

Investigating Strategies Used by Libyan EFL Teachers in Teaching Reading Comprehension at Sirte Basic Education Schools

Mariam Akilah Omar

Department of English – Faculty of Arts

University of Sirte

Abstract

This study aims at finding out the strategies used by English language teachers in teaching reading comprehension to basic education pupils in Sirte, Libya. Towards this purpose two research designs have been used: qualitative and quantitative by using two data collection methods: a teachers' questionnaire and a classroom observation. In this study 26 English language teachers from Sirte Basic education schools participated in the study to answer the questionnaire moreover, three sets of Class Nine students in three schools - randomly chosen among the basic education schools in Sirte - were observed for at least five times.. The results of the data collected show that teachers use different teaching strategies in teaching reading comprehension. These strategies comprise of the teaching of new vocabulary, reading aloud and answering the comprehension questions.

Keywords: *Teaching Strategies – EFL – Reading Comprehension*

1. Introduction

Teaching, basically, aims to make learning happen. To measure the use of a teaching strategy, it is necessary to ensure that learning has taken place. Being aware of such a necessity, this study is conducted with the primary purpose of investigating the teaching strategies used by EFL teachers in reading classes. Reading is the most practised of the language skills inside the EFL classroom. Outside the classroom, it is practiced on a large scale by various categories of people. Definite theories are available on the acquisition and teaching of listening, speaking and writing. Improvising on these theories, teachers evolve key strategies to teach these skills.

In contrast, in the case of reading, definite theories are not available on the nature and the process of reading. In a comprehensive review of reading research, Alderson remarks that researchers do “not agree on what skills are involved in the teaching process” (2000: 13). The fact that there are plenty of educational materials on “reading” today confirms Alderson’s remark. In the absence of decisive strategies, teachers find it difficult to choose their teaching methods. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the strategies that teachers in Sirte Basic Education Schools use in teaching reading comprehension.

2. Literature review

Learning a language involves learning a number of skills. Richards and Schmidt (2002: 293) define language skills as “the mode or manner in which a language is used.” There are four of such skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In addition to these four skills, there are a number of “micro-skills” or strategies, which learners use to communicate with others.

Some of these skills are inherent to all languages, which are capable of positive transfer, others have to be learnt. Gower, Philip & Walters (2005: 85) state: “Many of these skills are common to all languages. Although students may have to be made aware that the skills they already use in their first language can be transferred

to the language they are learning, other strategies may have to be introduced”.

2.1 Strategies of Teaching Reading

Reading comprehension strategies are divided by some scholars into three: pre-reading stage, while reading, and post reading (Gibbon, 2002; Brown, 2001; Wallace, 1992; and Barnet 1989).

2.1.1 Pre-Reading Activities

The purpose of pre-reading activities, according to Wallace, is to “raise the readers’ knowledge of what they are about to read” (1992: 90). The key to building readers’ confidence is to prepare them effectively to read. The teacher can do many things before reading a text to attract students to it and make it simpler for them to understand. Abbott and Wingard (1981: 93) state that “the overriding aim” in doing any class works with learners before they begin to read a text is to create a “positive attitude” in them towards the text to be read. Lindsay and Knight (2006: 75) support this viewpoint. “Pre-reading activities,” they state, “are designed to set a task for the learners; help the learners prepare for the task and motivate the learners to read.” Nuttall (1996) recommends a pre-reading activity of six steps: providing a reason for reading, introducing the text, global understanding of the text, breaking up the text to smaller units, dealing with new words and arousing learner curiosity.

2.1.2 While-Reading Activities

While-reading activities, according to Wallace, train students to be “active and reflective” readers (2003: 93). Students become active and reflective readers if they work in an interactive atmosphere. Researchers identify three kinds of interactive reading activities. These are: the teacher-centred activities, text-centred activities and group-work. These three kinds can be practised individually or be combined during the teaching of a reading

lesson depending upon the students' needs. Each kind is described here in the following section.

Teacher-Centred Activities: In this mode, the teacher controls the learning activities completely. The teacher decides the sequence of work, sets tasks, checks learning and ensures that every student participates in the learning process. Such an interaction keeps the teacher immediately aware of the problems faced by the students.

Text-Centred Activities: While performing text-centred activities, each student works alone by himself for much of the time. Since reading is essentially a personal activity, this mode is very much suitable for teaching reading. Every student is responsible for his own progress. The teacher keeps a record of each student's work, watches progress and gives support whenever necessary. Since every student should comprehend the text for himself, the teacher should make the reading instructions as complete as possible.

Group-work: In the group activity, the students make joint effort to understand the text. They pool and discuss individual efforts. It gives practice in teamwork. This mode has two advantages. Motivation is generally high. Individuals participate more actively. However such an activity has two disadvantages: the pace and approach may not suit everyone, some students may not be working. With beginner level students, group-work has to be performed with much supervision by the teacher. However, group-work can be a very positive language activity with responsible learners.

2.1.3 Post-Reading Activities

According to Toprak & Almacioglu (2009: 23-24) activities of post-reading stage commonly check the students' comprehension and lead them to a deeper analysis when necessary. They state that the aim of a reading text is not memorising the author's point of view, but rather to "see into another mind, or mesh new information into what one already knows". Post-reading activities

always depend on the purpose of reading and the type of information gathered from the text. Post-reading exercises first check students' comprehension and then lead them to a deeper analysis of the text. Thus, by actively engaging students in pre-reading, guided-reading and post-reading activities, the teacher not only supports students' understanding of the content, but also provides them with opportunities for comprehension, vocabulary and study skills. Most teachers already use these principles and practices. Being thoroughly conversant, these teachers are likely to feel confident as far as their profession is concerned.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Method

This study employed a qualitative and quantitative research design. The data were gathered via a teacher's questionnaire and classroom observation. These two main sources were of great help for the researcher to understand what was going on in the classroom, how the reading lesson was taught by the teacher and what kinds of strategies the teachers used to simplify and make the reading lesson a happy learning experience.

3.2 Research Question:

This study aims to answer the following question:

- What strategies are used by Libyan EFL teachers in teaching reading comprehension classes in Sirte basic education schools?

3.3 Participants and Setting:

The participants of this study were 26 teachers of Class Nine in 15 basic education schools in and around Sirte. The researcher has made a random selection of three basic education schools in Sirte and approached the authorities of these schools seeking permission to observe Class Nine pupils for a few days. They gladly agreed and gave us the necessary access and facilities. The questionnaire was distributed to 30 English language teachers of Class Nine basic education stage. Twenty-six teachers responded.

4. Results and Discussion:

The aim of this study was to investigate the teaching strategies that teachers in the basic education schools in Sirte adopt in teaching reading comprehension lessons. Following the thematic analysis that was conducted on the data gathered from the questionnaire and the observation, the current study's revealed the following results:

4.1 Pre-teaching vocabulary

The results reveal that the majority of teachers 76.92% use *pre-teaching vocabulary* as one of their main strategies in teaching reading to their students whereas only 23.08% employ this strategy occasionally. 80.67% of the teachers who filled-in the questionnaire explain the meaning of new words at the pre-reading 7.69% explain the meaning of the new vocabulary of the reading stage while reading however, 11.54% leave this to the post-reading stage. The way that teachers use in explaining the meaning of new words is by translating to the source language. According to the questionnaire results (30.77%) often translate the new words into Arabic, (53.84%) sometimes translate the new words into Arabic, (11.54%) rarely use this method, and one teacher (3.85%) never translates the new English words into Arabic. However during the observation, it is noted that the new words of a lesson are written on the board by the teacher in the pre-reading stage and pupils are asked if they know their meanings, otherwise the meanings are explained. Many times, they translate the new English words into Arabic. New words are pronounced by the teacher – sometimes with incorrect pronunciation – and ask pupils to drill.

4.2 Motivating learners' interest and activating prior knowledge

One of the items of the questionnaire was "the pictures presented in the reading text have no effect on the students' comprehension". In the framing of this question, a methodological trick common in designing of questionnaires is applied. It has an inverted structure. The purpose is to check whether the teachers

are answering the questions carefully or not. The responses show that the teachers are alert on this inversion. Surprisingly, (19.23%) of the research participants agree with the statement that the pictures have no effect on the students' comprehension and (23.08%) partially agree whereas, (38.46%) disagree and 19.23% partially disagree with the statement that the pictures have no effect on the comprehension of the text. It is often helpful to introduce a text before starting work on it. This introduction will route the students' existing knowledge in the right direction by activating relevant schemata in their minds. This will make them feel interested in reading this particular text. According to the teachers' point of view in relation to motivational pre-reading activities twenty-four teachers (92.31%) agree that introducing the reading text is very helpful in teaching reading; two teachers (7.69%) disagree with this outlook. It is important to motivate learners to read, it is essential to build their confidence which can ultimately lead them to improve their reading ability. What do the teachers think? Based on the results twenty-two teachers (84.61%) agree that students can read efficiently if the students are properly prepared for reading, three teachers (11.54%) partially agree with this concept, whereas one teacher (3.85%) disagrees with the statement that preparing learners to read will build up their confidence in reading.

4.3 Tackling texts

The majority of teachers 84.61% agree that reading aloud is very important and helpful especially for students at early stages of language learning; four teachers 15.39% partially agree with this statement; none of the teachers disagrees with this. Consequently, 100% of the teachers invariably give opportunities to the students to read the reading lesson aloud. Although reading a loud is a classical term, it is noted that all the teachers observed are using this strategy both reading to students and reading by students. Depending upon the teacher, three to eleven students get this opportunity in every reading lesson. They read at incredibly low speed. On an average, each student takes about five minutes to read a small passage of 50 words. Reading aloud by the teacher and the students in the classroom is carried out more as a

convention than as a strategy. Students reading aloud, no doubt, are a very useful technique. Accordingly, when students follow the text with their eyes while reading, this will improve both speed and comprehension gradually. But reading aloud has to be practised carefully and with a purpose. Instead of allowing eleven students to read a text mechanically, the teacher can identify the students with basic reading problems and give opportunities to just two or three of them in a session to read the text.

Based on the results all the teachers read the text aloud in the class, they are divided in their practice concerning the number of times the text is read aloud by them. Some of them read the text only once or twice in the class. Many of them read the text more than two times in the class. It is essential that the teacher reads the text aloud in the class. When the teacher reads with involvement and inspiration it creates interest in the students. But this has to be practised cautiously. It is necessary that the teacher reads aloud the passage not more than two times in the class, because this will cause over-teaching, loss of student interest, and above all, loss of valuable classroom time. However only few participants (7.69%) often ask their students to read silently, 15.39% occasionally do that; 38.46% rarely ask their students to do silent reading; and equally 38.46% of the participants say that they never ask their students to read silently in spite of the fact that silent reading is very important in developing in improving students' understanding without the additional effort of concentrating on the pronunciation of individual words as well as students will develop strategies of fast reading with comprehension. Additionally, all the students in the class will get the opportunity to read the text.

4.4 Confirming Comprehension

After the reading aloud, the post-reading stage "follow-up" starts. Teachers use the questions which come after the reading passage in both the course book and workbook. It is in line with The National Capital Language Resource Center's (NCLRC) (2007) report (as quoted in Antoni 2010) that suggested three kinds of activities to evaluate comprehension in the post-reading stage; evaluation of comprehension in a particular task, evaluation

of overall progress in reading and in particular types of reading tasks and deciding if the strategies used were appropriate for the purpose. It is likeable that every one of the students benefits from classroom activities. But the level of intelligence differs among people. If some students did not understand some aspects of a passage, a teacher need not worry. When the weak student is exposed continuously to reading exercises in the later lessons, it will bring out the dormant skills embedded in him at times of necessity. Thus, 38.46% of the research participants claim that they often make all the class understand the reading lesson, 53.85% say that they sometimes make all the students understand the text, while two teachers (7.69%) say that they rarely make sure all the class understands the reading text before shifting to introduce a new one. On occasions when some students fail to understand a lesson, teachers often redo that lesson to make all the students understand it. On such occasions, teachers feel reluctant to introduce a new lesson. Teachers need to change this attitude for four reasons. First, reading is a cognitive skill, an interactive process; it is a quiet progress; even though learning would have taken place, it escapes measurement. Second, there is not one empirical method available to the teacher to decide whether or not a student has understood a reading text. Third, within the very short time allotted for teaching reading in the basic education classes, a teacher will not find extra time to re-teach a lesson. Fourth, re-teaching has to be done at the cost of the clever students who might lose interest in repeat-learning. Hence, re-teaching decisions need to be taken very carefully. Usually comprehension questions follow reading texts and students are expected to read, understand and answer the questions based on the text. However, 7.69% of the participants say that they answer the comprehension questions in the books themselves, whereas (15.39%) say that the students answer them, and twenty teachers (76.92%) claim that it is a combined activity of the teacher and the students. None of the teachers neglected the comprehension exercises. In the real world, the purpose of reading is not to memorize an author's point of view, but rather to see into another mind, or to mesh new information into what one already knows. Memorizing is an ability not directly connected to any cognitive language skill.

Surprisingly, seventeen teachers (65.38%) agree that memorization is very important in teaching reading, six teachers (23.08%) partially agree, three teachers (11.54%) partially disagree with the observation that memorizing is helpful in the teaching of reading.

5. Conclusion

The current study aimed to find out the strategies adopted by Libyan EFL teachers in the ninth grade in teaching reading comprehension in the basic education stage. To this end, the study employed a questionnaire and observation to gather the data. The overall results seem to indicate that teachers use different strategies in the teaching of reading, namely, pre- while- and post-reading. In the pre-reading stage teachers explain the new words from the lesson on the board with their meanings. In the while-reading stage, teachers focus on the reading aloud strategy and on explaining and translating the reading text into Arabic. Then in the post-reading stage, they answered the comprehension questions with their pupils and ask them to do some of the exercises as homework. Although the study was limited by 26 teachers from basic education schools in Sirte, the findings may be used to predict the possible strategies that teachers use in teaching reading lessons in Libyan context. Therefore, based on general observation, experience, and the specific findings of the study, it is recommended that teachers should know what reading comprehension is and why it is taught within English textbooks. They should also follow the steps prepared in the teacher's book and make an interesting class for students. Teaching reading is a very broad area with large potential for further research. A good research activity is justified only when it benefits the society and the country. Two problem areas are identified for further research in the Libyan context. First, research needs to be conducted to discover the methods necessary to develop speed reading skills. Second, the way that teachers use to give instructions during the reading lesson and how students respond to such instructions are advised to be studied.

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