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**Journal of King Saud University –  
Languages and Translation**

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**FULL LENGTH ARTICLE**

# Do EFL Saudi learners perform differently with online reading? An exploratory study

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Received 22 October 2011; accepted 10 April 2012

Available online 26 December 2012

## KEYWORDS

Reading comprehension;  
Internet;  
Saudi EFL learners;  
Online reading

**Abstract** New forms of literacy and reading approaches are emerging as a result of the Internet's increasing dominance as a major source of information. To foreign language learners, the Internet is a tool through which they can access authentic target language content. This study reports the results of a study conducted to explore the effect of reading on the Internet on Saudi EFL learners' overall reading comprehension performance. The participating students were divided into two groups. The experimental group was asked to take a reading comprehension test in an internet format. The control group took the same test in its print format. The results indicate that the Internet has a positive impact on the overall reading comprehension ability. Students who are asked to take the Inherent-based reading test outperformed the other group. This finding comes in accordance with the results of some of the few studies carried out in this area within EFL contexts. Several factors could have contributed to this outcome. The assumption that the Internet raises the level of motivation among EFL learners can justify this conclusion. Another hypothesis is based on the form of strategies and skills involved in reading on the Internet. Online reading may encourage the proper use of the right strategies that meet the particular needs of reading comprehension among EFL learners. Whatever the explanation is, the study calls for more in-depth examination of the online reading strategies and skills.

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## 1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is one of the most significant skills that a second language learner (L2), in particular, an English Language Learner (ELL), must master (Aebbersold and Field, 1997; Anderson, 1991; Bernhardt, 1991; Grabe, 1991, 1999,

2009; Schwartz, 1984; Wolf, 1993a,b). When learners of English strengthen their reading skills, they tend to make greater progress in other areas of language learning (Anderson, 2003). "After all, reading is the basis of instruction in all aspects of language learning: using textbooks for language courses, writing, revising, developing vocabulary, acquiring grammar, editing, and using computer-assisted language learning programs" (Mikulecky, 2008, p. 12). The skill of reading comprehension has gained even more significance because of new information technologies (Lai, 2009). The Internet and personal computers have led to the emergence of new formats of literacy. Second language learners (L2s) are increasingly relying on online materials as an informative source of input

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Peer review under responsibility of King Saud University.



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(Anderson, 2003; Leu, 2002). Leu (2002) observes that, “the Internet has entered our classrooms faster than books, television, computers, the telephone, or any other technology for information and communication” (p. 311); thus, it has become necessary to explore the impact of using the Internet on the performance of L2 learners. Coiro (2003) points out that the introduction of electronic texts means that new supports as well as new challenges will have a great impact on the L2 learners’ ability to comprehend what they read.

Using computers and the Internet in language teaching, in general, and reading comprehension instructions, in particular, exemplifies the attempts to expose L2 learners to authentic language. Konishe (2003) highlights the fact that language learners access authentic materials from the Internet which makes web-based reading an effective teaching tool. The process of interacting with electronic texts requires particular “skills and abilities beyond those required for the comprehension of conventional, linear print” (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002, p. 14). Coiro (2003) believes that “the Internet provides opportunities for interacting with new text formats (e.g., hypertext and interactive multiple media that require new thought processes); new reader elements (e.g., new purposes or motivations, new types of background knowledge, high-level metacognitive skills); and new activities (e.g., publishing multimedia projects, verifying credibility of images, participating in online synchronous exchanges)” (p. 459). It is this notion of ‘newness’ that implies that non-conventional mechanisms in reading comprehension have emerged as a result of introducing new technologies. Such mechanisms need to be thoroughly examined for the sake of properly defining reading comprehension within this new emerging and increasingly dominant context.

While the available literature on conventional reading comprehension contributed to better understanding of how students construct meaning when reading printed texts (Aebersold and Field, 1997; Anderson, 1991; Bernhardt, 1991; Grabe, 1991, 1999, 2009; Schwartz, 1984; Wolf, 1993a,b), there is, however, a dearth of information as to what is involved in the process of electronic and internet reading. According to Corio and Dobler (2007), “little empirical evidence has been gathered, particularly among adolescents, to support the claims that printed and digital texts are distinctly different media requiring different cognitive processes” (p. 214). The newly introduced formats through which different kinds of context are presented via the Internet bring about a major change in the way reading comprehension takes place. “This situation highlights a rapid change in the nature of reading so that the online domain requires a different reading literacy from traditional ones and change of perspective in the dynamics of reading comprehension” (Chifari et al., 2010, p. 491). Data collected from research aimed at examining the effect of using such innovative new technologies on reading comprehension will definitely help specialists draw a clearer picture of what reading has become in the digital age. This current study focuses on the impact that the use of an online format may have on the performance of Saudi-English as a foreign language (EFL) learners when compared to the use of the conventional paper format. The goal is to discover whether the presumed change in the nature of reading, caused by the change of presentation format, affects Saudi EFL readers’ performance.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Traditional reading comprehension

The task of reaching a somewhat conclusive agreement upon the nature of reading comprehension is a difficult one. The fact that reading comprehension is a complex, cognitive, internal, and invisible activity that takes place inside the mind of the reader (Bernhardt, 1991; Grabe, 1991; Schwartz, 1984; Wolf, 1993a,b) contributes to the complexity of properly defining reading comprehension. Such a fact makes it difficult for researchers to closely examine and investigate this skill (Aebersold and Field, 1997; Alexander and Heathington, 1988; Anderson et al., 1991; Bernhardt, 1991; Marzano et al., 1987; Rost, 1993; Schwartz, 1984). Grabe (1991) considers it impractical to try to find a simple definition for reading comprehension since it is not “completely understood nor easily described” (Aebersold and Field, 1997, p. 5). Smith (1985) states that there is “no point in looking for a single definition of reading. We should not expect that a single definition for reading will be found, let alone one that throws light on its mystery” (p. 100). Researchers recognize that “the problem of specifying and adequately operationalizing the construct of ‘reading comprehension’ is still far from being solved to the satisfaction of all concerned” (Rost, 1993, p. 79).

Still, it is crucial for researchers to investigate the characteristics of the reading comprehension process and what it entails. The ultimate goal of this investigation is to provide specialists in this area with the ability not only to teach this skill in a better manner, but also to assess it properly and validly (Barnett, 1989). Farr (1969) believes that it is necessary to understand the basic components that make up any behavior to measure it as accurately as possible. No doubt, however, that the more the studies conducted on reading comprehension as a process, the better the insights into this skill that can be achieved. Our understanding of what reading comprehension is has been notably shaped by the observable developments and findings that researchers have come up with over the last six decades (Aweiss, 1993; Grabe, 2009; Kamil, 1984). While comprehending the main idea or message that the writer/author wanted to deliver was the focus of early definitions of reading, more recent definitions emphasized the importance of how each individual reader understands and interprets the reading material (Aweiss, 1993; Carlo and Sylevester, 1996; Carrell et al., 1988; Grabe, 2009; Kamil, 1984; Johnston, 1984; Urquhart and Weir, 1998). The primacy within the early approaches to the definition of reading was assigned to reading as a product (meaning) and the message that the authors wanted to deliver. As an example of the early views of reading, Widdowson (1979) defines reading as the process of getting linguistic information via print. To Johnston (1983), reading is the process of “using the cues provided by the author and one’s prior knowledge to infer the author’s intended meaning” (p. 9). Vaughan (1984) thinks that reading is the ability to understand what the writer was intending to say. In sum, reading was basically seen as a decoding process of reconstructing the author’s intended meaning (Carrell, 1988).

Recently, however, reading comprehension has been viewed as an interactive process that involves features of the reader, the texts, and tasks. The presumed interaction that takes place

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