Investigating the Techniques Used by Iraqi Teachers in Teaching Reading Comprehension in the University Level

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Abstract

In teaching English, Reading is an important and effective skill in the learning and teaching process. Therefore, teachers should focus on and teach strategies to help learners cope with the text. Subsequently, it is important to investigate teacher techniques in the classroom as they teach reading. This study was designed to investigate the teaching techniques of reading comprehension among Iraqi EFL teachers in Iraqi universities. The study used a fully quantitative research design to collect data through a survey questionnaire from 34 lecturers. The findings showed that teachers used various strategies which are divided into three categorizations namely; pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading. Strategies of previewing and vocabulary technique, Question-Answering Technique, vocabulary instruction technique, recitation and reading aloud reviewing technique and follow up strategy. An implication was drawn at the end of the study.

Keywords: reading comprehension; teaching techniques; teaching English.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is an important skill in foreign language learning and teaching process. It provides important linguistic input for foreign language learners; moreover, it helps for further development in listening, speaking, and writing. Since reading is an important skill in language teaching and learning process, it has been investigated from different perspectives and reading comprehension gained importance. The consensus among reading educators and experts is that reading is a complex, interactive process that involves features of readers, texts and tasks (Bernhardt and Kamil, 1995; Grabe & Stoller, 2005). As there have been many variables in reading comprehension, researchers have always tried to find ways to overcome the difficulties readers have while reading. According to Santrock (2008) when reading, the learner decodes, visualises, conceptualizes, infers, predicts, imagines, rereads, paraphrases, classifies information, guesses from the context and clarifies words by looking them up in a dictionary. Also, while reading, the effective reader uses certain metacognitive strategies which involve goal setting, selective attention, planning for the organization, monitoring, self-assessing, and regulating. Thus, for effective reading comprehension, a reader needs knowledge about strategies, knowledge about when, how and where to use these strategies (Paris, Cross, & Lipson, 1984).

The teacher of English is at a serious disadvantage compared with teachers of other subjects. This is so because most students of English specializing in English as a prestige. Another obstacle is that such students lack sufficient motivation to learn English. Teaching reading comprehension (RC) is by no means an exception. Added to the above obstacles, different approaches dominate the field of teaching foreign language including RC. Moreover, university teachers of RC suffer from shortage in the time allotted. They also suffer from too many techniques suggested for teaching RC on one hand, and the other hand, from the fact that there is no best technique for teaching it. Cook (1996) states that " no second language acquisition research can provide a definite answer to the real problems of second language teaching at this

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point…. there is no predetermined correct theory of language teaching originating from second language acquisition research"(Tomlison,2008) Iraqi university teachers of RC, moreover, are at a loss. They are not free to choose the materials they use in teaching. At the same time, they are directed by the authority concerned and required by their serious students to promote achievement not only in RC but also in general proficiency in English. Moreover, "teaching can be direct (in that it transmits information overtly to the learner) or it can be indirect (in that it helps learners to discover things for themselves)"(Tomilson, 2008) On the other hand, university teachers are under the pressure of poor techniques of teaching preferred by weak students who insist on having each word, phrases, sentence, etc., translated into Arabic. Such students are after marks not after real learning. It is unknown that university teachers submit to such pressure or refuse. It is also unknown, whether other outdated techniques are used or rejected and replaced by correct ones. Another pressure is put on teachers. It is the lack of motivation on the part of students " no one will, of course, deny that we learn best when we want to learn" (Girard, 1974).

Literature Review

For identifying the strategies that could be applied for the L2/FL learners, Grabe (2009) studied and modified a few earlier studies by Pressley et al. (1989), NRP (2000) and Trabasso and Bouchard (2002). Thereafter, he identified eight different strategies that supported the reading comprehension, which included summarizing, monitoring comprehension, forming questions, activating prior knowledge, answering questions and elaborative interrogation, using visual graphics and other graphic organisers, applying the text structure awareness and inferencing (Grabe 2009). Many L1 and ESL/EFL language researchers studied the implementation of the reading strategies by the English language teachers for determining the strategies which were commonly used by these teachers for improving the comprehension skills of the students (Kadah 2005; Hernandez-Laboy 2009; Kuzborska 2010; Alsamadani 2012; Althewini 2016; Reyna Barron 2016).

A few of the studies have been reviewed below. Alsamadani (2012) studied the attitude of the EFL Saudi teachers towards the reading comprehension strategy-based instructions in their EFL classrooms. These researchers distributed an attitude-related questionnaire amongst 60 male Saudi teachers, which questioned them about the common and research-based reading strategies. They also made some classroom observations. According to their results, the Saudi teachers displayed a positive attitude towards 9 strategies, i.e., previewing all reading material, scanning and skimming the material, questioning, determining the actual meaning of the unfamiliar words, activating the previous knowledge of the students, paraphrasing, using actual context clues and finally, visualisation.

However, the teachers were not aware of the relevance of many strategies like setting a specific purpose for reading, identifying the major ideas, summarization, monitoring the comprehension, inferring, thinking aloud and evaluating the material. Hernandez (2009) conducted a study where they investigated the various reading strategies used by the ESL teachers for improving the comprehension amongst the students. They concluded that all teachers used reading strategies for comprehension. After analysing all data that was collected during the survey of the reading strategies, the researchers noted that the teachers did not use a text structure and thinking aloud protocol. Furthermore, they did not use any strategies for setting a reading purpose, questioning or monitoring comprehension, regularly.

Reyna-Barron (2016) observed that the teachers lacked sufficient knowledge regarding the instruction of the comprehension strategies. When the teachers showed no awareness about these strategies, the researchers could develop effective comprehension strategies like setting clear reading-based goals, prediction, text preview, identifying the actual meaning of the unfamiliar words and activating the prior knowledge of the students. When enquired about the research-based strategies for improving comprehension, some teachers talked about the 'summarising' strategy (Reyna-Barron, 2016). In their study, Kadah (2005) determined how the Arabic Foreign Language (AFL) teachers taught their students some reading strategies. The researchers distributed a questionnaire which consisted of 22 strategies amongst the 106 K-12 AFL reading teachers in the USA. Their results indicated that a majority of these teachers used 6 common strategies, i.e., inferring, repetition, use of background knowledge, plan, role play, summarising and cooperating. However, the least commonly used strategies were - access to the information sources, implementation of graphic organisers, taking notes, evaluation and organising and selective attention (Kadah 2005(.

A few other researchers reviewed the studies which focused on the strategies used by the teachers while teaching the reading comprehension. In one such study, Janatun (2013) investigated the various strategies implemented by the teachers in teaching the listening comprehension-related skills. These strategies were classified into 3 types, i.e., top-down, bottom-up and metacognitive. The results showed that the students positively responded and stated that they could understand all the sounds of English words and patterns. Ahmad investigated the strategies used by the teachers while teaching the

students different reading and speaking-based comprehension skills. They concluded that these teachers used 3 stages while teaching the students different reading skills, i.e., pre-reading, during reading and the post-reading stages. During the pre-reading stage, the teachers presented some warming questions to the students for testing and enriching the vocabulary of the students. This allowed the students to participate in the topic that is being discussed. The results of this study showed that some strategies were specifically used by the teachers while teaching the students to read and comprehend. The researcher aimed to determine the data that was commonly used by English teachers while teaching strategies.

Methodology

The study is fully quantitative research design. The selection of a descriptive statistical design for the current study was made based on the feedback elicited from previous studies which handled the same area and employed the same design. These studies found this design suitable for collecting data that can be statistically analyzed and described. Creswell (2017) noted that descriptive studies are useful for investigating a variety of educational problems, and concerned with assessing attitudes, readiness, opinions, preferences, demographics, practices, and procedures. Johnson & Christensen (2019) stressed that using such a descriptive approach for data collection was useful in achieving the objectives of the study. The population of the study included EFL instructors teaching reading comprehension at the departments of English in Iraqi universities. A sample of 34 instructors was selected. They teach RC in the first and second levels. The instrument used for collecting data in this study is a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire items of this study were adopted from previous studies.

Results and Discussion

Demographic information

Age: The teachers were aged between 35 to 60. 14 (41%) of the participants were aged between 30 to 40 years old while 20 (59%) of the participants were aged 50 to 60 years old. Regarding the participants' gender, 25 (73%) of the participants were male while 9 (23%) of the instructions were female. Teaching Experience: the data showed that 20 (59%) of the participants have more than five years of experience while the rest of the participants 19 (41%) have ten years of experience in teaching reading comprehension.

Results of Reading Comprehension Strategies

Data were collected through the distribution of a questionnaire to the participants, the repletion and the frequency of the participants' answers will be provided below. Data showed that the most common strategies used by the teachers was 'Permit students to ask questions' as they consider that this technique is the most effective way to improve students reading strategy. This strategy was followed by 'Encourage competition among students' where the teachers used to evoke students' competition making the learning process more engaging. Reading the whole paragraph from the textbook were found to be one of the best strategies to teach reading comprehension, this indicates that teachers tend to let the students understand the whole context of the paragraph to ease the understanding of the text for the students. Also, data showed that the same number of teachers agreed on the strategy of 'answering the students' question' as an effective teaching of reading comprehension. Furthermore, seeking accuracy, fluency and choose mistakes to correct was an always strategy used by the teachers in teaching reading comprehension. Making students read silently, encourage the students to use certain words of the sentences to use it to make sentences which leads to a better understanding of these words found to be used by the majority of the teachers. However, the teachers have answered the second categorisation of the strategies as a 'moderate' use which means teachers make use of these strategies sometimes. The strategies of 'reading sentences separately' `dividing students into groups' and 'encourage cooperation among students' Encourage students to ask each other to read the text then discuss it with the teacher which represent the new method of teaching communicative approach. Make students read the text aloud is also were found to be a moderate strategy to be employed by teachers. The role-play strategy 'encourage students to act what they read' where the students act and imitate what they read from the text which leads to more understanding by using the strategy learning by doing. On the other hand, some of the strategies of the least used by teachers were translating each word of the text, translate phrases, translate whole sentences, correct all mistakes as these strategies were seen to be less effective in teaching reading comprehension. The second part of the questionnaire tackled the importance of teaching reading comprehension. Majority of the teachers agreed that teaching reading comprehension is vital in developing students' efficiency in English language learning. Also, some of the teachers believe

that teaching reading comprehension in the English language leads to improve it in the Arabic language. in responding to the last item in the questionnaire, half of the teachers believe that learning the English language helps or leads to improve the Arabic language as these both languages have different systems.

Discussion

Teachers use many cognitive and metacognitive strategies while teaching students in their reading classes. Block and Pressley (2002) noted a widespread agreement amongst the scholars that the students must be taught various cognitive and metacognitive strategies, irrespective of the program that is used. These instructions must include scaffolding, modelling, guided practice and an independent application of the strategies, which helped the students develop an ability to choose and implement all relevant strategies independently, and thereafter, supervise and regulate their usage. As a result, the students become more aware of the significance of using these strategies while comprehending the reading process. During their third year, the prospective teachers are taught techniques which would help them teach various reading skills. This class helps the teachers learn the different stages of teaching reading skills and how to prepare proper lesson plans.

The choice of the strategies is based on the type of text that is being read. Based on the nature of these texts, the various strategies like the vocabulary-related strategies, activating the background knowledge, rereading, inferencing, monitoring comprehension, self-questioning, identifying the main ideas, summarizing and drawing conclusions, could help the students understand all texts (Harvey & Goudvis 2007). The secondary school students must be taught a proper way to read the texts so that they do not struggle while they are reading and learning the texts. Strategy instruction should begin very early. Hence, it was suggested that the teachers must consider teaching the strategy instructions to all students. Before these teachers teach their students, they must learn these strategies themselves so that they can interact with their students at appropriate times and places, while reading texts (Zhang & Wu 2009). Under these circumstances, the teacher educators must help the prospective teachers become good reading teachers and also help them to learn and effectively teach the reading strategies. An effective reading skill must be taught. Also, while helping the prospective teachers learn and subsequently teach better reading techniques, these teaching strategies have to be incorporated into the teacher education programmes. Thereafter, the respondents applied a follow-up technique by giving homework to the students as a final activity in their reading class. Based on all the observations, it was noted that Respondent 1 asked their students to text. This was according to the suggestions made by Edmundson (2006) that all teachers must ask their students to summarize the texts. This would help the students improve their writing skills through other follow-up activities. Hence, a follow-up activity was another effective technique for transferring the reading skills to texts and integrating the reading skills in other language-related skills (Barnet 1988; Wallace 1992). Similar findings could be concluded from the questionnaire data and it was seen that the teachers often ask their students to do homework that included activities like matching the words with their definitions, completing all sentences and translating a text. Thus, the post-reading activities are of different types and are seen to be very innovative, creative, positive, effective and fun-based.

Generally, all respondents in the study used different reviewing techniques wherein they asked their students to present conclusions related to whatever they have learnt. They reviewed the generic structure of every text which was previously discussed and used this strategy for assessing the students' understanding level. CAL (2006) mentioned that based on this reviewing activity, the teacher could determine how the students understood and fit all information together. Results indicated that the teachers used reading aloud technique while teaching, which increased the interaction between the students and teachers, and the students, could comprehend the text in a better manner. Thus, this activity played a vital role in developing the reading competence of the students. Furthermore, the respondents used the recitation methodology, wherein they asked the students to recite a story based on the text. The retelling was seen to be an important activity that could be used during the reading stage. Additionally, other results indicated that the teachers also asked the students various comprehension-based questions and later clarified all the answers in the class for ensuring that the students understood the text properly. This was similar to the statement made by Downing & Anderson when he stated that justifying the comprehension was a technique wherein the teachers asked the students to read a particular passage and then they asked some comprehension questions. The data indicated that the teachers used a strategy of asking a few explicit questions (Jennings et al; 2013). The explicit questions are defined as questions where the students have to find information published in a text, and thereafter derive their answers from this information.

Conclusion

Teacher's technique in teaching reading is regarded as one of the fundamental factors since they can promote students' comprehension in reading. Accordingly, this study explored teachers' techniques in teaching reading. This study was

designed to investigate the teaching techniques of reading comprehension among Iraqi EFL teachers in Iraqi universities. The study used a fully quantitative research design to collect data through a survey questionnaire from 34 lecturers. The findings showed that teachers used various strategies which are divided into three categorisations namely; pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading (Strategies of previewing and vocabulary technique, Question-Answering Technique, vocabulary instruction technique, recitation and reading aloud reviewing technique and follow up strategy. Finally, this research was limited to teachers' techniques in teaching reading at senior undergraduate levels, future research can be conducted on school levels (high, secondary). Also, this investigation can be conducted on students' strategies in learning reading comprehension>

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Appendix

Items	Always	Often	Not sure	Sometimes	Never
Read sentences separately	18	9	4	10	2
Read the whole paragraph	24	14	1	3	1
Use Arabic when appropriate	10	7	3	19	3
Seek accuracy	20	8	4	10	1
Divide students into groups	16	9	4	6	8
Seek fluency	22	9	7	4	1
Make students read silently	21	10	2	9	1
Make students read aloud	18	9	1	7	8
Divide students into groups when they read and ask questions	16	10	8	7	2
Permit students to ask questions	28	9	0	5	1
Encourage students to answer each other	14	10	2	14	3
Encourage students to ask each other	8	9	6	10	10
Encourage students to act what they read	18	9	3	8	5
Encourage students to use certain words in sentences	19	10	1	12	0
Encourage cooperation among students	15	14	3	10	1
Encourage competition among students	27	12	3	1	0
Choose mistakes to correct	20	17	2	4	0
Translate each word	11	3	10	10	9
Translate phrases	9	14	9	9	2
Translate w hole sentences	10	13	0	6	14
Ask the students to translate words, phrases, paragraphs or text, etc	8	13	1	17	4
Correct all mistakes	11	11	2	4	15
Answer students' questions	24	14	4	1	0
Bear in mind developing reading skills when teaching any course	23	18	1	1	0
When teaching courses other than comprehension, I follow old techniques of teaching comprehension	26	12	1	4	0

When teaching courses other than comprehension, I follow modern techniques of teaching comprehension	15	13	4	11	0
Reading comprehension is vital in developing students efficiency in English	24	12	3	3	1
Developing reading comprehension in English leads to develop it in Arabic	11	13	12	5	2
Learning English helps development in Arabic	12	10	10	6	5