

# Investigating Learners' Reading Habits and Strategies

## التحقيق في عادات واستراتيجيات القراءة للمتعلمين

<sup>1</sup> GHAOUAR Nesrine,

1 Faculté des lettres et langues- Université Badji Mokhtar- Annaba (Algeria),  
ghaouarnesrine@yahoo.fr

Received: 17/08 /2019

Accepted: 31/10/2021

Published: December/2021

### الملخص:

القراءة هي المدخل للكتابة الفعالة ؛ ومع ذلك ، أثبتت كتابات الطلاب باللغة الإنجليزية على مدار سنوات الليسانس وحتى درجة الماجستير طبيعتها السطحية وافتقادها للفهم العميق. كما تظهر كتاباتهم صراهم الدائم لايجاد الأفكار وصياغتها في شكل جيد. لذلك يهدف هذا المقال أولاً إلى دراسة عادات واستراتيجيات القراءة للمتعلمين و ثانياً إلى زيادة وعيهم بمهارات القراءة .لتحقيق هذا الهدف ، تم استخدام استبيان كأداة بحث مع طلاب السنة الأولى في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية ، جامعة باجي مختار – عنابة . كشفت النتائج أن غالبية الطلاب قيد التحقيق قد طوروا عادات قراءة ضعيفة تقتصر إلى استراتيجيات القراءة الفعالة كما أنهم يواجهون بعض الصعوبات. بناء على ذلك ،تم اقتراح بعض الممارسات التربوية لكل من المعلمين والمتعلمين للحصول على عادات قراءة أفضل.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** القراءة ، القارئ النشط ، أنواع القراءة ، نماذج القراءة ، استراتيجيات القراءة.

### Abstract:

Reading is the doorway for an effective writing; however, along the years of the licence till the master degree, students' writings in English proved its superficial nature and lacked deep understanding. Students' constant struggle to write a good piece of writing urged the focus on investigating their reading habits, strategies and difficulties from their first year at the university. The aim was to gain awareness of their reading skill in order to develop good reading practices. To achieve this aim, a questionnaire was used as a research tool with first year students at the department of English, Badji Mokhtar University- Annaba. The results revealed that the majority of the students under investigation developed poor reading habits and lack effective reading strategies.

**Key words:** Reading, active reader, reading types, reading models, reading strategies

## 1. Introduction

Literacy skills basically involve the ability to read and write. For instance, reading is a receptive skill that was considered for a long time passive as learners just pass their eyes throughout a text with no observable credit for the sub-skills of processing information in the mind. However, it is an active -and even a complex skill- that needs a lot of attention from the reader's part in order to get the gist of the read material. Then, what does reading comprehension imply? Who is the active reader? And what are the effective reading strategies?

### Research Problem

The low quality of students' writings urges the need to investigate their reading skill as university learners are expected to read their lessons, prepare research papers, analyze articles, provide their points of view and discuss their readings. Besides, vocabulary repertoire is very poor for the majority of the learners which leads to difficulty in expressing their ideas. Furthermore, teachers are always complaining about learners' style of writing and question the efficiency of their reading strategies. Consequently, this study aims at investigating students' reading habits and strategies.

### Research Question and Hypothesis

In order to investigate the **research question**, what reading habits and strategies did first year learners of English lack in order to be active readers? A questionnaire was administered to first year students of English at Badji Mokhtar University – Annaba. The aim was to test the **hypothesis** whether they developed poor reading habits because they lack the use of effective reading strategies applied by active readers. A questionnaire was used as a research tool of investigation.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Reading Comprehension

According to Sadiku (2015), there is a strong relation between reading and writing, as reading can be used as a tool to achieve good writing. Reading has been defined in different ways; for instance, Pearson and Cervetti (2013) refer to the two fundamental psychological aspects of reading. The first is word level processes- including sub-word processes such as phonological awareness and decoding, word reading, and vocabulary, with all of its entailment; while the second is text-level processes which are grounded in structure, genres, and disciplinary knowledge pursuits (p. 507). Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016) add that reading is an interactive process in which readers construct a meaningful representation of a text using effective reading strategies (p. 229). Furthermore, Küçükoğlu (2013) emphasizes that reading is not restricted to studying but it is a lifelong skill. However, he adds, despite its importance, reading is one of the most challenging areas in the educational system. Likewise, Davis (2011) affirms that reading is a complex skill that needs knowledge and strategies to be developed.

For Patesan, Balagiu, Zechia, Alibec (2014), the text is encoded and the reader should use the appropriate techniques of reading the words, sentences and paragraphs to decode it and to comprehend what he or she reads. Kirby (2007) sees "reading comprehension as the application of a skill that evolved for other purposes (listening or oral comprehension) to a new form of input (text)" (p. 1). Hogan, Bridges, Justice, and Cain (2011) notice that reading comprehension involves two primary processes: (a) decoding printed text and (b) understanding language accessed through the process of decoding. Woolley (2011) clarifies that the process of reading comprehension goes beyond the meaning of isolated word. Hence, Rice (n.d) defines reading comprehension as a process in which the reader interacts with the text in a deliberate and strategic way involving problem-solving strategies. He adds, "The

meaning a reader derives from a text is influenced by his or her own knowledge (including knowledge of language and print), experience, and perceived purpose for reading” (p. 1)

According to Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), the outcome of reading comprehension is based on both readers' previous schemata and mental representation. Abu-Al-Sha'r (2008) further refers to critical reading which is a technique used for discovering information and ideas within a text. It implies a careful, active, reflective, analytic reading where a reader applies certain processes, models, questions, and theories that result in enhanced clarity and comprehension (p. 52).

Patesan, Balagiu, Zechia, Alibec (2014) explain that readers need certain skills. First, skimming to get a general idea what the text is about. One reads quickly to get the main points, and skips over the detail. Second, scanning for specific information is used when one is looking for something particular in a list: so you will move your eye quickly over the page to find particular words or phrases that are relevant to the task you're doing. Third, detailed reading, to extract the information accurately is when one reads every word of the text. Sometimes a dictionary is needed to get a certain word or phrase properly and connections should be made to understand the subject (p. 64). Furthermore, Khaki (2014) highlights that reading has different purposes as getting the main idea, learning new information, enjoying ones' time and developing critical thinking.

## 2.2. Active Readers

According to Patesan et.al (2014), the active reader predicts, makes inferences and draws conclusions, compares and contrasts, evaluates and makes decisions. Küçükoğlu (2013) adds that “good readers are actively involved with the text, and they are aware of the processes they use to understand what they read” (p. 710). They also set a goal and a purpose for their reading. He finds out that the active readers use certain strategies. First, *predicting* helps the reader set a purpose for their reading. Second, *visualizing* requires the reader to construct an image of what is read. Third, *making connections*, as the learners can activate their prior knowledge and connect the ideas in the text to their own experiences. Fourth, *summarizing*, in which the students will be able to distinguish the main ideas from the supporting ideas. Fifth, *questioning* that readers can use before, during, and after reading. Finally, *inferring* refers to reading between the lines (pp. 710-711). Therefore, active reading means full understanding of what one reads and involves thinking while reading. Besides, active readers apply certain strategies and are not satisfied with only reading in the classroom, but they intensify this skill whenever they have the opportunity.

In addition, Pressley & Wharton-McDonald (1997) explain that good readers engage in conscious, active comprehension strategies before, during, and after reading. *In the pre reading phase*, good readers set goals for their reading, recall previous knowledge about a topic, and consider the structure of a text. *In the reading phase*, during, they make connections among important ideas, construct and test hypotheses, paraphrase key points, and try to resolve any comprehension difficulties that arise. As they read, they may make notes in the margins or underline portions of a passage. *In the post reading phase*, after, they may reread or skim the passage, summarize it, or take notes. Good readers often continue to reflect on the meaning of a text long after they have read it.

In relation to university students, Ntereke & Ramoroka (2017) highlight that the ability to read and interpret textbooks and other assigned material is a critical component of success at university level (p. 1). Indeed, reading skills form the basis for learning and are important elements for obtaining knowledge in academic learning in all subject areas. Moreover, Pinto (2005) highlights that despite the differences between reading and writing, they both nourishes each other; “Reading also improves oral language and may lead the reader to

become familiar with various aspects of language, from its sonority to its style, including the different language levels (phonetic/phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactic) and punctuation" (p. 40). Likewise, Nell et.al (2011, p. 76) confirm that current understanding in the field of literacy dictates that reading and writing mutually reinforce one another.

### 2.3. Strategies for Reading Comprehension

According to Brown (2000 p. 306), reading comprehension is primarily a matter of developing appropriate, efficient comprehension strategies as follows: 1) Identify the purpose in reading, 2) Use graphemic rules and patterns to aid in bottom up decoding, 3) Use efficient silent reading techniques for relatively rapid comprehension, 4) Skim the text for main ideas, 5) Scan the text for specific information, 6) Use semantic mapping or clustering, 7) Guess when you are not certain, 8) Analyze vocabulary, 9) distinguish between literal and implied meanings, 9) Capitalize on discourse markers to process relationships. In her turn, Woolfolk (2004) refers mainly to three reading strategies: **READS**, **SQ4Rs** and **KWL**. First, **READS**: **R**-review headings and subheadings, **E**-examine boldface words, **A**-ask "what do I expect to learn", **D** do it –read and **S** summarize in your own words. Second, **SQ4R**: **S**- survey your reading for a preview, **Q**-write questions for each major section ( turn the headings and the subheading into questions, **R**-read, **R**-reflect by elaborating and making connections between what you are reading and what you already know, **R**-recite after reading each section by thinking about the initial purposes and questions and answering the questions without looking to the book, **R**-review by incorporating new material into the long term memory, including all what has been read ( sections or chapter). Third, **KWL**: **K**- what do I already know? **W**,-what do I want to know? **L**- what have I learned?

Moreover, Patesan et.al (2014) affirm that active readers use, **3R's** and **QAR** strategies (p. 64). **3R's** refers to *read, recall and review*: read the first section with the questions in mind. Look for the answers, and make up new questions if necessary. After each section, stop and think back to the questions; the reader sees if he can answer them from memory. If not, he takes a look back at the text. Once finished the whole chapter, the reader goes back over all the questions from all the headings and reviews them. **QAR** (*question/answer/relationships*) by which students are taught to locate and answer comprehension questions.

## 3. The Method

### 3.1 Study Importance and Relevance

This study is important as it sheds light on an ignored skill which reading. It is taken for granted that learners read; but the question is how they read? It also pinpoints the importance of this skill in order to attain good writing skills; a good reader is a good writer. In addition, the great majority of learners' exams are in the written mode and if students did not develop the reading skill, they would have problems of comprehension and trouble in answering the questions efficiently. Indeed, reading is the door way for reading and since our students' writings are not at the level, investigating their reading habits and strategies could be the clue.

### 3.2 Aims of the Study

This study aims at highlighting the importance of reading as a necessary skill for university studies and success. Besides, it raises awareness of reading for a better written piece of writing. It also draws attention to the different strategies that active readers use so that university learners activate this skill.

### 3.3 Questionnaire Analysis

This study used the questionnaire as a research tool in order to investigate learners' reading habits and strategies. The population of this research is first year students at the department of English, Badji Mokhtar University-Annaba. Why first year students? Because they are novice and the teacher can easily change their learning habits to more effective ones

once the questionnaire shows their poor reading skills and lack of effective reading strategies. Another reason is that establishing good reading habits, techniques and strategies in the first year will help them along the licence and master's degree and even the doctorate, because they get used to them from the beginning.

The questionnaire consists of 23 questions (see Appendix 1). Out of 60 students, 55 answered the questionnaire. The findings showed that 61.89% of the students under investigation affirm that reading is a habit for them, and they advanced the following reasons: "Because today's reader is tomorrow's leader", "I like it, reading keeps me excited about life", "I can't imagine my life without books or reading, I love it so much", "I m interested in some topics and I feel I need to know more about them", "I like it, whenever I have free time I just take my PC download a novel and read it", and "I like reading and when I read something I feel happy like I live that story and I feel confident when I understand what I read". However 38.18% assure that reading is not a habit as they explain: "Am all the time at class and am reading handouts", "I like reading but it is not a habit for me because I don t find something interesting to read", "I think reading is boring", "It is boring and I don't have enough time to read", and "Just when I have a free time".

Table 1: The language learners most read in

<b>Langue</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>English</b>	<b>38.18%</b>
<b>Arabic</b>	32.75%
<b>French</b>	10.90 %
<b>English and Arabic</b>	10.90%
<b>English and French</b>	7.27%
<b>Total</b>	100%

Concerning the language they most read in, **38.18%** of the students read in English, 32.75% read in Arabic and 10.90 % read in French, 10.90% read in both English and Arabic while 7.27% read in English and French. Hence, the majority **did not** read in English and this will have negative effect on their level in English especially as learners of English. Therefore, reading in English is a habit that needs to be developed.

**60%** of the students affirmed that they are good readers of English whereas 34.54% affirmed the opposite. One student opted for somehow and another wrote am a "60% good reader". However, the question that should be asked" How the great majority of the learners do not read in English (only **38.18%**) and 60% affirm that they are good readers of English? How can they be good in a skill that they do not practice?

Moreover, they advanced that they mostly read materials in English in the following rank according to the number of frequency in their answers since sometimes they opted for more than one material: 23 Messages (Chatting, phone texting), 20 E books, 19 Internet articles, 19 Lessons, 15 Printed books and articles, and 9 Emails. Then, messaging takes the head of the list with e-books and internet articles. This exemplifies today's digital age generation. But the question is" How effectively do they read electronic materials?" Do they highlight, take note on the margin, take down the meaning of new words or just read passively without interaction with the text? Moreover, messaging is most of the time short, written in informal language and does not need high reading skills just scanning or skimming.

72.72% rely on silent reading whereas 25.45% opted for aloud reading. **1.81%** rely on both silent and aloud reading (1.81% provided no answer). Consequently, only a very small



minority of the students use both silent and aloud reading which are more efficient together. Silent reading helps to get the first contact with the text, discovering the phonemes, the words, and getting the general meaning. While, aloud reading helps to focus attention, practice pronunciation, and attain deeper meaning.

Concerning the strategies learners use while reading, 45.45% read for general ideas (skimming), 20% for detailed information, **14.54%** read for specific information (scanning) and equal percentage just read with no specific objective. However, effective reading is based on a purpose otherwise it will be a waste of time and energy. Hence, skimming is the most used reading style.

As demonstrated in Table 2, 49.09% affirm that they **always** understand what they read, and another 49.09% affirm they sometimes understand while 1.81% do rarely so. Hence, about half of the learners face problems of understanding. Besides, in answering the question about highlighting and underlining the key words while reading, **27.27%** affirm they **always** do so, the same percentage opted for sometimes, 12.73% rarely did so; however, **32.72% never** highlighted or underlined key words. This raises a serious problem that our learners should be aware of, highlighting key words and phrases is a technique used by good readers. Highlighting is the first step for real interaction with the text and only a minority of the students under investigation do so (27.27%). In checking the dictionary for difficult words, **29.27%** opted for **always**, 61.64% sometimes, 3.64% did rarely and equal percentages (3.64%) never and 1.81 did not answer. This result is very alarming since how learners of English could enrich their vocabulary if they do not use the dictionary?

**Table 2: Learners' used techniques in Reading**

	Always	Sometimes	rarely	No answer	Total
<b>understanding</b>	49.09%	49.09%	1.82%	0%	100%
<b>Highlighting</b>	<b>27.27%</b>	<b>27.27%</b>	12.73%	32.73%	100%
<b>checking the dictionary</b>	<b>29.27%</b>	61.64%	3.64%	5.45%	100%

Besides, 49.09% use English –Arabic dictionary, 21.81% English-English dictionary, 9.09% English –French dictionary, 18.18% use both English-English dictionary and English –Arabic, while 1.81% use English-English dictionary and English –French dictionary. Hence, the great majority use **English-Arabic** dictionary and this explains their poor vocabulary repertoire in English.

In answering the questions about the strategies they use while reading, Students' answers are grouped in the following table:

**Table 3: The frequency of Strategies Use**

	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No answer	Total
<b>Asking questions</b>	<b>5.45%</b>	38.20%	27.27%	23.63%	5.45%	100%
<b>Taking notes while reading</b>	<b>14.54%</b>	20.19%	27.09%	<b>38.18%</b>	0%	100%
<b>Summary writing after reading</b>	<b>9.09%</b>	12.72%	32.74%	<b>45.45%</b>	0%	100%
<b>using the new read information</b>	31.90%	<b>61.82%</b>	2.64%	3.64%	0%	100%

Then, the students under investigation lack using effective reading strategies as shown in Table 3. Only a minority (5.45%) do always ask questions on the read material. Besides, only 14.54% do always take notes, and 9.09% do always write summary for what they read. However, 30.90% do always use the new read information in speaking or writing. These students need training on using these effective reading strategies to be active readers.

While reading in English, students face different problems as presented in the following rank (1.81% did not answer): 40% word meaning, 23.64% word meaning+ Word pronunciation, 16.37% word pronunciation, 9.09 % Comprehension, 3.64 % word meaning+ comprehension, 3.64 % word pronunciation+ Comprehension, 1.81% and transition from word to word. However, if these students got the habit of using the dictionary, the problems of word meaning, pronunciation, and even comprehension would decrease. The dictionary provides the different meanings of words in addition to the transcription. Besides, if students develop the habit of regular reading, the problem of comprehension will decrease with every new text they read. In fact, the problem of comprehension will be solved with effective interaction with the text through the above cited strategies.

Furthermore, students affirm that reading is important for academic, entertainment and personality development reasons. First, reading is important for academic reasons as it enriches one's vocabulary, inspires new ideas, and develops language skills, grammar and the English language. They advance: "To get new vocabulary, know the correct structure of sentences", "To develop my English", "To get new ideas, vocabulary and information", "To develop grammar", "To develop speaking and writing", "It is a good strategy to be a native speaker and to improve my vocabulary", "I should be able to read without mistakes", "To learn", and "to develop reading skill". Second, for entertainment reasons, reading is a source of fun and relief. They clarify: "It is a source of relief", "To get entertainment", and "To have fun". Third, for personality development reasons since reading develops the brain, the personality and the intellectual capacities. They explain: "to be intellectual", "To develop ourselves", "builds up stronger personality and refreshes memory and know other cultures", "To know many cultures and many things about life", "Books are magical, it develops brain make you stronger and educated person". Therefore, students are highly aware of the importance of reading not just for their study but even for different aspects of their life.

### 3.4 Comparison with previous research

In discussing the results of this study with previous research in the Algerian context, it has been found that major studies were conducted with high school learners while two doctorate theses -Madani (2016) and Aliouchouche (2017)-address university students. They will be compared with this study depending on the similarity of the questions. First, in this study, 61.89% like reading which becomes a habit for them while in Aliouchouche (2017) study only 29.97% like reading very much. Then these students are highly motivated to read. Second, in answering the question on the language students most read in, the results are shown in the following table:

**Table 4: Comparison with Aliouchouche (2017) Research**

Language	This study	Aliouchouche (2017)
<b>English</b>	<b>38.18%</b>	14.89%
<b>Arabic</b>	<b>32.75%</b>	8.52%
<b>French</b>	10.90 %	<b>30.86%</b>
<b>English and Arabic</b>	10.90%	5.32%
<b>English and French</b>	7.27%	<b>25.53%</b>

In comparing the results, in this study, the percentages of students who read in English (38.18%) is higher than in Aliouchouche's study (14.89%). In her study the majority read in French (30.86%). Then, in this study, the students are willing to be more competent in their language of specialty.

In addition, in this study and Madani's research (2016), all students are aware of the importance of reading, while in Aliouchouche study 97.88% find reading important (56.39% =very important and 41.49%= important). Therefore, approximately all the students in the three studies are conscious of the important role of reading in their learning. However, none of two theses - Madani (2016) and Aliouchouche (2017)- investigated students' reading strategies and reading difficulties from students' perspectives as examined in this study.

### Discussion and recommendations

It has been proved along the questionnaire results that there is a contradiction between what students say and what they do. They confirm that reading is a habit and beneficial, but it has been found that they did not developed this habit in English- though they are students of English! It has been also confirmed that they do not use effective strategies while reading and this explains their poor vocabulary and constant struggle in writing. Students need to use strategies as highlighting or underlining key words, taking notes, asking questions on every read paragraph, writing a summary, and reviewing. They need also to develop the habit of using English-English dictionary. These strategies will help learners directly in understanding while reading and indirectly in writing as there is a close link between reading and writing. Students transfer the skills and the knowledge from the reading skill to the writing one.

The findings of this study have important implications for both teachers and learners, for whom we provide certain guidelines and suggestions. First, for teachers in Annaba, there is no module of reading; therefore, all teachers are responsible for developing learners' reading skill explicitly or implicitly- through intensive or extensive readings. Indeed, from the first year at the university, all teachers especially study skills, written expression, and even oral expression need to gain knowledge of their learners' reading habits, strategies and difficulties. Through explicit training on SQ3Rs for example, learners will develop the good reading habits of surveying, asking questions, reading, reflecting and reviewing what they read. In addition, teachers should be aware that one time training is not enough, but using every new learned strategy should be part of everyday classroom habit. Furthermore, to develop critical readers in the classroom, KWL is also a good technique. It develops their



metacognitive awareness as they prepare for reading through activating their previous knowledge about the material to be read “ what I know?”, then develop awareness before reading “ What I need to learn” and after by reflecting on “what I learnt”. Then, training students on using these strategies is not a onetime session as teachers should implement their use along different sessions till students will use them automatically whenever the teachers hand them texts to read. Besides, teachers should encourage the learners to use them in all the modules: linguistics, anglo-saxon, literary text,..etc.

Moreover, intensive reading under teachers' supervision will involve the learners is using different styles as skimming and scanning and different strategies as underlining, highlighting, taking notes, asking questions and summarizing. Besides, showing learners two opposite reading situations in which they use reading strategies and the other situation in which they just read passively with no strategy then ask them how different they find their comprehension? And which one is beneficial? Involving them in reflection will ease their future use of these strategies. After training, students will forget and here comes teacher's role in insisting on using them and like this they will develop good reading habits with good strategies. Consequently, from the first day at the university, teachers should insist on the importance of the dictionary, digital or hardcopy. Whenever, students face a difficult word either for pronunciation or for meaning, the teacher asks them to check the dictionary and share the information with others. Then, teachers should develop learners' awareness of the merits of reading for the other learning skills especially writing. The teacher will explain that the exams are done in the written format, their licence final project too, and even the master dissertation. Then the one who wants to succeed should know how to actively read in order to be a good writer.

Second, learners should be aware that reading in English is crucial if they want to know how to effectively write. Reading is the opportunity to know how the other thinks and writes. Reading should become a habit for them. They need to decide themselves for regular reading basis- every day a page, every week a chapter, every month a book, ...etc- by choosing books that interest them. They should be aware that at the beginning, developing the habit of reading will not be easy, but needs self-discipline and persistence. As university learners, they should be aware of the different reading strategies and techniques and be keen on applying them for themselves. In fact, learners should develop flexibility in using the strategies depending on the requirements of the text. In addition, learners should develop awareness that the first step towards critical thinking is reading, and there is no good piece of writing without critical reading skill. Besides, reading is neither silent or aloud but both and they should get the advantage from both intensive and extensive reading as they need to take whatever opportunity inside or outside the classroom to read in English. To conclude with, students should develop a sense of responsibility towards their learning and apply these strategies not only under teachers' guidance but even at home. They should be aware that the benefits of using the effective reading strategies and techniques will not only be helpful in their first year study but along the licence, master, doctorate and even their life.

#### 4. Conclusion

Reading is one of the literacy skills that university learners need to pay attention to. In the digital age, reading was reduced to reading text messaging, e-mails, and e-books. This is the quick superficial type of reading since learners do not interact actively with the text through visualizing, highlighting, underlying, taking notes, asking questions, reviewing, and summarizing. As a result, they develop poor reading habits in addition to difficulties in comprehension and pronunciation. Therefore, it is important to develop learners' awareness of the essence of reading comprehension and train them on the different reading strategies.

There is a need to develop teachers' and learners' awareness of the roles they have to play for an effective reading skill. Then, teachers should remember, if we want good writers we should first develop good readers.

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