

The Place of Reading in EFL Context

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Abstract: The article aim is to shed light on the problem of reading in EFL context and also refer to non – Latin Arabic alphabet learners’ challenges. Researcher tried to analyze myriad research articles to explore the common EFL learners’ difficulties and problems on the way of English reading and comprehension and bunch together the implemented methods (techniques) and go through generated suggestions and feasible solutions. The marshal factors will provide benefits to educators in EFL context (EFL school teachers, university lecturers, people whose concern is EFL development).

Keywords: Reading, Comprehension, Challenges, EFL Context

1. Introduction

Nowadays we see our students holding smart phones instead of holding books, reading and writing comments on Facebook or other social media instead of reading some hardcopy or software pages and analyze them, sharing photos instead of sharing their impression on what have been read. The current busy and full of distractions century and rapid, attractive technology progress are all have their particular effects on reading position in society and attitudes towards reading in L1, L2 and inevitable in EFL context from primary school learners to post – master and doctorate students.

2. Reading in EFL Context

As an EFL context educator at University I very often come across with students’ moans and groans when they have to do some reading, it doesn’t matter as an in – class or out – class activity. It is not only my personal opinion that I infer through my 5 years Iraq work experience but almost all of my colleagues’ at Faculty and my former colleagues’ from secondary and High school general consensus is that students mostly don’t like reading, they have poor reading habits. So what causes these boredom and gripe in EFL reading?

In language learning one of the most prominent considerations is reading (Noor, 2011). In the last decade the importance of reading in second and foreign language acquisition has burgeoned (Karbalaie, 2010). Reading perceived as a main pillar in academic and higher education context for EFL and ESL learners. They receive new information through reading which assists them to gain comprehending, reading between lines, synthesizing, interpreting in order to go ahead in their study field (Grabe, 1991; Noor, 2011; Richards, 1976). Reading also has been approved as the most significant of the four essential skills in English language learning (Alderson, 1984; Carrell et al., 1988; Koch, 1975). In recognition of significance of reading comprehension it should be indicated that it is notably the principal aim for EFL and ESL learners to acquire apprehending of the environment, community and of

themselves and it enables learners to elaborate and interact with what they read (Tierney & Readence, 2005). Reading in EFL notion has been widened to encapsulate mental and visual skills required to get information from digital displays, computers, and hand – held (mobile) devices or from other various technological learning settings. Nowadays the concept of reading is expounded to incorporate the process of learning complex and different set of abilities and knowledge which empower EFL readers to comprehend print – based and visual information and be able to keep up pace with vibrant and rapidly developing information – based environment (Reutzler & Cooter, 2012). In addition students have an easy access to this knowledge either virtually via internet or through large spectrum of printed materials (Rajab & Al-Sadi, 2015). However students' reading is debatable point.

3. Challenges in EFL Reading

If we assume the advance of English as a top of a mountain in that case EFL learners are climbers who try to move up and in each next step they need to enhance their reading comprehension in order to upgrade language skills and reach the EFL – advance peak.

It's undoubtful that English is a lingua franca (Bhandari & Blumenthal, 2013; Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014; Smala et al., 2013) and the most widespread international language in the world (Coleman, 2011; Tsui & Tollefson, 2007). Internet World Statistics reported that English takes the first place between the languages used online (" Internet world users by language," 2013). Therefore English plays a crucial role not only in academic grounds but also in technology, business and various research fields in many countries (Altbach et al., 2009; Fortanet-Gómez & Räisänen, 2008). Iraq is one of the Middle East countries where having good proficiency in English is accepted as prestigious and English is used as a medium of instruction in Universities either in state or private (Wachob, 2009). Students' Academic English inadequacy (Sofi-Karim, 2015) and especially reading comprehension weakness (Ahmed, Puteh—Behak, & Sidek, 2015) trigger Ministry of Higher Education of Kurdistan region to make upgrading in teaching English in tertiary level (Kurdistan Region of Iraq 2020, A Vision for the Future, 2013).

In dealing with reading comprehension, EFL students come across with compilation that may hinder understanding of the assigned reading material in curriculum which will impede process of reading comprehension skills improvement (Alkhalwaldeh, 2012). Schema or students' prior knowledge are the main components which reputed as the corner stone for reading comprehension (Adams, 1977; Carrell, 1983; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Grabe, 1991; Johnson, 1981; Ulijn & Salager-Meyer, 1998; Weaver, 2002). Murray (1980) and Alderson's (2000) studies also indicated the crucial role of prior knowledge in reading comprehension of EFL learners. It means if the readers know more about the written texts' topic it helps them to understand required texts' more easily. Reading the culturally familiar texts have positive impact on learners' (Dayze, 2004; Lin, 2002)

- a. Post – reading performance
- b. Reading speed – students read faster culturally – familiar text
- c. Fewer errors occur while recalling passages' information
- d. Strengthen text understanding

In this case non – familiar text may be considered as a one of drawbacks for EFL students in reading comprehension. For example, Iraqi or Muslim students would better understand, easier remember and have more fluency in the text about Eid-al-Fitr (Ramadan Feast) than the text about Easter. In respect thereof, if teacher teaches non – familiar topic (like Easter in Muslim context) so they should give insight into topic or provide students with the schema – information which could be associated or connected with students existing knowledge. Another matter to discuss in this regard is teachers’ instructional practices (instructional strategies implemented by teachers to activate students’ prior - knowledge) should be put under scope and examined (Al-Jahwari & Al-Humaidi, 2015). It’s necessary to teachers to be aware of students’ experiences and prior knowledge to related reading part (Chen, 2003).

Vocabulary knowledge is one another factor among the problems which affect EFL learners’ reading and understanding. In the last two decades the importance of vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension becomes a focal point of second and foreign language researches (Anjomshoa, 2014). Most researchers’ conviction is that EFL/ESL learners have deficit of understanding reading parts because of their insufficient vocabulary size (Al-Darayseh, 2014; Anderson & Freebody, 1979; Laufer, 1998; Nation, 2001; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Schmitt, 2000; Stahl, 1983). Laufer (1998) pointed out the prominence of vocabulary that the text comprehension is not possible either in L1 (learners’ native language) or in a second or foreign language without apprehending the text vocabulary. Woolley (2010) noted that learners who have poor comprehension generally suffer and have difficulties in acquiring new vocabulary. To sum up this part it should be remarked that the harvest of reading is comprehension and vocabulary knowledge is a major prerequisite (Salah, 2008) and essential pillar in comprehension and naturally reading itself also have positive effect on vocabulary advancement.

Another problematic area for EFL learners which cause difficulties are unfamiliar script and writing system. Researchers stated that learners with similar, close or Latin (also known as a Roman) alphabet word familiarization and recognition is better than EFL Arabic, Chinese and non – Latin alphabet learners (Masduqi, 2014; Muljani et al., 1998; Wang & Koda, 2005). With respect to Arabic alphabet (Mourtaga, 2006);

- a. No capital letters
- b. Depend on letters position in a word 28 Arabic letters have dissimilar forms (Hussien, 2014)
- c. Written from right to left, students need adaptation to be able read in opposite direction (Thompson-Panos & Thomas-Ružić, 1983) – this hinders fast reading and decelerates skimming and scanning and note taking skills.

EFL learners’ attitudes towards reading – the concept and perception of reading need to be refreshed. The reading shouldn’t assume only as a tool to pass exam, or a vehicle to enhance English language skills or educational advancement (Rajab & Al-Sadi, 2015), it is pleasurable way to acquire useful and desired information and enjoyable way to learn new things. Furthermore, researchers asserted the crucial role of EFL learners’ motivation in reading development (Grabe, 2009; Şentürk, 2015; Yamashita, 2004) and learners’ attitude towards reading have effects on their reading comprehension achievement (Lazarus & Callahan, 2000; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997).

Table 1: Reflections from some researches in EFL reading context

Author	Title of Article	Stated Problem	Contribution
Hashem A. Alsamadani (2008)	“The Relationship between Saudi EFL College-Level Students’ Use of Reading Strategies and Their EFL Reading Comprehension” – doctoral thesis	Saudi EFL teachers are far from teaching Reading skills and strategies Learners’ reading inabilities pose obstacles in the professional and academic progress	Suggestions to improve teaching pedagogy and EFL teachers’ awareness about reading skills and strategies Boost learners’ metacognitive awareness of several beneficial Reading strategies in order to enhance EFL learners’ reading comprehension
Harits Masduqi (2014)	“EFL Reading in Indonesian Universities: Perspectives and Challenges in Cultural Contexts”	Students are reluctant to read their textbooks and participate to reading classes. The causes of unwillingness are not familiar explanation and discussion genres used un reading material in EFL tertiary level.	Provide students with sufficient background knowledge. Give students guideline includes culture and gender elements. Interactive reading classes give opportunity to Indonesian EFL learners to gain self- confidence and increase their motivation.
Kuang Yu Chen (2014)	“Vocabulary, Syntactic Knowledge and Reading Comprehension: the Perspective of College EFL Students”	EFL learners’ limited Vocabulary Knowledge	Generate the positive correlation between vocabulary and syntactic knowledge much more effective than solely vocabulary knowledge increase.

Al-Darayseh (2014)	“The Impact of Using Explicit/Implicit Vocabulary Teaching Strategies on Improving Students’ Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension”	EFL students suffer a lot from not to be able achieve understanding of reading texts, because of insufficient vocabulary size. Hence EFL learners unable to accomplish reading comprehension.	Explicit and Implicit vocabulary teaching strategies combination were implemented which improve learners’ vocabulary knowledge and correspondingly enhance EFL learners’ comprehension of reading materials
Ar-Riyahi and Rashid (2010)	“An investigation of the Effects of Oral Reading Fluency on the Comprehension of Iraqi Learners at the University Level”	In Iraqi EFL context the observation is that Iraqi EFL learners are slow readers, not having fluency in reading have adverse impact on the way of academic advancement, inadequate reading fluency is also accepted as stumbling block in text comprehension	Implementation of oral Reading Fluency (ORF) from standpoint – it is the process of reading aloud which enables learners not only to see the words but also hear them and build up a proper intonation while reading aloud and understand encounter text at the same time.

4. Conclusion

After elaboration of studies and researches carried out in EFL reading Comprehension context it could be summarized that each study throws light and pinpoints various challenges, problems and statements. This review draws part of huge EFL reading portrait and gives opportunity to get general knowledge about current reading comprehension circumstances in EFL context and acquaint people whose concern is the emerging developments in EFL reading and contemporary implementation in this context. This article analyzed problems which assist educators to get the true diagnosis, if educators unaware of students’ level, culture, background and general in and out classroom conditions is too difficult to find out the successful way and approach to teach.

5. Suggestions

It seems that the use of appropriate techniques/approaches along with well – developed class instruction is enough to solve learners’ problem. However it should accentuated that teaching is not only job but a humanistic career. Especially in critical countries like Iraq (where researcher herself is a teacher of English) implementation of successful methods, teachers’ positive and warm – hearted attitudes establish positive class environment which facilitate students’ motivation. Motivation make learning process easier and enjoyable. The peaceful and friendly learner – instructor relationship and class atmosphere might be more essential than teaching specific words, and structures. Furthermore, to get accomplishment in reading classes, lessons should be organized in an interactive way.

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