Teachers' Views on EFL Students' Reading Comprehension Approaches

A Comparative Study of Different Educational Stages

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Abstract

Bottom-up and top-down approaches have been perceived as vital in further developing EFL students' reading comprehension. This study aims to investigate whether teachers choose one approach to implement or if they integrate them both. Six teachers, three at high school level and three at middle school level, were interviewed to find answers to the study's question. The data was collected through qualitative research method by conducting individual interviews with all six teachers. Afterwards, the data collected from high school teachers and middle school teachers was analyzed using a comparative method. The findings in the current study show that teachers find both bottom-up and top-down approaches to be important in further developing EFL students' reading comprehension, but since these two approaches develop different reading-skill components, they should be given equal importance through the integration of them both.

Table of Contents

1 Introduction

For learners to master a language they need to understand the written form of it. It is when students fully understand what they read and can express what they have read that we can consider them as good readers. As an EFL learner, the knowledge is acquired either through communication with English-speaking people or through linguistic material – written texts. In the former, learners acquire the English language mostly from, for example, communicating with friends living abroad or from movies and social services. In the latter, which is mostly practiced in school, learners acquire the language from textbooks, newspapers, journals, and internet websites (Chawwang, 2008, p. 1). Therefore, acquiring the English language as an EFL learner in a school environment necessitates the need of mastering the reading skill. As an EFL learner, the purpose, and thereby the process of reading comprehension, is, however, not the same as for an ESL learner (Koda & Zehler 2008, p. 68). English taught in an ESL setting is taught in the same manner as for native speakers. Reading in this case becomes a practice for pleasure because native speakers have already acquired the language intuitively and traditionally since early childhood (Cook, 2008, p. 171). EFL learners have, therefore, different purposes in the process of English mastery. An EFL learner wants to become capable of understanding given descriptions and instructions and extracting meaning from given texts, which can be achieved through being exposed to authentic language where many linguistic features are available (Eskey, 2005, p. 563). Evidently, reading comprehension plays a decisive role in EFL students' learning process of the English language.

Kong (2019, p. 9) refers to reading as a procedure where graphic representation is transferred into thought or meaning (Kong, 2019, p. 9). Reading is further defined as an interactive process where the reader and the author can communicate indirectly (Lopera Medina, 2012, p. 81). Reading comprehension, however, does not only revolve around reading a text and understanding its words. Duffy and Israel (2008, p. 228) postulate that in the process of reading the reader interacts with the text for a given purpose and the reader can be assumed to have fully understood a text only when being able to incorporate what has been read and then, potentially, being able to share it with others.

The process of reading is defined as an individual process by which readers can comprehend and thereby interpret a text differently (Maarof & Yaacob, 2011). In other words, students within the same class can have different difficulties in English. A considerable reason could be that different individuals have access to different reading strategies to

understand written texts (Zoghi et al., 2010). In light of this, it can be assumed that different individuals have different difficulties in reading and therefore should be provided with the appropriate reading strategies needed to achieve their learning objectives. Consequently, my desire, as a teacher, will be to provide my students with the sufficient and needed tools to better master the English language.

The importance of reading comprehension is also highlighted by the Swedish National Agency. According to the Swedish National Agency (2011), mastery of the English language is considered to increase the learners' opportunities to be part of the world as well as being able to study and work abroad. As learners, we are members in a community where the fact that written texts are part of our daily life cannot be denied. However, words in written texts can sometimes be a source for enlightenment and amusement, but also, at other times, a source for confusion, and ambiguity (Brown & Lee, 2015, p. 389). Therefore, learners should receive sufficient guidance from their teachers. Teachers should guide their students to become independent in their reading by providing them with the needed strategies. Once they are independent readers, they will soon be able to improve their reading comprehension.

There are different reading-skill components involved in reading comprehension in an EFL setting. Linguistic knowledge and background knowledge are two components that are crucial in reading comprehension (Lopera Medina, 2014, p. 90). These two components are associated with bottom-up and top-down approaches where students' reading comprehension flows either from bottom to top or vice versa. Researchers have, however, been in disagreement over which of the two approaches better furthers EFL students' reading comprehension. For instance, a top-down approach is believed to be ineffective by Lundberg (1984) and Allard et al. (2001) because they believe it is mostly dependent on predictions, context, and background knowledge. Therefore, EFL learners are assumed to gain knowledge only through a bottom-up approach. In contrast, other researchers believe that EFL students' reading comprehension can be further developed through a top-down approach (Brown, 2007; Abbot, 2006). Even teachers show different preferences when it comes to the approaches they use in their classrooms (Birch, 2007, p. 5). Yet, there are researchers who believe that both approaches are vital in reading comprehension and none of them should be given less attention (Brown, 2007; Birch 2007).

In the literature review I conducted earlier, only one study out of ten was conducted within Europe. Also, the studies did not involve any high school learners. They involved either younger learners or adults. Both the lack of studies within Europe and research not taking into consideration high school students have, thus, been essential for the starting point

of the current study. With regard to the abovementioned, the aim of the current study is to understand which of the three reading approaches – bottom-up, top-down or integrated approach, teachers at different educational stages use to further their EFL students' reading comprehension. To answer my questions, I have chosen to study teachers' beliefs and perspectives towards reading comprehension and the strategies they use in their classrooms.

2 Theoretical background

The current study aims to investigate which of the three reading approaches – bottom-up, top-down or integrated approach – teachers use to further their students' reading comprehension. It is, therefore, important to provide definitions on, firstly, reading comprehension, and, secondly, on the reading approaches the current paper aims to focus on. *Reading Comprehension* is defined in the first subsection, *Bottom-up* in the second subsection, *Top-down* in the third subsection and *integrated approach* in the fourth subsection. Moreover, an additional subsection *Differentiating in the Classroom*, is added to define diversity in the classroom in terms of necessary adaptions.

2.1 Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is defined by many researchers. It was first defined as a "psycholinguistic guessing game" by Goodman (1970). Goodman (1970) claims that in that "game" the learner's thoughts interact with the language. For Bakke (2010), reading is a "complex process" where different operations take place, especially if reading is done in the target language. Reading comprehension is also defined as a skill that the learner uses to interpret written discourse (Chawwang, 2008; Angosto et al., 2013). Besides, reading comprehension opens up additional opportunities not only in education, but in professional life in general (Anderson et al., 1985, p. 1; Kucukoglu, 2013). In light of the aforementioned, it is, thus, vital for EFL learners to master this skill. Consequently, teachers must provide their students with effective reading comprehension strategies.

When researchers discuss reading comprehension, they place it under two different categories – bottom-up approach and top-down approach. Below, these two approaches as well as related theories are discussed in more detail.

2.2 Bottom-up Approach

The concept of bottom-up approach has changed over time. First, the bottom-up approach was founded on 1950s behaviorist psychology. At the time, the approach was designed to teach second language through *drilling, repetition,* and *error recognition* (Villanueva de Debat, 2006, p. 9). Today, the approach is further associated with phonics where the learner is expected to match letters with sounds. Also, the activities involved in bottom-up today are matching, paragraphing, and scanning (Brown, 2007, p. 308) whereas in textbooks the focus is put on recognition and grammar (Villanueva de Debat 2006 p. 9). Moreover, the bottom-up approach is also defined as a procedure that is both data-driven and detail-oriented in which the learner decodes "word-by-word" in order to construct meaning from bottom to top (Abbot, 2006, p. 635; Brown, 2007, p. 299; Nagao, 2002, p. 7). First, the linguistic items (e.g., letters, morphemes, syllables, phrases, grammatical cues, and discourse markers) need to be identified, and, second, learners use their mental data-processing to organize these items.

In activities based on the bottom-up approach, learners are assumed to construct meaning from the bottom, i.e., smallest units, to the top, i.e., largest units (Nagao, 2002, p. 7). For example, in order to create words, the learner is expected to, firstly, begin from letters. Once the learner has created words the learner needs to construct meaning from the text, which is accomplished through syntactic and semantic clues (Lundberg, 1984, 1984, p. 75 – 67).

2.3 Top-down Approach

An (2013) defines the top-down approach as "conceptually driven" as well as "big-picture oriented" which is activated through predictions and experiences. According to Brown (2007, p. 299), reading based on the top-down approach helps students see the text as whole; they construct meaning from a holistic perspective. In this approach, reading is an active operation where the reader interacts with written texts (Villanueva de Debat, 2006, p. 10). To accomplish this and for the reading to be purposeful and rational, the reader needs to rely on predictions and prior knowledge. Learning through connecting new information to prior knowledge is effective because the reader will add the new acquired knowledge to prior cognitive structure (Villanueva de Debat, 2006, p. 1). The reader is, therefore, more dependent on world knowledge and less dependent on linguistic information (Rao, 2003, p. 31 – 32). Comparing this to the bottom-up approach, according to Villanueva de Debat (2006, p.

9), new acquired knowledge flows instead in so called "series of stages (…) without any feedback or possibility of later stages of the process influencing earlier stages".

Learners do not need to understand each word in a text, rather, they are expected to predict meaning by relating a specific part from the text to background knowledge (Nagao, 2002, p. 8). In this process, the learner captures the text as a whole and by drawing assumptions and conclusions using prior knowledge the learner can succeed in extracting meaning from the given text (Lungberg, 1984, 1984, p. 75 – 67).

2.4 Integrated approach

In recent years, a third view on reading has been developed. This view, or approach, integrates both bottom-up and top-down approaches. According to Xue (2019, p. 4), sometimes it is difficult to determine which of the two approaches is involved in the reading comprehension process because any act of reading comprehension is "the combined result of the top-down model and the bottom-up model". Mendez and Liviganay (2017) claim that some activities can activate the need of both approaches, and Ardhani (2016) shows that both approaches are equally important and should be used depending on the students' needs and situations.

While reading, the reader can have mixed skills that are both of low-level and high-level kind. These mixed skills can help with different areas in the text. The knowledge of low-level skills can help, for instance, to understand the words in the text as separate units, but, on the other hand, the high-level skills will help the reader to create general knowledge of the words connected to each other in the text. Grabe and Birch (2004; 2007) both believe the integrated approach is more effective. Grabe (2004, p. 48) claims that the components that the bottom-up approach is believed to cover are as important as the components that the top-down approach covers. Birch (2007, p. 4) describes the two approaches as hand-in-hand processing through which readers can achieve their learning objectives.

2.5 Differentiated Instruction of Reading

The Differentiated Instruction of reading is closely related to so called Multiple Intelligence theory in which humans are seen as possessing different kinds of intelligence (Tomlinson, 1999). El Khdar et al. (2019, p. 1863) state that different individuals interact with the world differently and therefore teachers should take account of the students' differences when planning to assign them activities. The consideration should be made in terms of providing

different opportunities to different individuals because they acquire knowledge in different ways. Teachers cannot provide one task to all students within the same classroom and expect each student to achieve the same learning objectives (Saleh, 2021). For all students within the same classroom to be able to achieve the same learning objectives, teachers should fulfill different students' needs.

3 Previous Research

In this section, multiple studies on the three reading approaches – bottom-up, top-down and integrated approach, are presented. However, the three approaches are not necessarily discussed in each study that has been examined for the current paper. Some studies only discuss one approach, whereas others discuss two or all the three of them. In view of this, the studies found will be presented in the following order: *bottom-up approach, top-down approach, and integrated approach*.

3.1 Bottom-up approach

Some researchers agree that prior to knowledge and experiences, EFL learners need to find clues in the text and take advantage of them (Angosto et al., 2013, p. 83). If teaching reading comprehension to EFL students is only based on a top-down approach, where focus is put more on background knowledge and predictions to the detriment of bottom-up strategies, EFL learners could be misled (Birch, 2007, p. 5). Eskey (1988; cited in Birch, 2007, p. 5) addresses the issue of top-down bias by teachers, especially in second language reading, and believes that teachers sometimes prefer it over the bottom-up approach. For instance, some teachers tend to think teaching reading comprehension in an EFL setting is about providing students with the needed background knowledge (p. 5). Indeed, other researchers claim that neither of the two approaches should be given more focus than the other since they both are critical factors of success in reading comprehension. Also, the bottom-up approach could be considered as a lower-level strategy which is certainly important for less proficient learners (Fatemi et al., 2014) who need to master the basics before they can begin with more advanced reading.

In the study of Al-Jarrah and Ismail (2018) the students showed preference towards strategies related to the bottom-up approach such as decoding knowledge. Through interview sessions, Al-Jarrah and Ismail (2018) investigated how Arab EFL learners use strategies in reading comprehension. When students were asked about the strategies they use in reading comprehension, 52.6 % of them said they preferred repeating sentences in the passage several times to help them understand its content. Yet, 60% of the participants said that they choose to "translate the meaning of the words or sentence into their mother tongue in order to understand the text" (p. 37).

In Aurell and Norin's (2009) study, the bottom-up approach has been proven to be effective from teachers. In their study, Aurell and Norin (2009) investigated reading comprehension from teachers' perspectives by conducting interviews at different schools. In two different schools with learners of a young age, from preschool up until 9th grade, the teachers seemed to raise knowledge about phonological awareness among them. Both schools adopted dictations – LTG dictations, of "reading on the basis of speech" (Aurell & Norin, 2009, p. 3). In one of the schools, teachers focused mostly on learning new words as whole units but with less attention to the phonological awareness with regard to the learners being young. In the second school, teachers worked only with one letter every week (p. 27). Additional methods that teachers combined with linguistic knowledge was reading aloud.

Good readers' decoding, according to Aurell and Norin (2009), depends mostly on self-regulated bottom-up strategies. Yet, the bottom-up approach has, on the other hand, been proven, by some researchers, to be ineffective. In a study conducted by Zoghi et al., (2010), twelve Iranian EFL learners at university-level were interviewed to explore their awareness of the reading comprehension strategies they use. The findings of Zoghi et al., (2010) show that decoding of individual words could not alone help students construct meaning from a given text. It was, therefore, considered insufficient to improve reading comprehension. Less proficient readers can, however, still have the ability to decode and integrate meaning of single words, but they cannot succeed in understanding the whole text because they lack the ability to construct meaning at sentence-level where they are supposed to "integrate meanings of separate words" (Wise, 1999; cited in Zoghi et al., 2010, p. 12). One of the findings in Zoghi et al.'s (2010) study was that poor "comprehenders" showed a lack of strategic reading in understanding the text being assigned. The researchers of the study believe that it might have depended on the environment of teaching and in what way teachers taught reading comprehension to their EFL learners. It is common for Iranian EFL learners not to read in "holistic chunks", but rather word-by-word, which can be related to the fact that the education system in some countries is influenced by so called rote learning and the grammar-translation method.

Attaprechakul (2013) conducted his study using two methods to investigate the inference strategies needed when reading journal articles. Firstly, eighty-eight graduate students were assigned a set of texts to read and then were asked to provide answers on questions related to the texts. The researcher of the study also conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-four graduate students out of the eighty-eight students that participated in the study. Attaprechakul (2013) found that relying on the bottom-up approach did not help Thai EFL students

understand authentic texts – journal articles on education and economic growth. The students managed to understand the assigned text only after looking up the meaning of the words in a dictionary. Also, the students did not read all the parts within the texts and chose to leave out difficult parts. Attaprechakul (2013) believes that journal articles discussing education and economic growth might have contained information that only those engaged with background knowledge in the field could understand it (p. 88). In line with Attaprechakul's (2013) study, Suraprajit (2019) has also found the bottom-up approach to be insufficient compared to the top-down approach. To investigate reading strategies, Suraprajit (2019) assigned a questionnaire, including items related to both bottom-up and top-down approaches, to two-hundred-seventy random undergraduate students.The participants in the study did not show preference for, for example, reading aloud or dividing sentences, firstly, into phrases and, secondly, into words to be able to understand the grammatical structure.

3.2 Top-down approach

There is a growing body of research that identifies the importance of top-down strategies when it comes to developing EFL students' reading comprehension. The effectiveness of the top-down approach has been supported by Al-Jarrah and Ismail's (2018) study on Arab EFL learners in Higher Learning Institution. Through interviewing Arab EFL learners, Al-Jarrah and Ismail (2018) found that participants relied more on their prior knowledge – so called conceptual knowledge, both in linguistic schemata – bottom-up, and content schemata – top-down (p. 323). However, prior knowledge was the most used strategy among other strategies in the study. The students in the study managed to adopt strategies to solve their reading problems. The researchers also claim that Arab EFL learners, in general, face difficulties in word recognition, synonyms, lengthy sentences, grammar and prior knowledge. Common for those students is that they use Google translate, dictionaries, and grammar books. Therefore, Al-Jarrah and Ismail suggest that such students should be given texts related to their field to facilitate their learning.

Aurell and Norin (2009) refer to five different methods at the five different schools where they carried out their study. These five methods, however, still have in common that they all activate students' existing knowledge. In their study, they interviewed teachers at different schools to highlight the importance of taking advantage of students' own experiences to motivate them to become interested in reading. To achieve the aforementioned, teachers are recommended to provide their students with interesting and meaningful texts.

Moreover, Suraprajit (2019) also claims that top-down strategies in the EFL classroom have been found to be effective. In his study, five different top-down strategies were included in the questionnaire that was delivered to the participants. The texts that were assigned to the students were of two types: academic texts and business texts. The academic texts were combined with four strategies out of five, whereas the business texts were combined with all the five strategies. The results of the study showed that top-down strategies have helped students, especially less proficient students, in their reading comprehension.

3.3 Integrated approach

Despite the fact that there are studies that claim one approach is more beneficial than the other, some other studies, on the other hand, show that reading comprehension in the EFL classroom should include more than one approach. Also, sometimes it is difficult to determine which approach should be implemented because the tasks assigned by teachers can overlap with both bottom-up and top-down approaches.

In a study conducted on 9th grade students between the ages of thirteen and fourteen at a high school in Ecuador, Mendez and Liviganay (2017) encourage combining bottom-up and top-down approaches and refer to the operation as "active stage". To find answers to their study, Mendez and Liviganay (2017) designed a questionnaire to collect authentic data on how teachers teach reading to 9th grade students. They found that some activities may activate both linguistic schemata as well as content schemata. When students respond to a question, their response can overlap with both approaches in that they, firstly, try to decode the words within the sentence as an attempt to search for clues – bottom-up approach. Yet, to understand the concept of the given words, they will need to relate to their background knowledge – top-down approach – to associate it with the words (p. 59). Nevertheless, the researchers state that even if the students could predict meaning using their prior knowledge, they also needed to read and decode letters, phrases, and paragraphs to construct the meaning of, for instance, unknown words (p. 47). For this reason, the researchers believe that integrating bottom-up and top-down approaches would better help students improve their reading comprehension.

Through using experimental research, Ardhani (2016) found the top-down approach to be successful, but the combination of the two approaches is believed to be more effective in furthering students' reading comprehension. However, Ardhani (2016) does not explicitly pinpoint whether the two approaches should be integrated, but, rather, she states that both of them should be implemented to further improve students' reading comprehension. Ardhani

(2016) explains that the choice of which approach to implement totally depends on the situation and circumstances of the learners. For instance, the bottom-up approach is more effective with younger learners because they may need more knowledge on understanding the basics prior to becoming advanced learners. Teachers are, therefore, encouraged to determine which approach should be used when they want to further their students' learning in a specific area.

Reading comprehension, according to Dehghan and Sadighi (2011), will not be effective if teaching reading is only based on a bottom-up approach. Sixty-six pre-university students were assigned ten comprehension texts – five texts with familiar cultural themes and five texts with unfamiliar cultural themes. In view of this, the researchers suggest that teachers, in order to achieve their goals, need to combine the two approaches. Sixty-six Iranian female students, between 17 and 18, who were studying English at pre-university level were given ten texts with familiar and unfamiliar topics. The part that was based on a bottom-up approach included word-recognition, literal comprehension and searching for pronouns, whereas the part that was based on the top-down approach included skim reading, scanning, and making inferences. The students performed better on the part based on the bottom-up approach. The researchers believe that the students' difficulties in the part based on a top-down approach could be related to the lack of linguistic knowledge needed to process top-down strategies. One reason could be that teachers do not provide their students with the requirements needed for activities based on top-down. At early learning stages, students are sometimes only motivated to focus on bottom-up strategies with total disregard for further stages that help them overcome their obstacles in the reading process.

3.4 Differentiated Teaching in the EFL Classroom

According to the Education Act (as cited by The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022), teaching must be equal and that all students should have an equal right to a high-quality education, and "schools should also strive to compensate for students' different […] conditions." However, teaching aims and learning objectives should remain the same for all students, but, on the other hand, they should be implemented taking into consideration each learner's needs. In other words, teachers should not design different sets of lesson plans with different aims and objectives for different learners, but should rather consider the tools required to help individuals with different needs to achieve the same objectives.

The study of El Khadr, Rguibi and Bouziane (2019) show that differentiated instruction in the EFL reading classroom helps students with difficulties in reading skills better achieve their learning objectives. The researchers conducted their study on one high school in Morocco through classroom observations. The majority of the students in the study were of lower-proficiency level. The findings of the study show that providing students with new learning opportunities is efficient. This was accomplished through cooperation with the students where the teacher asked them to express their interests and needs. The teacher then created groups based on the students' interests where each group was assigned with different tasks according to their interest (p. 1866).

In an additional study conducted on grade 4 and 5 in Jordan, from four different schools, differentiated teaching has been proven to have an impact on English reading comprehension in the EFL classroom (Magableh, 2020). The findings of Magableh's (2020) study show that differentiated teaching reduces heterogeneity in the language classroom (p. 32). Some of the effective activities that could be used as means of increasing homogeneity in the language classroom, according to Magableh (2020), could be differentiated content, tiered activities, and tiered assignments (p. 32).

4 Method

The aim of the current study is to investigate which of the three reading approaches – bottom-up, top-down or integrated approach, teachers at different educational stages use to further their EFL students' reading comprehension. To address the research questions a qualitative research design was used. The data was collected by conducting interviews with English teachers at different sites.

4.1 Participants

Since this is a small-scale study, I have considered it sufficient to have six interviewees. In a qualitative method, researchers seek to include small samples of participants to study them in depth (Miles & Huberman, 2014). As regards sites, I approached high schools and middle schools as this paper is aimed at comparing how two different educational stages implement reading comprehension strategies. I reached out to six teachers, three high school teachers and three middle school teachers, who all have attended teacher training programs. However, the teaching programs they attended are different in terms of length and place. For example, three

teachers have English as their first language and have attended teacher training programs in their countries before their teaching careers in Sweden. One interviewee, who does not have English as his/her first language, has attended a three-year teaching program in Iraq, but needed, firstly, to get their degree recognized, and, secondly, to study two additional years in Sweden before starting teaching in Sweden. The remaining two teachers, on the other hand, have received their degree in teaching in Sweden. Additionally, the teachers' length in teaching experience is different for all six teachers.

In terms of the choice of participants, it was not explicit early in the data-collection process. Contrary to quantitative research where researchers use probability sampling, in a qualitative research non-probability sampling is used. In non-probability sampling researchers may be purposive (Miles & Huberman, 2014), and the decision on which teacher to be the next interviewee fully evolves once being in the process of conducting an interview. In non-probability sampling researchers may also choose their participants using snowball sampling in which predetermined interviewees can recommend other interviewees for the study. The sampling in the current paper is, therefore, a mix of both purposive and snowball sampling. First, different teachers at different schools were approached and asked if they could take part in the study – purposive sampling. Later, one more interviewee was still needed for the study, so one of the interviewees recommended a teacher at the same school he/she worked at – snowball sampling.

4.2 Design of the interview

Six individual interviews with six teachers – three high school teachers and three middle school teachers, were conducted. The collected data is based on teachers' views on reading comprehension strategies. As mentioned before, the aim was to investigate how reading comprehension strategies are viewed and used in the EFL classroom to enhance students' reading comprehension.

The interview guide consisted of two parts: part one involved six short background questions, and part two consisted of seven thematic questions. Some of the thematic questions also had probes. There were some scripted probes in case an interviewee would have difficulty in understanding a question. Some probes were, on the other hand, not scripted and used depending on the situation. For instance, on some occasions there was a need to elicit further explanation from some interviewees and thus I needed to come up with a probe to maintain the conversation and avoid invalid answers. However, to reliably identify the same

factors, the main questions still steered the interview. In other words, the interview was structured in that the questions were predetermined and asked in the same manner to all interviewees. Also, the questions were open-ended in nature in order to elicit information about teachers' beliefs regarding reading comprehension and reading strategies. Yet, the background questions still required short answers such as "*What is your main subject?*" or "*When did you graduate?*". The thematic questions were also open-ended but required longer answers as well as examples. It was important to let the interviewees feel comfortable to share their experiences and opinions freely. With open-ended questions interviewees have more freedom in providing responses since they are not constrained by any response possibilities (Creswell, 2015, p. 216).

4.3 Procedure

Prior to conducting the interview sessions, each teacher was approached by email. Next, four teachers were interviewed online through Zoom-meetings, and the remaining two were interviewed in person. The sessions were taped on two different devices to ensure there would be a backup of the same recording to avoid any potential risks of data corruption. Moreover, the interview sessions lasted between twenty to thirty minutes, with most being thirty minutes long. Also, all six interviewees chose to respond to my questions in English when asked which language they preferred to use.

4.4 Comparative Method

The comparative method is based on comparing and contrasting (Harding, 2015, p. 1). Using the comparative method helps the researcher examine commonality, differences, and relationships (Gibson and Brown, 2009, p. 128-129). However, prior to examining commonality, differences, and relationships in the answers of the interviewees, the researcher needs to prepare the dataset. The researcher needs to organize and summarize the interview transcripts. Once the dataset is organized, the researcher can implement the comparative method where the aim is to identify similarities and differences in the answers of the interviewees.

In the first step, the researcher should choose two interview transcripts and make a list of both similarities and differences between them (Harding, 2015, p. 5). For example, common patterns between the two interviews should be placed under similarities. However, in

case differences in terms of how each interviewee defines these patterns could be identified, it should be placed under differences. After the completion of the first two interview transcriptions, the list of similarities and differences can be expanded by adding more from the additional interview transcriptions. A complete list of all the similarities and differences between all interview transcriptions will help the researcher see what common themes could be found as well as what interviewees do not have in common. Also, the researcher should be able to find relationships between the interview transcriptions in the collected dataset. However, to better find relationships it may sometimes require the researcher to create a typology (Harding, 2015, p. 9). In other words, it is sometimes difficult to easily relate an identified difference to another, and, therefore, the researcher in such cases needs to amend it into a typology which can be associated with a pattern that is closely related.

4.5 Limitations

In the current study, there are several limitations that can be highlighted. The questions in the interview were open-ended in nature, which can be beneficial in that the participants are not constrained by any response possibilities (Creswell, 2015, p. 216). However, open-ended questions can also have disadvantages. For example, interviewees can provide irrelevant information that requires the researcher to exclude afterwards. Also, some interviewees may not understand all the questions and, thus, the researcher needs to quickly find a probe that should not change the actual meaning of the question. Consequently, open-ended questions can be time consuming because some questions can take less time for an interviewee but longer for another. Moreover, in two interviews, especially one of them, I had difficulties to understand what it was they meant because their English was not clear. I could still understand what they said, but for the results to be of high quality and accurate, I needed to correct some of the statements to avoid any misunderstanding.

As regards the validity of the study, I believe that there are two issues that may have had a negative impact. First, the fact that the identity of my interviewees was known to me as well as mine to them. Second, the interviewees may have anticipated the intentions behind my study and what I indeed sought to find. For example, from the way I asked, I may have made it clear to them what responses I was seeking.

4.6 Data Collection and Analysis

After conducting all six interviews, I transcribed each interview and put it in a separate document. Second, I printed them out to be able to code and find themes. I started to highlight potential codes that I found interesting for what I aimed to investigate in my study. To do so, I went through all interviews to find common words and opinions that could be related to each other. Afterwards, I moved on to identify themes where I could place my codes. Also, any irrelevant information was excluded.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

In this section, I aim to provide clarification on how I took account of ethical principles when I conducted the study. To undertake any research, the researcher should adhere to a set of guidelines striving for honesty and validity in research (McKay, 2006, p. 25-26). For example, for this research to maintain ethical standards, considerable attention was paid to ensure consent and confidentiality. As regards consent agreement, it was obtained twice – electronically and verbally. First, when I reached out to my interviewees in the recruitment email asking them for their permission to take part in my study. Second, prior to conducting the interviews, participants were once again asked to confirm that they gave their consent this time verbally. Each interviewee was informed about the procedure of the interview. It was clearly stated that their participation was only to help me answer the current study's questions and not to disclose it to anyone. In terms of confidentiality, the identity of the interviewees is only known by the author – me.

   After collecting the data and putting it together, the author should only use the responses to answer the study question/s without referring to the interviewees. Christofferson and Johannessen (2015, p.50) state that the study findings should still remain anonymous even if the identity of the interviewee is known by the researcher. The Swedish Research Council (2017, p. 42) proposes that the connection between participants and their responses should be eliminated when data is put together. I have, therefore, hidden the identity of my interviewees after I have collected the data by taking out the interviewee's names and replacing them with numbers instead. In the process of data analysis, I referred to each interviewee by using the numbers I have replaced their names with. Therefore, this study can be assumed to meet the requirements for confidentiality. Also, sometimes interviewees may provide specific examples of their experiences, which cannot be excluded since it is of interest for the study's

findings. A solution in this case could be that the examples can still be referred to in the findings, but without explicitly giving the identity of who said it.

5 Results

The findings of the current study are presented in this section. I have organized the themes found into *General Challenges that EFL learners face in their Reading Comprehension*, *Types of Texts assigned to EFL learners*, *Types of Reading Comprehension Activities assigned to EFL learners*, *Teaching Reading Comprehension in Diverse EFL Classrooms*, *Introduction to New Books*, *Reading Strategies Teachers Choose to Base their Students' Reading Comprehension on*. Also, since the study includes teachers from two different educational stages, being high school and middle school, this will clearly be indicated in each section. That is, the responses from the two school stages will not be discussed in separate sections, but rather under the same section.

5.1 General Challenges that EFL learners face in their Reading Comprehension

All three high school teachers confirmed that one of the general challenges EFL learners face in their reading comprehension today is vocabulary. On the one hand, two interviewees out of three believe that EFL learners do not have the vocabulary range needed for a person to understand written texts. On the other hand, one interviewee claims that students are challenged with academic vocabulary as opposed to, for instance, informal communicative language. One interviewee states that students in Swedish schools do get a good deal of vocabulary, but oftentimes it does not seem to be associated with context. In other words, students may know a considerable number of lexical items, but the interviewee was "surprised by some of the vocabulary that they do not know". An additional challenge, besides vocabulary, is also highlighted. One interviewee believes that decoding issues can appear due to teachers' choice of texts. Teachers' choice of texts "will definitely affect students' actual work, their willingness and ability to proceed", because when students have decoding issues, they tend to procrastinate the reading and eventually prefer to avoid it. Moreover, one interviewee out of three also believes that not only lower-level students need to improve their vocabulary, but higher-level students as well. The interviewee explains that when students

come to their class, they [the interviewee] usually go back and reteach them certain vocabulary.

When the same question was posed to middle school teachers, all three of them agreed that one of the general challenges EFL students face in their reading comprehension is also vocabulary. They all confirmed that students usually avoid reading due to lack of vocabulary. Specifically, one interviewee claimed that lack of ability to understand the content of a text depends highly on decoding: "students will stop reading if they cannot understand the text […] they will not be able to bridge their knowledge gap"[1].

5.2 Types of Texts assigned to EFL learners

When high school teachers were asked about the text types they use in their classrooms, two interviewees out of three preferred using short texts as well as longer texts, while one claimed to prefer literature and longer texts instead. From those who preferred literature and shorter texts, one preferred short texts more and only used literature during long stretches. The other interviewee preferred literature more but also claimed that the choice sometimes depends on the situation: "Students sometimes only handle short texts and, therefore, choosing a longer literary text does not always sound good."

Similarly, middle school teachers showed different preferences as regards the type of texts they use in their classrooms. According to one interviewee, the type of texts usually depends on the project and the theme they plan to work with. The other interviewee prefers short texts from textbooks. However, they do not work with textbooks much, but only pick out different topics. The third interviewee uses both literature and texts.

5.3 Types of Reading Comprehension Activities assigned to EFL learners

Two out of three high school teachers explained that they use verbal as well as written comprehension questions related to the assigned text. In contrast, one interviewee only explains to the students, verbally, what they should do and why. Afterwards, the teacher discusses with them where they freely can express and make conclusions regarding what they

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[1] Transcription has been corrected due to grammatical issues.

have understood. The interviewee pointed out that the proficiency level of the students is not as important as encouraging them to put words to their cognitive thinking.

On the question how they can ensure that their students learned something from the assigned text, one interviewee out of three claimed that it is not easy to fully verify what the students have learned due to time issues. The two other interviewees did not respond to this question because they do not usually have one way to ensure this.

Middle school teachers' responses on the same question are in line with those high school teachers provided. One interviewee out of three provides her/his students with questions on the content. Whereas one interviewee out of three revealed he/she cannot be certain every time for every student, but usually "I ensure through providing them with questions on the text". At other times, the interviewee would ask them to use words from the text to create their own sentences. Sometimes "I [the teacher] want to take advantage of the last ten minutes of the lesson to repeat the words with my students". The interviewee stated that it is important to vary the strategies to motivate the students and surprise them, but, on the other hand, the variation should be made wisely because it should be valid.

5.4 Teaching Reading Comprehension in Diverse EFL Classrooms

All three interviewees at high school level appeared to deal with diversity differently. In cases of diversity in the classroom, one interviewee said he/she would use the same text with similar questions but then the students, depending on their proficiency levels, respond differently. For example, advanced learners would put more work into their responses because they have more tools to work with. Lower-level learners' answers, on the other hand, are not as advanced as higher-level students. The other interviewee does not exactly design different lesson plans for different learners but would rather divide the students into two groups and provide each group with a different book to read. Afterwards, the groups would present the book they have been assigned to each other as groups. This interviewee believes it is not only enjoyable to do different things sometimes, but it is also important to be with the students and listen. Sometimes, it is not the length of the book that is challenging but the way in which the book is being used. When assigning books to students "I should at least have read them (…) and different lesson plans would mean different "workstations" where I will not be able to be part of these stations at the same time. I believe it is necessary to be with the group and listen to them when they discuss the book."

One interviewee also revealed that variety in teaching can sometimes be problematic due to the number of the students in the classroom. The larger the number is the more adaptions should be planned. It is necessary to adapt the lesson to meet all students' needs, but "I always assume that I cannot meet this necessity". Instead of trying to find or design different texts for different individuals, the interviewee postulates there should be a balance between the levels. For instance, a teacher can choose a text which is at an intermediate level, in terms of both syntax and vocabulary, and focus more on explaining to them what it is he/she expects from them once they have read the text.

Two middle school interviewees out of three agree that adaption is necessary. One interviewee believes that sometimes it is more effective to use one text but with different difficulty levels, rather than designing separate lesson plans. By doing so, the teacher can accommodate all students' needs no matter at what level they are. With different difficulty-level texts, the teacher can also create a few easier questions that all levels can answer and some more tricky questions for those at a higher level. The other interviewee stated that at the school he/she works at they always adapt, but it is done differently. For instance, instead of having multiple lesson plans, the school where he/she works has decided to create mixed groups from different classes depending on the level of the students. For example, in class A and B, there could be students with special needs or students with different proficiency levels. A potential solution could be to create two groups – one for those with special needs and one for those with proficiency level issues. The new mixed groups include different students from different classes. By doing so, "we mix students from different classes (yet from same grade) but who have one goal to achieve." The interviewee concludes by saying: "being a teacher is trying to be creative the whole time." However, one interviewee out of the three does not believe adaption is necessary because it can be time consuming. To be able to understand how much time a teacher needs to create multiple lesson plans the interviewee claims that we can take into consideration the time one lesson plan requires. Instead, the interviewee usually begins somewhere at basic level, which sometimes can be easy for some students but challenging for others. Afterwards, the teacher seeks to challenge those who are at a higher level by giving them additional tasks. In other words, the interviewee claims he/she does not create different plans for different individuals. It is also important as a teacher to know what to focus on when planning a lesson. The interviewee illustrates it as problematic because "as teachers, we need to balance the plan so that each student can benefit from it […] it is better

to find your way to the lower-level students so that you can get everybody on the same page, and then choose the type of challenges you want to assign."

5.5 Introduction to new Books

All three high school teachers give their students an introduction to the book they have planned to work with. One interviewee would give their students the opportunity to predict, especially if there is a plot coming. Through questions, the interviewee tries to elicit from them what they think will happen. Usually, the teacher prefers to start off by reading a little from the book and then allow them to explore the book and have a discussion on it before the actual reading. Whereas one interviewee is keen on providing the students with an introduction to the book in whole class where he/she talks more about the theme and background of the book as a means to help them get into the story. The interviewee believes the first lessons of book reading projects oftentimes are boring to students, but once the teacher succeeds in motivating them by reading a few lines out loud, they will soon become interested and want to continue reading. The other interviewee also gives their students the opportunity to predict but not by providing them with clues on the title or image of the book, but rather on the context: "I focus more on the historical context and then get into the text immediately by reading aloud to them."

To introduce a new book to their students, middle school teachers choose to do so differently. Two interviewees out of three introduce a book in whole class depending on the length of the book and the goal with the project. One interviewee out of three prefers to show the students the cover of the book and have them make guesses on its content. Two interviewees out of three also mention movies based on books they are to work with. They explained that they sometimes refer to movie trailers, if there are any. However, they also believe this should not be mentioned early in the book introduction because some students may watch the movie instead of reading the book. One interviewee out of three prefers to have a general introduction to the book and mostly on the characters, atmosphere, setting and plot.

As regards giving the students the opportunity to predict, one interviewee usually takes advantage of the cliffhangers in different chapters. The interviewee explains that he/she does not prefer to have them predict before each chapter, but would rather divide the book in a way where there is a purpose for predicting. If, for instance, chapter six ends in an

interesting way "I would, in this case, want them to predict chapter seven before reading it". One interviewee agrees, to some extent, that predictions should not be overused. Sometimes, he/she prefers to leave predictions to the end of the book because some students may spoil some events in the story which may not be appreciated by other students. One interviewee claimed he/she very seldom gives his/her students the opportunity to predict because it depends on how motivated the students are.

5.6 Reading Strategies Teachers Choose to Base their Students' Reading Comprehension on

Two interviewees from high school level out of three seemed to prefer basing their students' reading comprehension on a top-down approach whereas one interviewee showed preference toward activities related to the bottom-up approach. One interviewee believes prior knowledge and prediction in reading give more freedom to the students to work with the assigned text. The other interviewee believes such skills, i.e., prior knowledge and prediction, help focus on the setting and the characters in the background rather than on grammar, phonetics, and letters. In contrast, activities related to the bottom-up approach are preferred by only one interviewee. This interviewee exemplifies that he/she usually wants to go from "micro" to "macro" and by that he/she means departing from the smallest units to the top. He/She starts with looking at the individual questions on individual words, grammar, and things that the students find interesting. From there, "we can turn to slightly larger pieces – syntactical components."

When asking middle school teachers, one interviewee believes he/she needs to focus more on the practical part of the language when learning English. He/she explained that learning the language should revolve around being able to use it mostly for communicative purposes than focusing on grammar. This is in line with what another interviewee stated, but with a slight difference. This other interviewee also preferred the top-down approach but associated it only with literature reading. With shorter texts, this interviewee still preferred to focus on the basics such as phonetics. Whereas the third interviewee usually uses a mix of both approaches. The aim, according to this interviewee, is to provide the students with the necessary tools to be able to learn. Therefore, the choice of which approach to choose depends highly on the goal and needs within the classroom. Also, using one single strategy, he/she believes, makes students sometimes less motivated. Teachers, therefore, need to vary.

However, varying should not mean teachers will have to use different approaches for the sake of variation and disregard the importance of making wise decisions.

6 Discussion

In this section, I aim to discuss and problematize the findings of the current study in accordance with the theoretical framework and previous research. To maintain consistency, most of the subsections will be organized in the same order as presented in the Results' section, such as: *General Challenges that EFL learners face in their Reading Comprehension*, *Introduction to New books*, and *Reading Strategies Teachers Choose to Base their Students' Reading Comprehension on*. As regards *Types of Texts assigned to EFL learners*, *Types of Reading Comprehension Activities assigned to EFL learners*, and *Teaching Reading Comprehension in Diverse EFL Classrooms*, they will be merged into one section: *Differentiated Instruction of Reading*, since several common patterns could be defined within the three subsections. Finally, potential pedagogical implications for the EFL reading comprehension classroom will be discussed in a separate subsection.

6.1 General Challenges that EFL learners face in their Reading Comprehension

Both high school and middle school teachers agreed that vocabulary is among the challenges EFL learners face in their reading comprehension. In the core content for both English at high school level and middle school level, vocabulary is addressed as an important component in the language learning which contributes to correct structure and context (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011; 2018). Also, considering previous research, vocabulary plays a decisive role in reading comprehension, especially for less-proficient learners (Fatemi et al., 2014). However, according to one interviewee, even high-proficient learners need to pursue developing their vocabulary.

Both the teachers' beliefs and the directives by The Swedish National Agency are in line with the findings of Al-Jarrah and Ismail's (2018) and Aurell and Norin's (2009) studies. In the former, to understand the content in the text, the learners, firstly, strived to understand the words in it before they could understand its content. In the latter, both vocabulary and phonological awareness were of importance, but given that the learners were of a younger

age, the researchers suggest that attention should only be focused on vocabulary knowledge. This indicates, in other words, that EFL learners, especially young learners who are less proficient, should have sufficient access to vocabulary in order to be able to understand the content in the assigned texts.

Moreover, two interviewees, one from high school and one from middle school, agreed that additional challenges that EFL learners face in their reading comprehension may also concern decoding issues, which both believed could depend on the teachers' choice of texts. In their study, Aurell and Norin (2009) state that good readers are good decoders because they rely on self-regulated bottom-up strategies. Even when the findings in Attaprechakul proved a bottom-up approach to be ineffective, learners could understand the assigned texts only through looking up words in a dictionary. In the same study, it is also demonstrated that the texts that were provided to the students were not chosen wisely, which may have been the underlying reason for the results in the study.

In light of the aforementioned, a bottom-up approach should be given attention in teaching reading comprehension to EFL learners. Most importantly, a bottom-up approach should not be implemented only to aid young as well as less proficient EFL learners to further develop their reading comprehension, but also to aid high-proficient learners as well.

6.2 Introduction to New Books

All six teachers agreed that they usually have an introduction to each new book they plan to work with, but the way in which they choose to introduce it differed. One common pattern that appeared when asking about how they prefer to introduce a new book to their students was prediction – i.e., a top-down approach. Although all six teachers want to accomplish different learning objectives, they all give their students the opportunity to predict. For example, one teacher preferred to focus more on the plot, one more on the theme and background, one more on the historical background, while one more on the "cliffhangers" in different chapters. Villanueva de Debat (2006, p. 10) states that relying on predictions and prior knowledge in reading contributes to purposeful and rational reading. Besides, learning through connecting new information to prior knowledge is effective because the reader will add the new acquired knowledge to prior cognitive structure (Villanueva de Debat, 2006, p. 1). Also, the studies of Al-Jarrah and Ismail (2018), Aurell and Norin (2009) and Suraprajit (2019) agree that relying on background knowledge helps students further their reading

comprehension. A top-down approach also helps motivate the students to become interested in reading (Al-Jarrah & Ismail, 2018; Aurell & Norin, 2009). Motivation and interest are components that were clearly highlighted by one interviewee, a high school teacher. He/she believes that book reading can oftentimes be boring and, therefore, the teacher needs to motivate the students.

Middle school teachers also pointed out that they usually introduce new books to their students through giving them the opportunity to predict, but they also pinpointed a few important issues related to this strategy. Two interviewees mentioned movies based on books and the fact that students sometimes can watch a trailer as a way of giving them a short introduction to the book. However, they also believed that this can be misleading in that students can watch the whole movie and spoil the plot of the book. According to Goodman (1970), the learner's thoughts interact with the language, and according to Chawwang (2008) and Angosto et al. (2013), reading is defined as a tool that the learner uses to interpret written discourse. Therefore, it can be concluded that students should, in fact, encounter the language in written form and not through "movie trailers", especially in book reading where the aim is to further their reading comprehension. However, if a teacher wants to vary the ways through which the students should predict, he/she can, for example, choose to make the prediction meaningful through predicting only when there is a reason for prediction. For example, one interviewee from middle school believes that it is more effective to predict when there is a twist at the end of a certain chapter.

6.3 Reading Strategies Teachers Choose to Base their Students' Reading Comprehension on

When asked about which type of approach they choose to base their reading activities on, all six teachers gave different answers. Four interviewees, from different educational stages, chose to base their reading on activities related to a top-down approach. In contrast, one middle school teacher chose to base reading on activities related to the both approaches – i.e., an integrated approach, whereas one middle school teacher prefers more the bottom-up approach.

Two interviewees prefer the top-down approach because they believe it gives more freedom to work with "stories" as well as helps focus on the setting and the characters in the background rather than on grammar, phonetics, and letters. These statements confirm what An (2013) and Brown (2007, p. 299) believe. An believes that the top-down approach is

"conceptually driven" and "big-picture oriented", while Brown (2007) illustrates the approach as a tool that helps students see the text as whole from which they can construct meaning. Also, the assumption regarding grammar, phonetics and letters being insignificant compared to top-down strategies correlates with Rao's (2003) statement that the reader is more dependent on world knowledge and less dependent on linguistic information (p. 31 – 32).

The only interviewee who preferred basing reading activities on the bottom-up approach exemplified that it is better because as a teacher, he/she wants to "go from micro to macro" by which he/she aims to work with the smallest units, bottom, towards the top. However, this can be considered a vague statement since not only the bottom-up approach can be assumed to help less proficient learners with their reading comprehension, but also the top-down approach. Suraprajit's (2019) study reveals that even less proficient students could benefit from top-down strategies. Therefore, even when a teacher aims to work with the smallest units, it should not mean that only the bottom-up approach will be helpful.

One middle school teacher believes a top-down approach is more effective because learning a language should touch upon the practical part where students are able to use the language to communicate rather than focus on grammar. In the core content for receptive skills in English at middle school level, it is stated that students should use strategies that help them understand "details and context in […] texts, such as adapting […] reading to the type of communication, content, and purpose." An additional interviewee also believes that a top-down is effective, but, on the other hand, only associates it with literature reading. He/she chooses to use a bottom-up approach with shorter texts to focus more on the basics such as phonetics. In the same core content as mentioned above, it is also mentioned that teachers should help their students develop their "pronunciation, […] grammatical structures, sentence structure, words with different registers […]". Therefore, one approach cannot be considered in teaching reading comprehension to EFL students. Each approach covers different areas that all together can further develop reading comprehension skills.

Only one interviewee revealed he/she prefers to mix the two approaches – i.e., use an integrated approach. This interviewee's aim is to provide his/her students with the necessary tools to further their reading comprehension. According to him/her, the choice depends highly on the goal and needs within the classroom. This is in line with Mendez and Liviganay's (2017) study in which the researchers believe that there could be activities that may activate both bottom-up and top-down approaches. For example, an activity can require students to, firstly, decode the words to search for clues; however, they cannot further understand the

context of the given words unless through relating them to their own background knowledge (p. 59).

In Ardhani's (2016) study, both approaches are given equal importance in furthering EFL students' reading comprehension. However, it is not clearly stated that they should be combined, but, on the other hand, they should both be implemented to help students with their reading comprehension. She claims that the choice depends highly on the situation and the circumstances of the learners. According to Dehghan and Sadighi (2011), teaching reading cannot be based on only one approach, and they, therefore, suggest that teachers that aim to achieve their goals need to combine both approaches.

6.4 Differentiated Instruction of Reading

It is mentioned in the Education Act (as cited in The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022) that schools should "strive to compensate for students' different […] conditions." Simultaneously, the aim and learning objectives should remain the same for all students, and thus changes can be implemented in terms of students' different needs. When both high school teachers and middle school teachers were asked about the type of texts they prefer to provide their students with, the majority agreed that they tend to not have a preference for a specific type of text because oftentimes it depends on the situation, the theme of the project, and the students' needs.

When high school teachers and middle school teachers were asked about the type of reading comprehension activities they assign to their EFL students, some said they used verbal comprehension discussions, while others usually use written comprehension questions, and some preferred other activities such as students using the words to form their own sentences. This confirms the findings of Magableh's (2020, p. 32) study where he clearly states that reading comprehension activities in an EFL setting could be provided in terms of tiered activities.

Some interviewees stated that sometimes it is more effective to use the same text but with different difficulty levels. Students, in this case, are expected to give different responses depending on their proficiency levels. According to the Education Act (2022), teachers should consider the tools required to help different individuals with different needs to achieve the same learning objective. In other words, the activities and the way they are provided in may differ in regard to different individual needs, but on the condition that they aim to cover the same predetermined learning objectives for all students within the same classroom.

In terms of ensuring whether students gained knowledge after the assigned reading comprehension activities, two interviewees, one at high school level and one at middle school level, stated that they cannot be certain every time for every activity, which I believe is not problematic because during the school year additional activities will be conducted where the teacher is able to note what the students have gained knowledge on.

One interviewee claimed that the process of adapting lesson plans is sometimes time consuming. Evidently, designing multiple lesson plans can be both time consuming and tiring, and, therefore, teachers are not encouraged to work in this way. Instead, teachers are encouraged to aim their teaching at being equal for all students through compensation and consideration of accurate tools to help students achieve the same learning objectives (Education Act 2022, as cited in The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022).

6.5 Pedagogical implications

It has been mentioned by some interviewees that implementing different approaches and lesson plans in the heterogeneous classroom can require much work and may be time consuming. However, it can be noted that teachers tend to misunderstand the concept of "implementing different approaches". In other words, teachers may believe that using different approaches means to design and plan whole and separate lesson plans which are adapted for different learners. Indeed, considering different reading approaches in the language classroom does not mean different lesson plans because the aim and learning objectives should remain the same for all students. Therefore, the implementation can be considered in terms of seeing the different students' needs and providing them with the accurate tools that help them better achieve their goals.

Since the current study has found that both bottom-up and top-down approaches are essential to further EFL students' reading comprehension, it can thus be suggested that teachers should combine them when teaching reading comprehension to their EFL students. They should, however, determine the needs and situation prior to choosing which approach they want to use, as both previous research and the findings in this study reveal that the choice is highly dependent on the students' needs and situations.

In The Swedish National Agency for Education for both high school and middle school levels, teachers are not clearly recommended which reading comprehension strategies they should use. For instance, in the curriculum for English at high school level, it is stated that students should "be given the opportunity to develop [...] all-around communicative

skills" and "to develop their ability to use different strategies", but it does not clearly define what type of strategies teachers should use. Therefore, it can be suggested that teachers, firstly, need to identify the components in reading comprehension they aim to cover with their students, and, secondly, they can determine which strategies they find more effective in helping their students better achieve their learning objectives.

7   Conclusion

In the current study, six teachers, three from high school level and three from middle school level, were interviewed to investigate which of the three reading approaches – bottom-up, top-down, or integrated approach – teachers at different educational stages use to further their EFL students' reading comprehension.

The findings indicate that two of the challenges students at both high school level and middle school level face are vocabulary and decoding. However, for EFL learners to become good readers and develop their reading skills they also need to relate to prior knowledge which necessitates the need of a top-down approach. It is, therefore, fairly apparent that both bottom-up and top-down approaches are important to further develop EFL learners' reading comprehension. Firstly, students need to understand written language at its basic level, decoding skills and vocabulary in particular. Secondly, students need to construct meaning from longer texts, which cannot be achieved only by relying on the smallest units, bottom-up approach, but also on prior knowledge and predictions, top-down approach.

Considering the above, one approach alone cannot be considered to help students in their reading comprehension because both approaches touch upon different reading-skill components. While a bottom-up approach helps EFL students develop their knowledge in vocabulary and decoding, a top-down approach helps them construct meaning from longer texts through prior knowledge and predictions. For this reason, some researchers believe that the integration of both approaches is beneficial. Mendez and Liviganay (2017) believe that some activities may require the use of both bottom-up and top-down approaches. The study of Ardhani (2016) shows that both are equally important to further EFL students' reading comprehension. However, Ardhani (2016) also believes that the choice should depend highly on the situation and students' needs. Accordingly, the findings of my study also indicate: 1) the importance of both bottom-up and top-down approaches in teaching reading comprehension to EFL students, and 2) that the choice is dependent on the students' needs.

Yet, some interviewees expressed concern about how time consuming it may be in the differentiated classroom. Therefore, teachers need to be aware that they are not encouraged to design multiple lesson plans for different individuals, rather they should "strive to compensate for students' different […] conditions" (The Education Act, as cited by The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022). Since the aim and learning objectives should remain the same for all students, the changes can be implemented in terms of students' different needs.

Finally, it can be suggested that more research in this regard remains crucial. Teachers in Swedish classrooms need to be more aware of additional tools that are available in order to help their EFL students achieve their goals and learning objectives in reading comprehension.

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Appendix

The Interview Guide

Brief introduction of me and my study:

I am conducting my second-degree paper in my teaching education. The paper will be on EFL reading comprehension strategies. It is, therefore, of interest to me to find out the types of reading strategies English teachers use in the English classroom and which of the reading strategies they believe mostly furthers their EFL students' reading comprehension. The interview will consist of seven background questions and ten thematic questions. The interview will last anywhere from 15- 30 minutes. In the background questions I only seek for brief introduction of you, whereas in the thematic questions I seek to find answers to my question regarding the area I want to investigate, that is, reading comprehension strategies. Also, as regards confidentiality, this interview will not be disclosed to anyone for any reasons. I will only transcribe it and then use the information from you to answer my study questions.

Background Questions

1. Which language do you prefer to use in the interview?

    Swedish

    English

2. Years of experience?

3. First subject?

4. Any additional subjects?

5. Teacher training program?

6. When did you graduate?

7. Students you have in the classroom:

    EFL

    ESL

    Mix of both

Thematic questions:

1. What general challenges do you think EFL students have in reading comprehension?

2. When it comes to the different levels you have in the classroom, does this necessitate the need of adapting the lesson as to meet the students' needs?

3. The routines of reading comprehension in the classroom:

   short texts (occasionally)

   short texts (often)

   literature (the art form)

4. Do you plan any activities or hand out any worksheets that are based on the content in the book?

5. If there are different levels in the classroom, does that mean different students will have different books to read? In this case how do you plan so that both levels have different activities and worksheets to work with?

6. How do you prefer to present a new text/book to the class?

   o Would you prefer to give them the opportunity to predict the content from, for instance, the title or images in the book?

   o In case of giving them the opportunity to predict, do you only predict the first time you plan to read the book, or do you keep on predicting before any chapter?

   o Do you mention to them why they should read and the knowledge they will potentially gain after reading?

7. I will mention to you some of the reading strategies that could be used in the language classroom today, and want you to give short answers and whether or not you use them in your classroom, ok?
   When you plan to read a book with your students, do you focus more on:
   - Letters
   - Phonetics
   - Grammar
   Or more on:
   - The setting
   - Predicting
   - Skimming for clues
   - Keywords