

The Relationship between Reading Comprehension and Vocabulary Knowledge of Libyan EFL Learners at Misurata University

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Abstract

This study seeks to investigate the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension among Libyan EFL students in the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, at Misurata University. The study also aims to test whether using open-ended questions or multiple-choice questions can lead to better results in measuring the participants' comprehension of reading texts. A reading comprehension test was designed to test this relationship between the effect of understanding reading texts and knowing the meanings of vocabulary items. The results showed that there was a noticeable relationship between the participants' comprehension of two reading texts and their performance on questions that tested their vocabulary knowledge. The results also showed no difference between their performance on open-ended and multiple-choice questions.

Keywords: Reading Comprehension, Vocabulary Knowledge, Libyan learners, English as a foreign language.

العلاقة بين استيعاب النصوص المقروءة والمعرفة بالمفردات لدى الطلبة الليبيين

الدارسين للإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في جامعة مصراتة

عائشة فتحى أبوغرسة

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الملخص: تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى استقصاء العلاقة بين المعرفة بالمفردات وفهم النصوص المقروءة لدى الطلاب الليبيين الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية الآداب بجامعة مصراتة.

تهدف الدراسة أيضا إلى اختبار ما إذا كان استخدام الأسئلة المفتوحة أو أسئلة الاختيار من متعدد يمكن أن يؤدي إلى نتائج أفضل في قياس فهم المشاركين لقراءة النصوص. تم تصميم اختبار فهم القراءة لاختبار هذه العلاقة بين تأثير فهم نصوص المقروءة ومعرفة معاني عناصر المفردات. أظهرت النتائج أن هناك علاقة ملحوظة بين فهم المشاركين لنصين مقروئين وأدائهم في الأسئلة التي اختبرت معرفتهم بالمفردات. كما أظهرت النتائج عدم وجود فرق بين أدائهم في الأسئلة المفتوحة وأسئلة الاختيار من متعدد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: استيعاب النصوص المقروءة، المعرفة بالمفردات، الطلبة الليبيون، الإنجليزية كلغة اجنبية.

1. Introduction

Language is a system of symbols that permit people to communicate or interact. Everyone is capable of learning a second language which is not commonly spoken in the country of the speaker. English language is taught as a foreign language (EFL) in Libya and is considered a core subject in Libyan schools and tertiary institutions. Thus, success in any form of formal education and training in highly skilled labor generally depends on one's ability to understand and use English language effectively. Language is described in terms of four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Reading is one's mental process toward a text (Wallace, 1992). According to Yagcioglu & Deger (2002), reading is essential and serves as a basic building block for learning, it is the process through which one internalizes what he or she reads and makes use of it in every stage of his or her life. Thus, reading is defined as a process of perceiving printed and written words through sense organs and consequently, interpreting and comprehending them. Moreover, reading is a mental and intellectual acquisition and a communicative activity with printed and written symbols. In addition, as explained by Kim (2011), the first description of reading and its process can be traced back to Thorndike (1971), who claims that reading is a process of reasoning. Learners are unable to read because of their incompetency in vocabulary knowledge pronunciation and accent, grammar, listening, and speaking. Therefore, teaching reading is a significant focal point of education, every stage of it should be handled studiously with scientific data.

1.1 Statement of The Problem

This research tries to investigate whether vocabulary knowledge affects reading comprehension or whether the opposite is true. It aims to examine whether knowing the key vocabulary of a reading text can lead to

understanding it or understanding this text can lead to knowing the meaning of new vocabulary from the context. In other words which of the two: reading comprehension or vocabulary knowledge has a greater impact on the other? The study also seeks to examine what kind of test questions; open-ended or multiple choice are more suitable to assess vocabulary and reading comprehension knowledge.

1.1.1 Research Questions

More specifically, this study was designed to find answers to the following questions:

1. What is the relationship between reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge of EFL students in Libya?
2. Which one affects the other, reading comprehension or vocabulary knowledge?
3. What kind of questions; open-ended or multiple-choice questions can lead to better results when evaluating reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge?

As answers to the previous questions, the study hypothesizes that reading comprehension results in vocabulary knowledge and knowing vocabulary leads to understanding reading texts so everyone leads to the other and that using open-ended questions can lead to better results when evaluating reading comprehension.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Reading and Reading Difficulties

Various authors have given their definitions of reading. This study employed Piaget's (1983) theory of cognitive development to define reading. According to this theory, mental development progresses as a result of learners' interactions with their surroundings. The role of the educator is to provide material and appropriate opportunities in which learners can interact (Kim, 2011). This definition agrees with Bhan's (2010: 4) view of reading as the act of simultaneously "reading the lines", "reading between the lines" and "reading beyond the lines". Therefore, it is concluded that the readers should be critical and creative.

According to Deavers (2000), Reading is an essential tool for knowledge transfer and the habit of reading is an academic activity that increases skills in reading strategies. Reading is the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction between the reader, the text, and the context of the reading situation (Dadzie, 2008). Reading habits, therefore, play a very crucial role in enabling a person to achieve practical efficiency (Issa et.al, 2012).

A student with a reading problem shows difficulties in reading skills which are unexpected according to age, cognitive ability, intervention, and quality and quantity of instruction. The problem is not a result of developmental delay or sensory impairment. It may be described by difficulties in single-word reading, reading sight words, and comprehension, for instance, such students cannot understand that entrances consist of words, and words are comprised of syllables. The processing problem can be also seen in spelling and writing which are usually common with a reading problem. For students with this problem, the difficulty will exist despite being combated. However, these students' reading ability may improve though it continues to be characterized by a slower rate (Issa et.al, 2012).

Regardless of the factors related to the reading disability, several types of reading problems are typically found among students. These include; problems related to reading habits; word recognition errors; comprehension errors and miscellaneous symptoms (Deavers, 2000). She lists several common problems experienced by some students who suffer from reading difficulties. These include; mispronouncing words; reversing words or syllables; transporting letters or words; repeating words or using improper inflection during oral reading.

In recent decades, people have generally attempted to learn English Language for either professional or educational purposes. Specifications of students' purposes for learning English Language have necessitated the development of new approaches and techniques in English Language (Tabi, 2004). English for specific purposes is one of these approaches used in the basis of circular development. Ogbode (2010) states that concentration reading is the most important type of reading for the desired outcome. It is the bedrock and the result-oriented reading which leads to achievement.

2.1.1 The Use of Strategy-Base Instruction

Reading comprehension Skills can be gained easily through positive communication between the instructors and the learners. Explicit strategy instruction is a useful approach to teaching students at all levels and competencies. This instruction method is consistent with the principles of Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism (Rogoff, 1990). Social interaction can improve learners' cognitive development when they engage in interpersonal communication and discussions (Ben-Ari, 2000).

Oral discussion during classes leads to building vocabulary that, over time, becomes internalized as inner speech (Vygotsky, 1986). This internalization process becomes an integral part of the cognitive skill repertoire. While teachers are involved in the direct instruction of specific reading methods, they must monitor their students' progress and continually encourage them. Finally, the overall learning outcome of direct instruction of strategies is to enable students to select from various strategies themselves flexibly and efficiently.

Reading strategy teaching has been subject to extensive research. For instance, the reference investigated Vygotsky's internalization and egocentric speech as related to the oral reading and silent reading strategies according to their importance to such processes as decoding and encoding. The researchers stated that Oral reading is better for comprehension only after a couple of years of schooling. Research done by Ahmedi (2013), reveals that low-level readers can comprehend orally presented texts better than silent readers.

Moreover, the poor reader performs much better on infernal questions than an average reader and comprehends better during silent reading than during oral reading by tackling these two types of questions as efficiently as they can. Nevertheless, it was found that a good reader is stronger than the poor and average reader in both oral reading and silent reading on various scales of comprehension. Here, the relationship between

reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge indicates superior skills elaboration. To sum up, it was found that reading for elaboration or details is a significant indicator of competence when it comes to literal comprehension.

2.2 Related Studies

Various studies have been conducted to investigate the relationship between reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge of EFL learners. A study done by Al-Khasawneh (2019) looked into determining the role of vocabulary size in reading comprehension among Saudi EFL learners. To collect data in that study, two kinds of tests were used, a vocabulary size test and a reading comprehension test. This test included 64 male students at the first level in the academic year 2018 -2019 at King Khalid University. The results proved the relationship between reading comprehension and vocabulary size, by conducting that vocabulary knowledge is an important predictor for comprehending written texts.

That study is similar to the current study in that the two of them are interested in the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension of Arabic learners of English as a foreign language. However, every one of these two studies uses different instruments to collect data and the current study also tests the effect of the familiarity of the reading comprehension tests on vocabulary knowledge and vice versa.

Another study by Quinn et al. (2014) evaluated dynamic developmental relations between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension using latent change score modeling. The participants in this study were 316 students from the Florida Longitudinal Study, from first through fourth grades. The results indicated that the development of both vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension was adequately described by dual change models in which growth reflected both positive constant change and negative proportional change. This study is different from the current study in that it uses a different instrument to assess the growth of the participants' vocabulary knowledge and its development over a long time.

The last study conducted by Yu-Han Ma and Wen-ying Lin (2015) focused on the relationship between English reading comprehension and English vocabulary knowledge. A total of 124 college students taking the course of Freshmen English at one University in Taipei were the participants of the study. Six instruments were used in this study. The findings seemed to suggest that the four subcomponents altogether play an important role in the reading comprehension of university students.

In the previously mentioned studies, a reading comprehension test was used as a data collecting tool, but with different instruments to find out the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. Moreover, the participants of previous studies Yu-Han Ma and Wen-Ying Lin (2015), and Al-Khasawneh (2019) were adult university students, whereas in Quinn et al. (2014) the participants were first-grade children from schools in the Leon Country School District.

Furthermore, the results of the previous studies proved that there is a relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, by proving that vocabulary knowledge plays an important role in understanding written texts. The current study is similar to those previous studies in that it seeks to investigate whether there is a relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension of EFL Libyan students in the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, at Misurata University. This study also aims to find out whether open-ended questions or multiple-choice questions can lead to a better result in measuring comprehension of reading texts.

3. Method

The descriptive method was used in this study. This method was considered an appropriate design for conducting this research because it involves describing, recording, and analyzing conditions that exist concerning variables in a situation (Creswell, 2013). Cohen (2007) views the descriptive method as a design that portrays accurately the characteristics of a particular individual situation in a group.

The descriptive method also helped to achieve the goal of the study, which was to find out the factors contributing to reading comprehension. In this descriptive research study, quantitative data techniques will be employed by collecting data randomly from 23 EFL students in the third semester through a reading comprehension test within the class.

3.1 Participants and Settings

The participants enrolled in this study are EFL students enrolled in the Reading Comprehension Course in the Department of English, Faculty of Arts at Misurata University in Misurata, Libya. The overall number of participants is 23 students (males and females).

3.2 Research Instrument

A reading comprehension test was used to collect data from the participants in this research study. The test was used to examine students'

capability to comprehend reading texts and to know the meanings of vocabulary items. The exam consisted of two parts, the first part contained two reading texts followed by several questions based on the participants' understanding and comprehension of the information and the vocabulary presented in these reading texts. The second part of this test contained one question designed to test the participants' vocabulary knowledge without providing a reading background to this question.

The participants' performance on this test was evaluated to investigate which kind of questions were easier for them. In other words, the data analysis process focused on making a comparison between the participants' performance on the questions based on the reading texts and their performance on the other question which was not based on a reading text and which tested their vocabulary knowledge without any reading comprehension effect. On another aspect, the study aimed to make a comparison between their performance on open-ended questions and their performance on multiple choice questions to test which kind of questions were more valuable in testing their reading comprehension.

3.3 Procedures

The data for this research study was collected through a reading comprehension test that was handed out self-administered to EFL students in the Department of English at the Faculty of Arts, Misurata University in Misurata, Libya. All participants were in the third semester and were administrated to do the test during a normal class in July 2022. The participants were told of the purpose, time, venue, and how to answer the reading comprehension test. They were also assured of their confidentiality and anonymity, and all of them responded to the test.

4. Results and Discussions

This chapter presents the results of a reading comprehension test, which is designed to find out the relationship between reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge of the target group of participants. In this test, there are multiple-choice questions and an open-ended question to investigate which kind of questions was easier for the participants and was more suitable to show their reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge. In addition, as was mentioned before, the first three questions were based on two reading texts, and the last one was designed to test vocabulary knowledge without being based on a reading text.

The two reading comprehension texts included in this test were different in how simple and familiar they were to the target subjects. The first reading text was written in a simple language and it was about a familiar topic which is sleep habits. The first question included in this test was an open-ended question asking the students to give brief definitions to three vocabulary items found in this text which are *teenager*, *elderly*, and *weeknights*. This aimed to find out if comprehension of this reading text can enable the participants to understand and explain the meanings of these words.

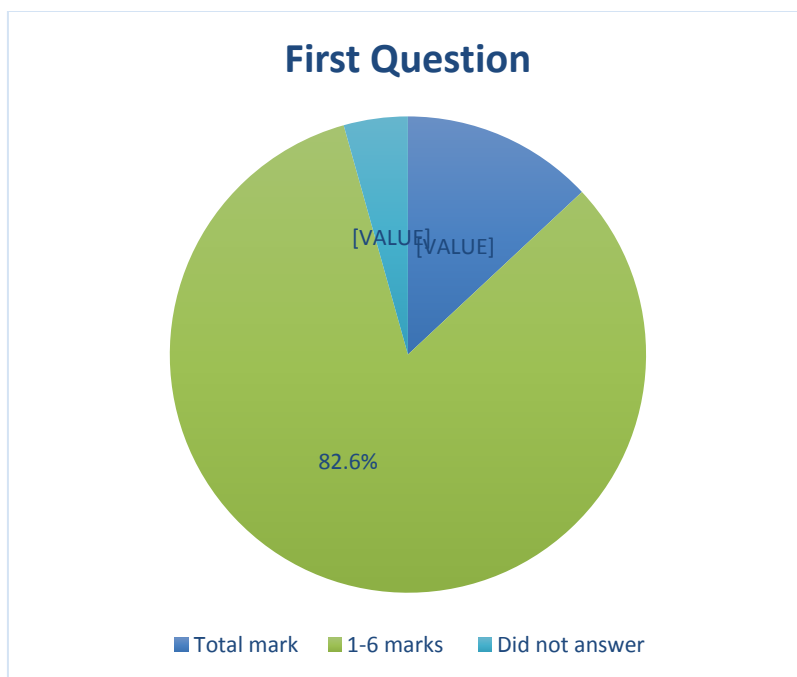


Figure 1: The participants’ answers to the open-ended question

The pie chart in Figure No. 1 above explains the percentage of the students who answered this first question based on the familiar reading comprehension text. As was mentioned before, this question contains three open-ended questions about the context. As shown from the pie chart 13.04% of the students answered this question correctly with a total mark of 7, while 82.6% of them scored 1-6 marks, and only 4.35% of them did not answer this question at all.

It appears that most of the participants were able to successfully answer this question which refers to their ability to explain the meanings of these three vocabulary items that were put within a familiar reading text. This

can refer to the effect of reading comprehension on their vocabulary knowledge as they were able to know the meanings of these words from the context. This also refers to the fact that it was easy for most of the participants to perform well in this open-ended question which indicates that the reading context can provide a guide and a key to answer the question similar to the keys provided in multiple-choice questions.

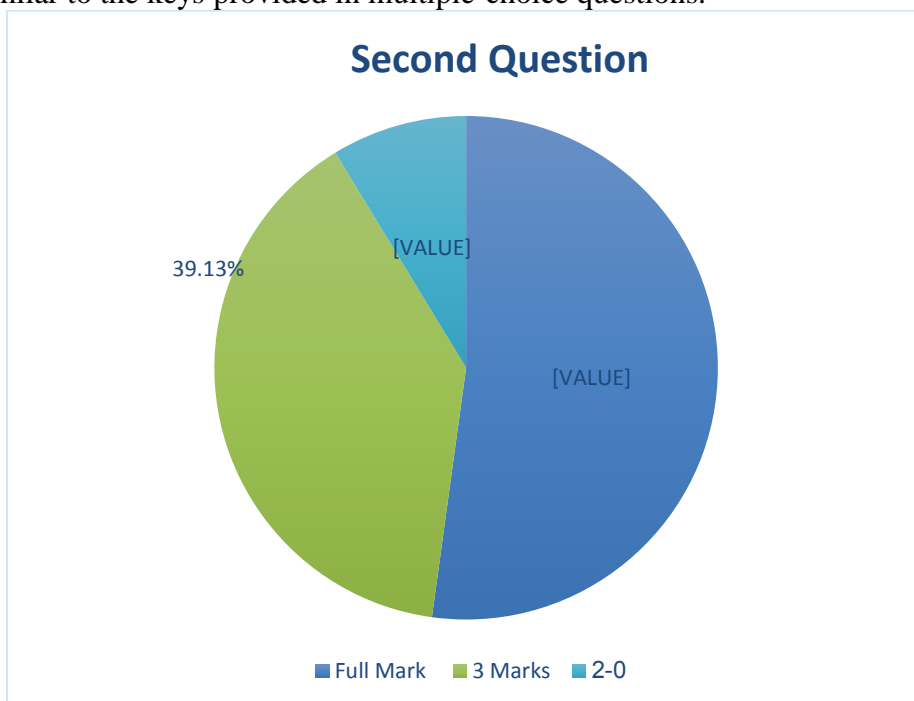


Figure 2: The participants' responses to multiple-choice questions about a reading text

The second figure shows the answers given by the same students for the second question about the same familiar reading text provided at the beginning of the reading comprehension test. The difference in the second question is that it is a multiple-choice question as can be seen in the pie chart, 52.17% of the students answered all the parts of this question correctly, whereas only 8.7% of them scored 0-2 marks, and the rest of them, approximately 39.13% gained 3 marks.

This result clearly shows that the majority of the students managed to answer all parts of this multiple-choice question correctly without a mistake because they were provided with a familiar reading text upon which this question was built. This indicates that students were able to generate ideas

and generalize them from the reading text provided and this also refers to the fact that multiple-choice questions based upon a reading text were easy for them to show their reading comprehension.

By making a comparison between the results obtained in these two questions based on the first reading text which was written in a simple language and which was about sleeping habits which is a familiar topic, it appears that the participants' ability to comprehend this reading text led them to perform well in the first two questions based on this reading text and there was no big difference between their performance on the open-ended question and the multiple-choice question. This refers to the effect of reading comprehension in enhancing the subjects' performance on questions designed to test their vocabulary knowledge.

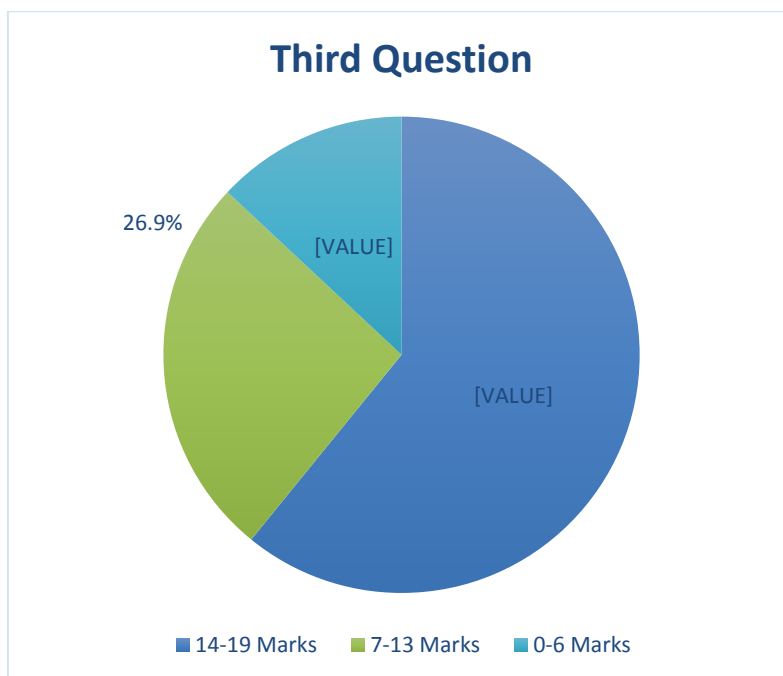


Figure 3: The participants' responses to the third question based on the second reading text

The second reading text provided in the designed reading comprehension test used in this study contains new information about unfamiliar kinds of houses whose names and descriptions which are unfamiliar to Libyan students. This reading passage contains information about three different types of houses in three different places in the world

which are very far away and very different from Libya, where the study is done, concerning the climate and the lifestyles of people. This reading text was followed by an open-ended question and a multiple-choice question as was done with the previous reading text.

Figure No.3 above illustrates the findings of the subjects' responses to the third question which is a multiple-choice question based on this second reading passage in which the subjects read about an unfamiliar topic. Students who scored 14-19 marks reached 60.87%, which is the highest percentage concerning the answers to this question. In contrast, students who answered from 0-6 marks got the lowest percentage, which reached 13.04%. Whereas students who got 7-13 marks were about 26.9%. Thus, these outcomes reveal that the students were capable of answering general background in reading comprehension only when they practiced reading and that the unfamiliar topic did not prevent them from understanding this text and answering the related questions.

The explanation for this can be because the text provides explanations to the new vocabulary about the different names given to these three different kinds of houses such as *igloo*, *dome*, and *yurt*. This can lead to the assumption that when the participants were provided with vocabulary knowledge given as explanations of the meanings of the new words within the text, they were able to understand the whole text and most of them were able to answer this question in a good way. This reading passage was not followed by an open-ended question asking about the meanings of some words as was done with the first text because the explanations of new words' meanings are provided within the text in this case to test if vocabulary knowledge can lead to reading comprehension which was proofed here.

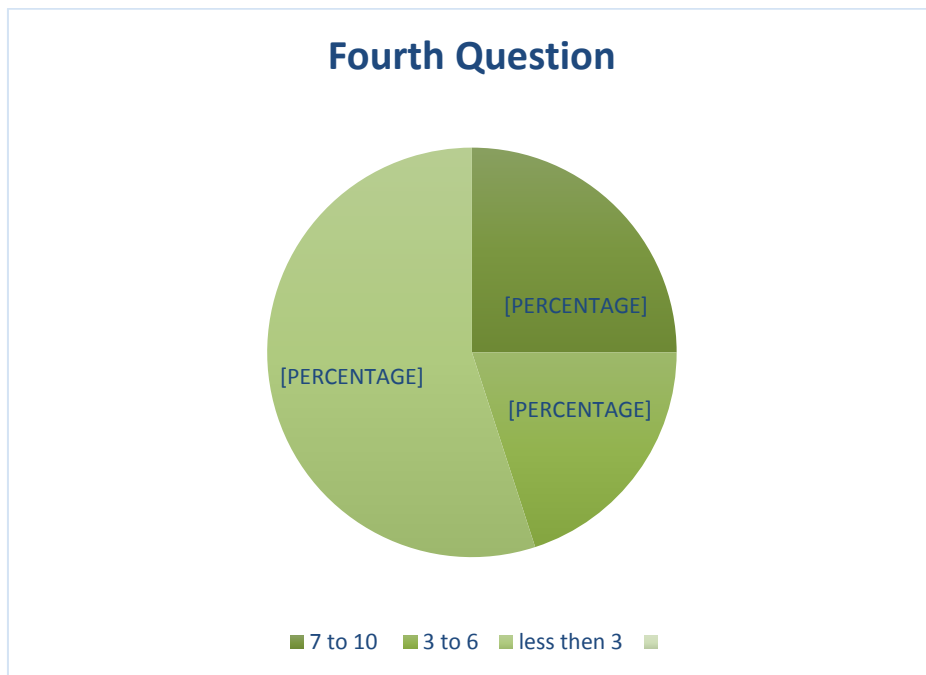


Figure No. 4: The participants' responses to the fourth question provided without a reading text

The second part of the experiment consists of a multiple-choice question which was designed to test the subjects' vocabulary knowledge without being related to any reading text. The question asked the participants to choose a suitable word or phrase to fill in the blanks. As can be seen in the pie chart in Figure No. 4 above, the students who got from 7 to 10 marks were about 25%. A less group of the participants, about 20% got from 3 to 6 marks. On the other hand, a larger group of them (55 % of the total number of participants) did not perform well and got less than 3 marks out of 10 on this question.

It appears from this result, that the performance of the participants in this question was worse than their performance in the previous questions which were based on their comprehension of the two reading texts. This multiple-choice question was similar to the previous two multiple-choice questions in which the performance of the participants was better than this similar multiple-choice question but it tested their vocabulary knowledge without the effect of a reading comprehension text.

Discussion

The results of this study refer to the effect of reading comprehension on the way that the participants answered questions that tested their vocabulary knowledge. The first reading text which was written in a simple language and gave information about sleeping habits, which is a familiar topic, enabled the participants to get good marks in an open-ended question and a multiple-choice question with no difference. This can be because it was easy for the subjects to understand this text, they were able to perform well in these questions and were able to get the meanings of any new vocabulary from the context.

The effect of reading texts on performing well in a question that tested vocabulary knowledge was also clear in question No. 3. As was mentioned previously, this question was based on a reading text which provided new information about unfamiliar kinds of houses in different parts of the world. The text contained explanations of the new vocabulary items which seems to affect the participants' comprehension of this reading text. In this case, it seems that vocabulary knowledge led to reading comprehension, and the subjects performed well in this question.

The participants' responses to the last question which was not linked to a reading text were not as well as their performance to the previous questions which also tested their vocabulary knowledge. This gives evidence to the effect of reading comprehension on vocabulary knowledge. In this last question, the fact that there was no reading background affected the participants' performance because they were not able to guess the meanings of some vocabulary items from any context.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study which included students enrolled in the reading comprehension course in the Department of English at Misurata University showed that there was a noticeable relationship between the vocabulary knowledge of the participants and their reading comprehension. The target group of EFL Libyan students were able to perform well in open-ended questions and multiple-choice questions which were accompanied by a reading text about a familiar topic to them. In this case, reading comprehension helped them to know the meanings of the vocabulary items.

On the other hand, the participants were provided with a difficult reading text which they were supposed not to comprehend very easily as it was about an unfamiliar topic, but the fact that this text contained information to explain the new vocabulary helped them to understand the text

and they were able to perform well in the reading test part related to this reading passage. It can be concluded that in this case, vocabulary knowledge helped them in the reading comprehension process. This conclusion was confirmed by the fact that these participants were not able to do well in the last question which tested their vocabulary knowledge without being accompanied by a reading text.

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