilities and fostering advanced learning. English educators bear the obligation to implement varied reading strategies and promote critical thinking to facilitate students' comprehension of intricate literature. Reading comprehension encompasses various characteristics, including cognition, language, and socio-cultural elements, complicating the task for educators to formulate an efficient and effective reading method (Alenizi, 2019).

The efficacy of reading methods and tactics in enhancing learners' comprehension is well acknowledged. Language educators must acknowledge the importance of reading engagement. Reading engagement is crucial for children who struggle with reading comprehension, since it offers immediate enjoyment and satisfaction from reading for pleasure, along with long-term educational and other advantages. Reading engagement results in a variety of reading tactics that encompass mental states or dispositions referred to as "Habits of Mind" (HoM). Traits such as impulse control, empathetic listening, rational and flexible thinking, and perseverance constitute the HoM. These factors are essential for fostering students' effective problem-solving abilities by improving their capacity to formulate appropriate questions, analyze available information, and engage in critical thinking. Reading objectives in language courses are enhanced to develop Habits of Mind (HoM) skills in reading practices, stemming from the connection between reading comprehension and the encouragement of interaction between students and reading material. Furthermore, language educators emphasize collaborative reading exercises to provide their pupils with a social environment that could improve reading comprehension. This includes group discussions, home reading assignments, and other reading-related activities that promote critical thinking on texts and facilitate interpretive exchanges among students (Abdel Halim ,2017).

Thus, involving and exposing students to more interactive, critical-reading-related activities would be beneficial in improving the students' comprehension in an English classroom.

The importance of questioning before reading is that it helps with learning among EFL students who may have difficulty with language and cultural differences, in new text situations. In the context of EFL teaching, having questions before reading helps students comprehend by leading them to comprehend main points, acquire the background and make inferences. Scholarship in schema theory highlights the importance of applying prior knowledge prior to reading—a principle that is in consonance with the practice of utilizing reading queries for creating a mind structure for new facts. Nevertheless, while pre-reading questions are often applied to research that empirically explored their influence on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' engagement and comprehension.

The research aims to investigate how posing questions before reading impacts the understanding and interest of EFL students in texts to provide insights into enhancing comprehension strategies in EFL environments and improving academic performance, through increased motivation and concentration levels, among learners.

Research questions

- 1- In what ways do pre-reading questions affect EFL learners' engagement with reading texts?
- 2- How do the Saudi EFL learners perceive the use of pre-reading questions in facilitating their understanding of texts?

Literature review

The method of incorporating pre-reading questions to facilitate reading comprehension has attracted considerable interest in research on second language acquisition. This approach, rooted in schema theory, suggests that by engaging with existing knowledge before reading texts (Anderson & Pearson 1984) readers are able to grasp information more effectively. Pre-reading questions act as a teaching aid to activate students' prior knowledge and focus their attention on concepts while preventing overwhelm (Hudson 2009). It is in EFL contexts, in particular, where this approach is useful since language learners often face language-related and culture-related issues that could hinder understanding.

According to research findings, pre-reading queries can improve the understanding of what's read by giving readers a reason for reading it for and an angle to read it from. When readers are tasked with answering a question or finding an idea, they engage with the content more intentionally which helps them better extract important information as highlighted by Grabe & Stoller (2019). Carrell & Eisterhold (1983) research shows that this method is particularly advantageous for EFL students as it assists them in conquering their vocabulary and unfamiliar references by focusing their attention on specific aspects. A study conducted by Alptekin, et al. (2002) revealed that giving reading questions to Turkish students learning English as a foreign language notably improved their capacity to remember key points and deduce meanings from texts—testifying the effectiveness of pre-reading questions in facilitating comprehension.

Additionally, the use of questions before reading seems to influence how engaged and motivated learners are. As stated by Day and Park (2005), EFL students who are given

reading questions tend to approach the text with curiosity and enthusiasm. This boosts their drive to read. Intrinsic motivation has a connection to comprehension results as interested readers are more likely to take on challenging sections and actively try to understand unfamiliar information. According to research conducted by Park and Kim (2018) on Korean EFL students, pupils mentioned that pre-reading questions helped them focus better on the text and boosted their confidence in tackling English. This, resultantly improved their overall understanding scores.

However, not all studies have displayed similar findings. A few investigations propose that the impact of reading queries may differ depending on the complexity of the text, the proficiency level of students, and the preciseness of the questions asked. For instance, Taboada & Rutherford (2011) in a study found that while pre-reading questions enhanced understanding for EFL learners, advanced learners did not experience much improvement perhaps because of their capability to interact with texts independently and autonomously. Moreover, asking questions that are too detailed could potentially hinder students ability to think critically as it may lead them to concentrate on specific parts of the text instead of forming a comprehensive grasp of the material (Wong 2015).

In the scholarship, literature suggests that using pre-reading questions can be an effective method to improve the understanding and involvement of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. The study expands on these conclusions by looking into how Saudi EFL students view reading questions and examining their impact on comprehension and engagement with texts. This research aims to provide an understanding of the significance of reading questions in the EFL classroom by considering learners' personal experiences, alongside measurable comprehension results.

METHOD

Research Design

The current study utilized the quasi-experimental design for assessing the impact of pre-reading questions on the skills of readers. In this study, the researcher applied one sample group combined with the pretest-posttest method. Quasi-experimental design is seen as the best available study technique when true experiment designs are constrained by ethical limitations or feasibility concerns. By comparing the outcomes of the pretest and post-test, we can understand what would have happened if the pre-reading activities have an impact on the reading comprehension skills of the respondents.

Respondents of the Study

This study used sixty (60) grade 4 English major students at the English and Translation Department, Majmaah University, Saudi Arabia. They were taught the course entitled "reading comprehension 3". The text book entitled "New Interactions 3 Reading comprehension" was used. Ten students were randomly selected for an interview.

Research Instrument

To get the impact of pre-reading questions on students' comprehension, the study adopted Oxford Placement Test where the group took a pre-test and a posttest of

reading comprehension. The pre-test reading questions were set at the end of the passages while in the posttest were sets prior to the reading text. The adjusted tests included a total of 50 test items for assessing the readers' proficiency level, including the identification of main ideas and salient points, structuring the information, recalling immediately, forming inferences or predictions, and the understanding of unfamiliar terms. All the learners in the group took part in research. Lessons were taught at different times of the day every week. The class teacher used all the activities and assessments prepared by the researcher for all three classes. Each lesson or reading activity took about 75 minutes.

Interview questions

After the experiment was finished, some students were asked to answer the following questions:

- 1-Can you describe how pre-reading questions help you understand the text better, if at all?
- 2-How do you feel when you see questions before starting to read a new text? Do they make the reading process easier or more challenging?
- 3-In your experience, what effect do pre-reading questions have on your focus or attentiveness when reading a text?
- 4-Do you think pre-reading questions change how you approach reading? If so, in what way?
- 5-How helpful do you find pre-reading questions in guiding you to important ideas in the text?

Research Procedure

Planning phase

The departmental permission was sought to conduct study with the designated EFL students. After receiving the permission, the respondents were approached in their class and oriented of what was expected of them. It was only possible because the researcher himself took the class.

Pre-treatment phase

After administering the Oxford Placement Test, the 4th level learners were subjected to a pretest. In the pre-test, students took a test with post reading comprehension questions. All the learners in the group took part in research. Lessons were taught at different times of the day, every week. The teacher used all the activities and assessments prepared by the researcher for all three classes. Each lesson was about 75 minutes long.

Post-treatment phase

The students were given a comprehension text with pre-reading questions as a post-test. The researcher asked the respondents to read the questions first before reading the text.

Statistical Treatment of Data

After the data collection process, statistical analysis was performed. A systematic categorization, analysis, and interpretation of the data were performed by the analyst. To support the analysis and discussions, some statistical tools were applied. In

particular, the mean and the standard deviation were computed. A test for differences was also applied to find out the significant difference in the pretest and the posttest data of the respondents. The descriptive statistical values of overall mean: 4 -6 for Satisfactory, 6-7 for Very Satisfactory, and 7-9 for excellent, 3-4 Fair.

FINDINGS

Quantitative data analysis

Table 1

Mean Pre-test Scores of Reading Comprehension before using the Pre-reading questions

Reading Comprehension	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Identifying main idea and key details	5.27	1.62	Satisfactory
Sequencing	6.87	1.76	Very Satisfactory
Direct recalling questions	6.60	2.58	Very Satisfactory
Making inferences or predictions	5.07	2.21	Satisfactory
Identifying Unfamiliar vocabulary	3.53	1.48	Fair
Total	5.67	1.97	

The table presents the pretest scores of reading comprehension before using pre-reading questions. The results indicate the attainment of a significant score for the identification of the main idea, recording a mean value of 5.27, suggesting their capacity for the understanding of core concepts during the act of reading. Students scored high levels of 6.87 and 6.60 for the sequencing and recall questions, respectively. This demonstrates their capacity for the right identification and ordering of incidents. Respondents scored the highest possible levels for the domains of the ordering and recall questions. This indicates the ability of the students to grasp the text reasonably. Here, organization of events is another strong strategy for understanding due to several reasons. For instance, organization helps the different abilities of the learners to structure knowledge and ideas effectively. This is the ability required for solving problems in various subject domains like science and social studies, and also for overall understanding.

Engaging the students towards the identification of various elements of the text increases their ability for recounting or summarizing the text for others. Rather than recounting the whole narrative, the students will analyze the text by dividing the text into its various elements like the beginning, climax, and ending. This is a planned technique for analyzing the structure of the text and thus building their writing skills. Teachers need to devise properly sequenced questions for building deeper understanding for the students. Properly planned questions can inspire creative thoughts, promote discussion, and allow the students to explore the subject extensively. Poorly worded questions can hinder the analysis by causing uncertainty, scaring the students, and restricting their creative expression. Consequently, educators must prioritize posing clear and direct questions rather than relying on the traditional approach of merely prompting students to retrieve content. The students scored satisfactory grade of 5.07 for their capacity for making inferences and forecasts, demonstrating their ability to make conclusions with slight inaccuracies. However, their capacity for recognizing unknown terms scored fair, the lowest possible. This suggests that while they can recognize unknown terms from the text, they experience some limitations when doing this (Tofade et al., 2015). Vocabulary awareness play an

essential role in comprehending the text. Inadequate vocabulary and the inability to possess strong word sense often hinder the learner's ability to perceive the author's message in the text. None of the learners scored outstanding grades for the test.

Table 2

Mean Pre-test Scores of Reading Comprehension after using the Pre-reading questions

Posttest Experimental Group	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Identifying main idea and key details	7.90	2.77	Excellent
Sequencing	8.13	2.40	Excellent
Direct recalling questions	9.23	0.90	Excellent
Making inferences or predictions	5.43	1.87	Satisfactory
Identifying unfamiliar vocabulary	4.03	1.43	Satisfactory
Total	6.54	1.75	

Table 2 depicts the mean scores achieved in reading comprehension test after the use of pre-reading questions in the classroom. Students achieved the overall average score of 7.90, demonstrating excellent levels. This proves some improvement towards the understanding of the main idea and the main points, from the statistics for the overall average scores. In terms of the structure and recall by type of question, the mean value of 8.13 and the value of 9.23 reflect improvement towards the overall average scores. This demonstrates progress after the use of pre-reading questions in the classroom. The data depicts that from the five reading comprehension skills, students performed well towards the setting of direct recall questions, and the extraction of the text effectively. Additionally, unfamiliar word recognitions were demonstrated to improve from satisfactory and fair levels towards the level where all recognitions were satisfactory. This suggests the practice environment helps improve the skills for reading comprehension, given the environment increases the awareness and focus towards the text by the students, thus resulting in enhanced performance levels.

Table 3

Statistical significance between students' reading comprehension in the pre-test and post-test

Performance Scores	Mean Score	SD	T- Value	df	p-value
Pre- Test	8.8	2.12	4.78	8	.000**
Post- Test	11.87	2.16			

Table 3 showcases the comparative performance of students concerning Pre-Reading Questions and Their Effect on Comprehension. For students' comprehension, the pre-test mean score is 8.8 with a standard deviation of 2.12, denoting a 'High' level of comprehension. Further, the post-test scores suggest a mean value of 11.87 with a standard deviation of 2.16, again indicating a 'High' comprehension level. The change was statistically significant with a p-value of .000, which is less than 0.05.

Qualitative data analysis

This part discusses students' understanding of pre-reading questions and the role of pre-reading questions in the reading process. The identified themes give a better understanding of the data collection process as well as the richness of the participants' experiences and the impact of pre-reading questions on comprehension, attention, affect, and processing.

Facilitating Comprehension and Preparation

All the students agreed that pre-reading questions helps in getting ready for the text as they serve as a conceptual framework to approach it. Thus, students believe that by understanding the key concepts and being able to expect the content in advance, they are able to make more meaningful connections.

Student A observed:

"The questions give me a sense of what to expect, which makes it easier to connect the ideas while reading."

This response shows that pre-reading questions help in the preparation of the students by eliciting prior knowledge and influencing the cognitive process especially when it comes to difficult or new text. But some of the students have expressed some limitations of this approach.

Student B expressed:

"Sometimes, they confuse me because I start looking for answers instead of reading naturally."

This hints a possible limitation: there is a possibility that overemphasizing on how to find answers may somehow hinder the overall understanding of the text. These responses indicate that pre-reading questions can be useful for comprehension, but they should also include more open-ended questions that allow students to discover information on their own.

Emotional Responses and Ease of Reading

Pre-reading questions had a mixed effect on respondents; some felt positive while others felt negative. The majority of the students stated that these questions helped in reducing anxiety as they provided a goal that was to be achieved by reading the text.

Student C remarked:

"I feel more prepared and less nervous because I know what to look for."

Pre-reading questions help the students to build confidence as they give a clear understanding to the students who may be overwhelmed by the content to be covered. However, the appearance and the level of difficulty of the questions that are designed can have the reverse effects.

Student D shared:

"It can be a bit overwhelming, especially if the questions seem too hard."

For such students, pre-reading questions can cause stress thereby leading to feelings of inadequacy or frustration. This further highlights the careful formation of question statements for the students.

Impact on Focus and Attention

Pre-reading questions are considered as tools which can help to improve the students' concentration and attention while reading. This is because these questions are set in advance, so students are able to identify what information is important in the text.

Student E noted:

"They make me more focused because I know what information is important."

This view is in accordance with the theory of selective attention according to which students direct their cognitive resources to certain parts of the text depending on the questions. But, certain learners expressed that such focus could at times be too concentrated.

Student F explained:

"I think they distract me because I keep checking if I found the answer."

This feedback suggests that pre-reading questions should be formulated in a way that will help the students to engage in a focused manner and with an overall approach regarding how they will read the text.

Adjusting Reading Approaches

The most important impact of pre-reading questions was the impact which it had on the students' reading strategies. The answers revealed a change in method with some of the students who simply searched for the answers in the text and others who read the text thoroughly.

Student G stated:

"Yes, they make me skim the text at first to find keywords related to the questions."

This can be viewed as a strategic, goal-oriented way of reading that emphasizes efficiency. Some other students had a different strategy:

Student H shared:

"They encourage me to read more carefully because I don't want to miss the answers."

These various answers indicate that pre-reading questions can be flexible enough to suit different approaches to reading. However, how useful students find them depends on the personal choice and the type of the text.

Guiding Toward Key Ideas

A recurring theme was the role of pre-reading questions in directing students' attention to critical concepts. Many students found them helpful for identifying central themes and avoiding distractions.

Student I emphasized:

"Very helpful—they highlight the main points I might miss otherwise."

However, not all students agreed that pre-reading questions were consistently useful in this regard.

Student J commented:

"Not always helpful; sometimes the questions focus on details that don't feel important."

This feedback underscores the importance of aligning pre-reading questions with the primary objectives of the text. Poorly designed questions may inadvertently draw attention to irrelevant details, diminishing their instructional value.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study emphasize the significant effect of pre-reading questions on students' reading comprehension, specifically on the skills of sequencing and direct recall, as evidenced by improved post-test scores. This finding is in harmony with Anderson and Pearson's (1984) schema theory, which underscores the role of activating prior knowledge in improving comprehension. While pre-reading questions can effectively scaffold explicit content understanding, the effect of these questions on more complex processes such as inferencing and vocabulary learning was not as significant, much like with Stahl and Nagy's (2006) assertion that vocabulary learning requires direct and contextualized methods. The qualitative analysis of the pre-reading questions indicated that they evoked both positive and negative emotions and had a mixed impact on cognition. Many students reported reduced anxiety and increased focus, supporting Schunk's (2012) theory that well-defined goals enhance confidence and motivation. However, overly complicated questions may lead to frustration and make natural reading difficult, dazzling challenges observed by Taboada and Guthrie (2006). Moreover, pre-reading questions influence reading strategies as some students adopt skimming techniques where as others get involved in minute reading, proving Tomlinson's (2001) concept of differentiated learning preferences. Regardless of these paybacks, poorly designed questions can sometimes be misleading, making individuals focus on insignificant information as noted out by Fisher and Frey's (2008) emphasizing the balance between teaching instruments and core text objectives. With little progress, vocabulary enrichment was also marked in the current research, supporting the claim by Lauer (1997) that to enhance vocabulary, there is the need to have deliberate and continuous approaches that are not confined to the pre-reading stages only.

These findings highlight the importance of developing well-crafted, pre-reading questions and to link them with other instructional strategies including direct teaching of vocabulary and open-ended questions to enhance students' comprehension. Future research should also examine how pre-reading questions can be blended with other strategies to address limitations including vocabulary knowledge and inferential skills.

CONCLUSION

The study aimed at exploring the role of pre-reading questions in improving the reading comprehension and participation of Saudi EFL learners, examining their cognitive and emotional processes during the application of this instructional strategy.

The results revealed that pre-reading questions enhanced students' ability to identify main ideas, sequence information, and recall details, reflecting their effectiveness in prior knowledge activation and presenting a systematic framework for reading. These findings are in accordance with not only the schema theory but also the existing literature that establishes the importance of intentional engagement and prior knowledge activation for comprehension. However, overall vocabulary gains were less than expected, employing the fact that such pre-reading questions may not capture other language learning goal, especially when highly targeted questions limit the critical thinking and the holistic understanding.

The qualitative findings revealed that the students positively perceived pre-reading questions as helpful in reducing anxiety, increasing confidence, and even offering a sense of direction when dealing with texts. However, some learners reported challenges such as feeling overwhelmed when question was too complex and the ability to ‘pump and dump’ i.e. pay too much attention to locating the answer in the text instead of actually engaging with it. These varied responses emphasize the significance of designing pre-reading questions that are well-balanced in terms of difficulty and scope, endorsing both focused and flexible reading strategies.

Although the study provides useful information about EFL pedagogy, there are some limitations to the study. The small sample size is a limitation to the generalization of the results and the study does not fully address how different types of texts or questions might affect learning outcomes in different ways. Finally, reliance on self-reported qualitative data can result in a bias as perceptions of individuals are not always an accurate reflection of their actual cognitive processes.

Future researches may address these limitations by comprising a larger, more diverse sample and scrutinizing how varying question formats and text complexities affect both reading comprehension and engagement. Additionally, employing tactics like eye tracking or think aloud protocols might offer a more accurate picture of how learners interact with texts when provided with pre reading questions. Further, an investigation of the long term effects of pre reading questions on vocabulary acquisition and critical thinking could further develop this teaching method.

In a nutshell, this study highlights the substantial prospective of pre-reading questions to enrich EFL learners’ comprehension and engagement, especially in contexts like Saudi Arabia. By adopting multiple and diverse questions, tutors can maximize their efficiency in classroom context. Future research will be valuable in determining the challenges faced in developing strategies for the best application of pre-reading questions in EFL teaching.

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