Original Research Paper **English**

Improving Weak Learners Decoding Skill in Using Context Clues While Reading Comprehension of EFL Students

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ABSTRACT : In this paper the general objective of this study was to develop weak learners' decoding skill in using context clues while reading. Among the first year EFL graduate students, 12 weak learners were selected by using the random sampling techniques and action research was conducted. Qualitative method was used to analyze the data because the data gathered through each tool involved word argumentation. As Bentz and Shapiro (1998) state: 'Action research is less a separate culture of inquiry than it is a statement of intention and values. The intention is to change a system, and the values are those of participation, self-determination, empowerment through knowledge, and change.' The requirement of word recognition was documented through assessments revealing students' phonemic awareness, reading fluency, and word recognition skill. An analysis of the problem setting resulted in the selection of three major categories of intervention: assessment and review of phonemic awareness to assure reading readiness; beginning reading instructional course; focus on reading skills and strategies and the word recognition. The analysis of probable cause data revealed that first year graduate students typically lack the skills and strategies necessary for word recognition and reading. Post intervention data indicated an increase in students' phonological and word recognition. The data also showed a substantial improvement in word recognition skills and an increase in the understanding and use of various reading strategies.

KEYWORDS :

Introduction: One of the most important and controversial issues over the past few decades has been teaching ability of decoding skills in using context clues while reading. Reading is a crucial part of learning and academic success. It is the most important tool of communication. According to Margaret (2010), when the readers are reading, they are actually gaining the knowledge and experience. Therefore, the art of reading is in great part that of acquiring a better understanding of life from one's encounter with a text. According to Hudson (2007), one of the categories in reading skills is critical reading skills. Critical reading skills are skills that will help students to be able to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate what is read. We need to teach reading skills to students because we want them to not only know how to convert orthographic symbols to language (decoding skills), use context and knowledge to comprehend what is read (comprehension skills), or see larger sentences as whole, a process which help students to read fluently. Students when they leave school go ahead to complete their higher education. However, this is not something easy for them to achieve if they do not have the essential critical skills and one of them is the reading skills. Therefore, it is imperative for teachers to teach these reading skills to students because these skills could help them to survive when they leave schools, especially when they embark in any program at the tertiary level. In order for teachers to produce critical readers, they must expose the students to reading skills. Taboada (2011), "explored the extent to which two instructional frameworks (the Contextualized Vocabulary Instruction and the Intensified Vocabulary Instruction) influenced and supported the English-language learners' reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Results indicated that the IVI framework increased students' academic vocabulary even 3 weeks after the invention was over, whereas CVI benefited reading comprehension as well as autonomous learning in the classroom" (p.113).

Both Musa (2001) and Yones (2001) agree that teaching reading is a constant, routine lesson wherein the teacher reads the text, before the students stand up one after the other to read parts of the text before sitting down again. Each student performs the same role, reading the whole lesson. Shehateh (1997) affirmed that 75% of the teachers perform the reading lesson by highlighting the topic. They read the text aloud and have students read in alphabetical order, which is how they sit in the classroom. Then the teacher explains the vocabulary, illustrates the lesson's ideas and finishes by answering the questions set out in the book. This is the same routine of every individual lesson. Teaching reading in Saudi schools can be limited to

just ensuring knowledge of the vocabulary and the pronunciation of each word without being concerned about simply teaching the reading and implementing continuous training in direct communication with the meaning (Badi, 1990).Taimah (1999) believed that teachers waste lesson time by asking students to read the text silently and that clarifying the new vocabulary is an issue that needs to be reviewed and emphasised. According to Fadl-Allah (1999), the reading lesson in its current form is useless. He points out that the ongoing teaching of reading following the current method has resulted in students being uninterested in reading, making them look upon it as an obligation. This, in turn, has generated a lack of motivation for listening, and subsequently the reading lesson has turned into an uninteresting class which learners shy away from.

In the article, "Improving Reading Comprehension of EFL students of Al Qassim Colleges, KSA' is a goal which every responsible faculty tries hard with his or her students to achieve. Nabeel,1994 claims that in some English classes, the announcement of a reading assignment elicits moans and groans from students as they envision the long time it will require, the laborious task of looking up the meanings of words in the dictionary. What makes matters worse is that after all the time and efforts; students still fail to comprehend the text. Most EFL students are often unable to comprehend a written text effectively. Therefore, 'teacher's focus' is one of the factors in this study that may motivate students to read and improve their reading comprehension. Chall & Jacobs (2003), point out that "the correlation of word knowledge with reading comprehension indicates that if students do not adequately and steadily grow their vocabulary knowledge, their reading comprehension will be affected" (p.47). Reading is for understanding, and decoding skill is the ability to understand the meaning of what is being read, thus improving weak learners' decoding skill is so important. Reading skills, decoding skill and the strategies of contextual clues should be integratively taught to improve understanding during the reading process. Amer, (1997) investigated the effect of the teacher's reading aloud on the reading comprehension of EFL students reading a story. Seventy-five students participated in the study. The experimental group had a story read aloud to them by the teacher, whereas the control group read the story silently. Two dependent measures were used: a multiple-choice test and a story frame test. Results showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group on both measures. This indicated that reading aloud by the teacher may have a significant positive effect on learners' reading comprehension.

It has been seen that weak learners could correctly pronounce unfamiliar words within a text without understanding their meaning. This means, if they pronounce unfamiliar words within a text, they lack decoding skill that affects their reading understanding ability, and mere pronouncing of unfamiliar words correctly does not mean that they have understood their meaning. Therefore, EFL teachers need to give weak learners close attention, explicit reasons, how to read, why to read, and teach them reading comprehension lessons by using contextual clues and reading strategies such as: following references, guessing, and making inferences. An action research was conducted to develop weak learners' decoding skill in using context clues while reading. Among the first year EFL graduate students, 12 weak learners were selected by using the random sampling techniques and action research was conducted. Qualitative method was used to analyze the data because the data gathered through each tool involved word argumentation. Quality AR may therefore be conceptualized as research that is "fit for the purpose" (of improvement in practice) or as "transformative," where there is a type of cognitive transcendence for the participants. Quality as leading to transformation for the research participants and improvement in the situation or practice studied particularly suits action research as an emancipator, critical model of research. There are two types of literature to review during an AR research project: the practice area and the AR process. For the academic audience to have confidence in the results and theory from a piece of research, they need to be satisfied that the researchers referred to, used, or critiqued previous key knowledge in the field. The literature review or bibliography, therefore, is still important for action research. The learners were identified into three groups based on their learning abilities as weak, middle and active learners through continuous assessments on decoding skill in using context clues while reading as to find out the problem and find solution. Accordingly, based on the researcher's knowledge of the various literature reviewed actually motivated the researchers to conduct the study on the weak learners' word decoding skill in using contextual clues while reading with the help of action research.

Objectives of the study: According to Greenwood and Levin (1998), validity of AR knowledge depends on whether the actions that arise from the process solve problems and increase the participants' control over their situation. "Pragmatic workability" is a major factor in establishing the worth of the research, and theory is useful only if it guides praxis well. Appropriate changes in appropriate directions are the proof of any theory generated by AR. The present study attempts to focus on the following objectives as the requirement of the weak learners in EFL classroom, to identify the approach of contextual clues to improve weak learners' decoding skill while reading and lastly to see if the role of context based teaching improves weak learners' decoding skill while reading or not. The present study followed Action research on weak learners in EFL classroom as it offered a systematic approach to introduce innovations in teaching and learning process. Action Research involves a cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, which is performed in natural setting by the subject teacher to assess in improving the objective of teaching and learning process (Kemmis & Mc Taggert, 1988).

Methodology: Among the first year 48 EFL graduate students, 12 weak learners were selected by using the pre-intervention continuous assessments for a week by random sampling techniques and action research was conducted at AlQassim Colleges, KSA. Qualitative method was used to analyze the data because the data gathered through each tool involved word argumentation. The requisite in view of weak learners as sources of data, because the action research directly focused on them as they require decoding skill in EFL classes during the reading comprehension. English teachers were used as a primary source and they were interviewed, as they are very much aware about the problem weak learners' faced towards decoding skill. To gather the relevant data concerning the decoding skill in using context clues, semi-structured interview, classroom observation, document analysis and reflection were used as the data collection tools.

Results and Discussions:
**The requirement of the weak learners in EFL reading classroom:**
To identify what the weak learners require in the English classroom while reading, the two EFL teachers' and the 12 selected weak learners' semi-structured interview, the classroom observation checklists,

the pre- and post-intervention continuous assessment papers and self-reflection were analyzed as follows. From the findings of the interview all the weak learners said that they require a sound good background knowledge in using context clues for given words as most of them are not familiar with the decoding approach and hence they lack decoding skill in using context clues while reading.

The teachers stated, that the weak learners were unable to identify and use the strategies of context clues, their types and signals because their background knowledge and the strategies of decoding skill was very poor. This means that, when they were at school, they were not informed by their English teachers of the said problem. However, it is obvious that they need to be made aware of such skills and their teachers had to motivate them by actively involving in teaching the students according to their needs and abilities and also by conducting tutorial classes, and exercises related to the types of context clue a student is dealing with during the reading and comprehending process. But, conducting tutorial or extra classes was not a success because the English teachers lacked interest due to several reasons, such as: there was no sufficient time and tutorial classes to help the weak learners overcome their problems in using word attack skills; high attention was paid for talented learners to make them score excellent grades, but this was not extended to the weak learners. Therefore teachers' outlook towards the weak learners was another factor in affecting the weak learners' decoding skill. The same was observed in the Classroom observation. The scores collected from both the pre- and post-intervention assessments were compared to see the role of intervention and the progress of the weak learners while analyzing the documents.

I. Pre-intervention continuous assessments' results

Table 1.Sample of pre-intervention continuous assessment results
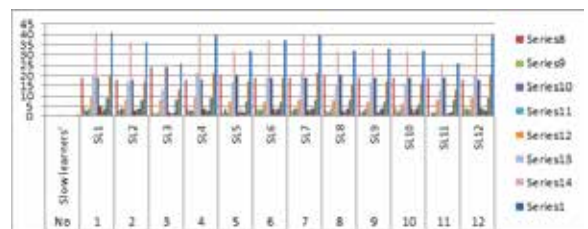
Mean: 34.58

Table 2 Sample of post-intervention continuous assessments' results

Mean: 75.91

The mean of the pre and post intervention shows a difference of 41.33 that indicates an improvement of the weak learners' word attack skill. This also proves the vital role of a teacher's intervention in improving weak learners' word attack skill.

The approach of contextual clues to improve weak learners' decoding skill while reading

There is a clear and obvious link between the various aspects of language development. The word 'home', for example, raises a host of meanings, associations, and memories regardless of whether it is read or heard. As the National Research Council (1998) points out, "Many basic cognitive processes are shared during reading and listening. Syntactic and inferential processes as well as background and word knowledge play a role in both." During the while intervention stage

the weak learners were made aware about what context clues are, and the types of context clues, their definitions and indicators, the practitioner prepared and gave practical exercises on decoding skills through context clues. This approach to contextual clues actually helped the learners deduce the meaning of the unknown words without referring to any lexicon or dictionary. The repetition of cycles also promoted the more thorough probing of the situation and practices under investigation. Collegiality and transparency were valued in the research process, as were the learning group who were reliable, open, and inclusive.

Implementing interventions for students who have reading problems should occur within a scientific process of targeting students' needs, and selecting and applying evidence-supported instruction that matches their needs and evaluating whether or not students improved their performance at sufficient rates as a function of the instruction. The data evidence points to weak students benefiting from encoding instruction. When encoding instructions are integrated with decoding instructions, the researchers observed considerable achievement in phoneme awareness, alphabetic decoding, word reading, spelling, fluency, and comprehension. All of the studies showed positive effects for struggling readers and spellers as well as decoding instruction as a context for teaching. The findings of the observation showed a major difference in the weak learners grasping skills. They were able to give a highly remarkable response to the questions and guess the meanings. This positive change and progress was significantly noticed while comparing the intervention continuous assessment results, and the while- intervention reading skill activities of EFL students in the classroom.

Conclusion: Reading is for understanding and extracting the meaning of the text and unfamiliar words to improve learners' knowledge, it is crucial to improve their decoding skill as it enables them to understand what they read, and understand. In this study the researchers followed Action research on weak learners in EFL classroom as it offered a systematic approach to introduce innovations in teaching and learning process. Parsons and Brown (2002) commented that the benefit of action research is that it leads to improvements in educational practice. Being a part of action research, impacts teachers' daily and future instructional practices. It is obvious that the participants in this study valued action research as a valuable tool that impacted their teaching and learning. The analysis of the pre -intervention results indicated that the weak learners lack decoding skills because they could not get close intervention, training and external motivation on decoding skills from their English teachers in the previous classes. During the while- intervention stages it was noted that the weak learners were involved and able to contribute and answer questions, guess and determine the unknown meanings of the word, as the practitioner educated the weak learners on decoding skill through teaching practical exercises' concerning context clues, their types and definitions to improve their decoding skill. The findings of the Post intervention stages revealed that the slow learners were able to guess, deduce and determine the meanings of unknown words after they had been guided and trained on decoding skill in using context clues. Thus, improving their decoding skill means, improving their reading ability for understanding. It also proves a more important point that rigorous assessment is a important aspect of inquiry and the learning cycle focuses more on students' engagement in the process of assessing their learning. This is visible as the students go through the process of reviewing , reflecting, applying and assessing their own work. It is in such a situation that the role of the teacher as a facilitator is exposed and the students are motivated to develop their word attack skills and comprehend the given texts in a more knowledgeable way.

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