

TEACHING METHODS OF READING COMPREHENSION AT STATE UNIVERSITIES AN EXAMPLE FROM THE SYRIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Undoubtedly, English teaching is pivotal to maintain students' knowledge and skills. Improving reading skills is one of the most significant challenges in state universities. At state universities, Syrian students majoring English still show weaknesses in reading comprehension with varying levels. The current study is an attempt to shed light on the different methods of teaching reading comprehension at Syrian state universities. The researchers depend on both qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection and for providing the research framework. The findings of the current study shed light on the fact that lecturers used variety of teaching methods.

Keywords: Teaching, Reading, Methods, State Universities, and Syrian Context.

INTRODUCTION

Despite all exerted efforts to improve the quality of English teaching as a foreign language, Syrian students majoring English at state universities still show weaknesses in reading comprehension with varying levels. The module of reading comprehension is still regarded by many university students as challenging and not easy to pass. The present study is an attempt to focus on this problematic issue where we will shed light on the teaching methods adopted by the Syrian lecturers for teaching reading comprehension module.

As for the contribution of this study and to the best of our knowledge, many studies have dealt with teaching reading comprehension in different contexts; however no study spots light on the teaching methods of reading comprehension for university students in the Syrian context.

The next section will comb and review the related literature and studies. Section three will focus on the results and discussion. Section four will be the conclusion which summarizes the research main findings and presents recommendations and suggestions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, the researchers will review the literature related to different issues such as the definition of reading comprehension and the methods of teaching reading comprehension.

Reading Comprehension

Certainly, reading in English as a foreign language is rather a complex activity and according to Koda (2005), comprehension can be defined as the process of constructing meaning that involves an interaction between the reader and the text (Duke & Pearson, 2002). Likewise, Birch (2007) and Hudson, (2007) considered reading as an interactive process to construct

meaning and comprehend what is being read and get the message of the writer. Also, reading promotes students' comprehension and production of texts, (Rose & Martin 2012; Chia, 2001).

Methods of Teaching Reading Comprehension

Teachers should make the learning process a pleasurable one for all students. Teachers should provide support to learners so that they become independent readers in the future (Becerra et al., 2019). This can be achieved by adopting different reading activities.

Pre-Reading Activities

These can increase students' involvement, interest, motivation, and equip them with vocabulary related to the text topic (Harmer, 2003). Undeniably, Vocabulary development is a pivotal element of learning how to read (Ramonda & Sevigny, 2019). An interesting study was conducted by Yusuf (2011) to investigate the effects of pre-reading activities on students' performance in reading comprehension in Nigeria. The findings revealed that the experimental group that was exposed to pre-reading activities gained considerable abilities in comprehension than the control group. The study recommended that teachers should use pre-reading activities as a useful way to improve students' reading comprehension.

Undoubtedly, there are different types of pre-reading activities such as, prediction which is an activation skill that enhances students' cognitive abilities (Hudson, 2007; Illes, 2009; Israel, 2009). Students establish certain expectations about the text and what is to come next (Macalister, 2011). Prediction can be achieved by reading the headlines, looking closely at photographs, illustrations, pictures, book cover, and captions in the assigned reading, and reading the first and last sentence of each paragraph (Harmer, 2003).

Reading Aloud

Teachers should read certain parts of the passage aloud to the students. This gives students the chance to hear a good example of reading makes students familiar with the pronunciation, flow and rhythm of the language as well as motivates students' reading. It is worthy to note that "*progress in reading requires learners to use their ears, as well as their eyes*" (Williams, 1986; Watkins, 2017). Also, students should be given the chance to read aloud as it is "*a cognitive warm-up*" act before proceeding to further classroom activities (Gibson, 2008; Geddes, 1982).

Developing Reading Skills

Teachers can play a pivotal role in developing their students' reading skills such as, skimming, scanning and intensive reading. Skimming and scanning are two different speed-reading techniques which enable the reader to cover a great amount of material rapidly.

Teachers can develop students' skimming skills in different ways such as asking them to practice a speed reading of titles, subtitles, summary and the first and last paragraphs. To practice the scanning technique, teachers can ask students to keep in their minds the information they are looking for and try to anticipate what clues may help them find the answer and selectively read and skip unnecessary sections of the reading passage. As intensive reading is the most common approach for teaching reading in the classroom (Macalister, 2011), teachers can improve it by

encouraging students to intensively read a wide range of materials to enhance their understanding.

Comprehension Questions

Comprehension questions can be used effectively in teaching reading and they should be well-prepared to check students' understanding before moving to the next stage of the lesson. Comprehension questions have received attention from Day & Park (2005) who considered them as an essential part of improving students' reading comprehension skills. The Barrett taxonomy of reading comprehension skills is the most well-known one it was designed to help teachers prepare useful reading comprehension questions for their students. It includes literal comprehension or recall questions, inferential comprehension questions, reorganization of ideas and information that are explicitly stated in the text, evaluation questions which deal with the psychological and emotional impact of the selection on the reader. These post reading activities enhance interactive aspect of the lesson through reading (Ramonda, 2020; Mera, 1999).

METHODOLOGY

In fact, this section presents a description of the current research methodology where the researchers depended on both qualitative and quantitative instruments for data collection and for providing the research framework. The participants were a sample of twelve lecturers who were teaching English as a foreign language at state universities. Data were collected over a period of three months. State universities were involved in this study are located in the East part of Syria (Deir-Ezzor). Twelve lecturers (from the pre-mentioned universities) were asked to answer the questionnaires while four of them were interviewed by the researchers. From a statistical point of view, the group consisted of nine males and three females, with ages ranging from 26 to 53. Because of the lecturers' different ages, their teaching experiences varied; it ranged from 2 years teaching experience up to 22 years teaching experience. The lecturers were 5 graduate teaching assistance, 2 MA holders and 5 Ph.D. holders.

Based on the nature of this study, different types of instruments were designed for data collection, namely questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observation. Unfortunately, the unstable conditions in Syria (Syrian revolution) at the time of conducting the research, made it difficult for the researchers to conduct the classroom observation. Thus, the Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires were the instruments used for data collection and for obtaining first-hand and more naturalistic data from the research participants. To ensure the feasibility and effectiveness of the study and for ideally gathered data, the questionnaire was complemented by a semi-structured interview. So, these two different research methods can offer variation of interpretation regarding the results of the study.

The process of the interview itself represents an interactive interchange of views that gives the participants the chance to openly express their own points of view and their interpretations of the world in which they live (Cohen et al., 2000; Paribakht, 1993).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents an account of the current research results that were obtained by analyzing the questionnaires and the interviews and a discussion of the research results.

Findings and Discussion

RQ. What are the main methods of teaching reading comprehension at Syrian state universities?

The analysis of the questionnaires data revealed that most Syrian lecturers at state universities (60%) agreed that pre-reading activities could positively affect students' reading performance. The following table presents the different pre-reading activities they adopted.

The Pre-reading Activities	State Universities
Activating Students' prior knowledge	70%
Pre-reading predictions	40%
Pre-reading questions	30%
Pre-teaching vocabulary	80%

Table 1 shows that reading comprehension classes. This could be because lecturers felt that it was important to introduce students to new words prior to reading as that could enhance students' understanding and improve their reading of the passage. Activating students' prior knowledge was another pre-reading activity that was adopted by many of the state university lecturers (70%). This might be because they were aware of the important role of activating students' prior knowledge and linking what they read with their personal experiences; this would enhance their understanding and increase their motivation at the same time (Smith, 1971). On the other hand, other pre-reading activities such as pre-reading questions and asking students to make predictions on the reading materials were not adopted by many of them. Since in state universities, lecturers were more concerned with time and classroom management, which may affect the use of many pre-reading activities. This idea was stressed during the interview conducted with lecturer B:

"We try to include pre-reading activities in our reading comprehension lectures. However, time is an issue. We have a book that we should follow and teach within a limited period of time".

The following Table presents the reading aloud strategies adopted at state universities.

The Reading Strategy	State Universities
The teacher reads aloud	80%
The students reads aloud	20%

Table 2 shows that most state university lecturers (80%) used to read certain parts of the texts aloud to students. On the other hand, only 20% of lecturers at state universities used to ask students to read certain parts of the text aloud. It might be that lecturers at state universities were more obsessed by time and students' management. So, they often preferred reading certain parts of the texts aloud to students as they believed that might give students the chance to hear a good

example of reading and make them familiar with the pronunciation and rhythm of language as pointed out by Williams (1986), “*progress in reading requires learners to use their ears as well as their eyes*”.

The following chart displays the reading skills that lecturers at state universities focused on.

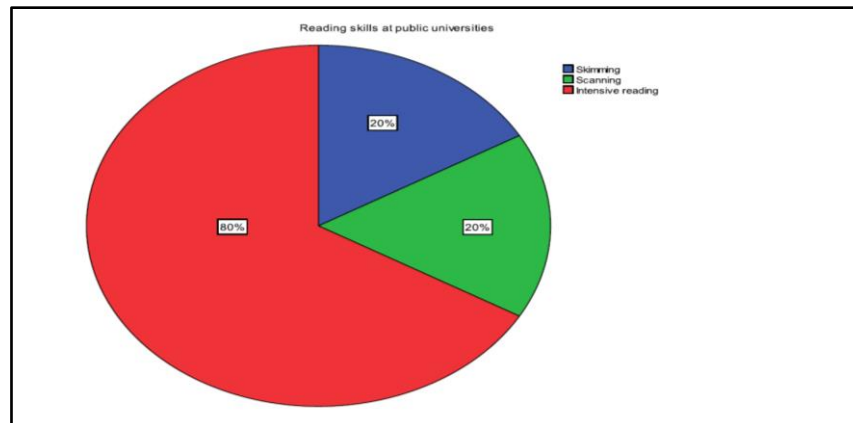


FIGURE 1
READING SKILLS AT STATE UNIVERSITIES

In response to the RQ, Figure 1 revealed that most lecturers (80%) focused on developing students' intensive reading skills. This could be due to the fact that intensive reading with its focus on comprehension questions can help students practice reading and understand certain passages in depth (Macalister, 2011; Newton, 2001). In addition, comprehension questions could play a monitoring role; the lecturers might like to monitor the extents to which learners have understood the text before moving to the next stage of the lesson. As indicated by Day & Park (2005), comprehension questions can improve students' different comprehension abilities. These abilities are represented by literal comprehension or recall, inferential comprehension, reorganization, evaluation and appreciation. However, only few lecturers (20%) focused on improving students' skimming and scanning skills. This could be because lecturers depended on a traditional way of teaching reading comprehension, paying no real attention to the importance of improving students' reading speed through skimming and scanning skills. This could be attributed to the constraints of time and large number of students.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study, the researchers shed light on the methods of teaching reading comprehension at Syrian state universities. The uniqueness of the present research stems from its originality and novelty in the field. The literature showed that there was a considerable research on the methods of teaching reading comprehension in different contexts, but not in the Syrian one. Answering these research questions will give lecturers at Syrian state universities in specific and lecturers in general an insight on improving their teaching methodology and open the door for further studies in this domain. This paper presented the theoretical background of the research by reviewing different views and studies on various issues such as the importance of developing different reading skills such as skimming scanning, intensive reading, reading aloud, pre-reading activities. Analyzing the interviews and questionnaires revealed that teaching methods and strategies at Syrian state universities were generally effective. However, most

lecturers adopted mainly two reading activities: pre-reading ones and pre-teaching of vocabularies with no real focus on skimming, scanning and students' reading the text aloud. In practice, many constraints affected their performance; these lecturers were really obsessed by time and classroom management as there were some restrictions imposed on them by the university. Therefore, strategies such as skimming scanning and reading the textbook aloud were not much practiced by students in classrooms.

Based on previously mentioned findings, the researchers spotlight on several conclusions and suggestions. Teachers themselves suggested the need to reduce students' numbers in the class as a means for improving teaching of reading comprehension. So, suggestions will entail reducing students' numbers when possible in classrooms and reducing the restricted reliance on course books leading to more effective involvement of students in the classrooms. In this way, students can practice skimming and scanning techniques and can read the text themselves rather than just listening to the lecturer reading it aloud. Thus, it is pivotal to give lecturers the chance to enjoy a sense of freedom to focus on a quality rather than quantity of education which will eventually lead to very positive students' outcomes.

Any future research will greatly benefit from classroom observations and probably conduction some interviews with students themselves on their view of lecturers' methods of teaching reading comprehension as they can be considered as agents of change.

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