Research Paper   **Education**

"Reading In Efl Classrooms: A Shift From Complacency To Competency"

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ABSTRACT

In most of the EFL classes in Saudi Arabia, learners find Reading as a complicated skill and neglect it. To remove this misconception from the minds of young learners, the teachers have to use innovative and interesting ways to intrinsically and extrinsically motivate the learners to develop their Reading skills. In this paper an attempt has been made to trace the factors that make the readers disinterested and reading sessions very laborious and time consuming. In the end a few suggestions have been incorporated which can enable the learners to enjoy the reading process and enhance their ability to comprehend.

Keywords : Saudi Arabia, strategies, schemata, meta cognition, extensive reading.

Introduction:

In Saudi Arabia at the school level the students are taught from basal readers which are considered as integrated course comprising of the four skills namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing .These skills are developed in context based on the text theme. In the classrooms, lot of emphasis is given to "silent reading", and comprehension questions", which is measured by their ability to answer the questions correctly. Due to limited scope, the readers lack awareness about the strategies and skills required to read effectively .As a result, most of the learners find the reading sessions cumbersome and get frustrated easily. Furthermore, they do not show any inclination towards extensive reading.

Since reading is an active process, which involves handling of different activities simultaneously, it is imperative to shift the focus towards effective reading" and train the readers to analyze , synthesize and evaluate the texts.Goodman (1960:270) and others recommend a by-directional process. They opine that equal weight age has to be assigned to 'what is written on the page and what the reader adds to it'. This means the role of the reader has to be enhanced and construction of meaning is to be emphasized.

During my teaching the undergraduate students of the English department at Al-Kharj University, I observed that about 60% of the learners were struggling to read and comprehend the texts. I closely monitored a group of thirty readers who were below the average level and observed that the factors discussed below were acting as hindrance and thereby, making the learners frustrated.

Inadequate Schemata

It was observed that for about seventy percent of the learners, schemata acted as a great hindrance in comprehending a text. The learners preferred to quit whenever they came across topics related to science, technology and politics. This is because in the schools they have very limited and stereotyped topics about cities in the Kingdom and biographies .Very few themes talk about science and technology. Most of the passages have a preaching tone. Walsh (2003) indicated that basal readers waste time on formal reading comprehension skills and miss opportunities to develop word and world knowledge by offering mostly incoherent, banal themes rather than content-rich themes. Reader's

schemata play a very vital role in comprehending a text. Therefore, the texts must comprise of a variety of topics to enhance the general awareness among the readers.

Lack of strong Vocabulary base:

It was observed that the readers often lacked motivation and felt anxious when they did not understand the meanings of the unfamiliar words. They complained that they found it difficult and at times even their reading process slowed down because of inadequate vocabulary.

Inadequate linguistic competence:

In Saudi Arabian classrooms bottom-up models are used because Saudi students start learning English only from grade II and there is no incidental learning environment.

However, these types of models have their own limitations. Going beyond the printed letters seems to receive little or no attention in this model. Furthermore, they do not seem to consider the contribution of the context or the reader's background knowledge to reading comprehension.

It was observed that the readers failed to identify the organization patterns and therefore could not make hypotheses in order to comprehend. The readers got confused when the writers tried to manipulate the rhetorical conventions to reduce monotony and make the texts interesting. Since the main purpose of reading in this model is comprehension, readers should always deal with whole texts, which are read for authentic purposes breaking the process down into isolated pieces is counterproductive to comprehension. It deprives the learners from using all the cue systems and from engaging in a full cyclic use of reading strategies in the pursuit of meaning (Purcell-Gates, 1997).

Inappropriate usage of Reading Strategies:

It was observed that the readers lacked strategic tools essential for effective reading. In fact it, was found that in the schools the readers were made to perceive other factors such as prior knowledge, enthusiasm for reading, time on task, purpose for reading, and vocabulary as having much effective contribution to their final comprehension. It is imperative to make the readers understand the significance of reading strategies and encourage them to adopt a flexible reading style in order to be a competent reader. Just as different gears are used for

driving on different planes, a uniform pattern of reading cannot be adopted for all types of texts. The purpose of reading a book plays a vital role in deciding which technique to adopt based on the kind of attention and

concentration required.

Focus on Accuracy rather than Fluency
Reading speed and comprehension are closely related. "A good reader makes fewer eye movements than a poor one". It was observed that most of the readers read the difficult texts word by word and did not know the language well enough to divide the text into units effectively. The students lacked the flexibility and maintained uniform speed throughout irrespective of the linguistic difficulty, the length of the content and the purpose of reading it. The problem with most of the readers in the group was they lacked fluency. This was because at the school level readers were made to focus on mostly accuracy. This over emphasis on 'accuracy' impeded fluency. Moreover, Arabic is a right-to-left alphabetic language.

Phonological differences between English and Arabic:
Unfamiliar phonology acted as a great hindrance in the process of reading. Some readers were found to be struggling with the phonetic skill of decoding English. "Processing difficulties" may cause "reading avoidance" (Saito et al., 1999. p.215).Moreover, in Arabic there are three vowels where as in English there are six vowels .Due to this difference the readers got confused especially when they came across words like beat, bet ,cat ,caught etc. With regard to consonants, the bilabial plosive 'p' present in English alphabets is not included in the Arabic alphabets. This difference made the group pronounce the words as Hyper Banda instead of Hyper Panda, bin for pin etc. Moreover, the English apico –alveolar fricative 'v'.as no equivalent in Arabic. This resulted in the tendency to pronounce 'van' as 'fan', 'seven' as 'sefen' etc. The major problem in reading arose when they came across consonant clusters. In English there may be up to three consonants between two vowels but in Arabic the maximum are two. The readers divided the consonant clusters by adding a vowel between them in order to pronounce the words. For instance: boled for bold, againest for against etc.

Conclusion:
Reading instruction in Saudi Arabia is whole-class instruction and does not cater to to the needs of individual learners. while designing the curricula it is important to take into consideration the fact that the level of productivity differs from reader to reader. Supplementary remedial tailor made materials can be beneficial to the readers to a great extent . Since maximum time is spent on formal reading comprehension skills, the readers do not get enough opportunity to develop word and world knowledge through content-rich themes. The readers are too dependent on the teachers because they lack metacognitive reading strategies. Balanced extensive reading activities are hardly encouraged. The need of the hour is to realize that the teacher can just promote reading ability in a reader but cannot pass on the ability to read. In order to make the readers "effective readers", a few suggestions have been incorporated.

- The readers have to make extensive use of meta-cognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning . According to Rothkopf (1974) these include: Identifying the purpose of reading, the important aspects of the message, paying attention to relevant information, monitoring the comprehending process, engaging in self-testing and reviewing, adopting corrective measures where ever and whenever required.

- The readers have to make use of word –attack skills like: meanings of unfamiliar words. The readers should understand the meanings of affixes and structural clues to identify the grammatical category of the unfamiliar words. The structural clues tell us the kind of meaning to look for. Morphological information assists the readers to identify the prefixes and the compound words and the way they are used to build words. The knowledge of different patterns of compound words is essential. The EFL learners should be taught vocabulary explicitly. They should be trained to use context to effectively guess the meanings of the unfamiliar words. Inference, a sub –skill of reading can be useful to guess the meanings of the unfamiliar words contextually. i.e. (reason out the meanings from the sense of the sentences.

- When practicing faster reading systematically the readers can be encouraged to keep a record of their results, showing their progress. This will encourage them to read more. However, it has been observed that, readers who read too slowly easily got discouraged and lost their interest very quickly. They stumbled on unfamiliar words and failed to grasp the general meaning of the passage. Therefore, such readers should be given ample practice to improve their speed. Initially, the readers should be given unfamiliar but simple and easy texts with possibly no new words.

- A meaning based approach to reading should be encouraged. Books containing authentic language can be used so that the readers can be exposed to wide range of vocabulary. The focus should be on individual learner by providing what he or she wants to read. Reading should be integrated with writing and the learners should work on both the skills simultaneously.

- The readers can be guided to enhance the comprehension by activating their schemata through setting goals, asking questions, making predictions, teaching text structure etc. As a pre-reading task, they can be asked to share with the peers what he/she knows about the topic. Activities related to prediction should be given so that the readers get an opportunity to make use of their schemata. These types of activities arouse the interest level of the readers and in case they make a correct guess then they also feel confident enough.

- The readers should be asked to divide the text into several units. The problem with most EFL readers is that they read the difficult texts word by word and do not know the language well enough to divide the text into units effectively. Research has shown that flexibility is one of the main characteristics of a good reader. When practicing faster reading systematically the readers can be encouraged to keep a record of their results, showing their progress. This will encourage them to read more.

- Balance can be maintained between improving the reading rate and developing the comprehension skills. The focus should be to develop 'fluent' readers and not 'Speed' readers. To read fluently, the readers must be able to detect quickly meaningful groups of words in spite of ambiguous lexical content.

- Readers who are considered as good readers may not necessarily be good critical readers and therefore need to read critically more often. The following tasks shall help them to improve their critical reading abilities: Finding out the factual meaning implied by the writer rather than just going by the superficial meaning , reading between and beyond the lines, separating facts from opinions, Identifying the tone of the author, following the organization or the logic of presentation , understanding the writer's intention , interpreting figurative /non literal language (Slang ,simile , metaphor).

· The readers can be guided to enhance the comprehension by activating the their schemata through setting goals, asking questions, making predictions, teaching text structure etc. As a pre-reading task, the readers can be asked to share with the peers what he/she knows about the topic. Activities related to prediction so that the readers get an opportunity to make use of their schemata. These types of activities arouse the interest level of the readers and in case they make a correct guess then they also feel confident enough.

· At times, the readers can be made to make deductive inferences apart from making assumptions by using the information provided within the text and come to a conclusion by logically reasoning out. In the Practice material the readers can be given short stories with a description of the characters and the readers can be made to correlate them to the list of adjectives provided.

· The EFL readers can be made to focus on extensive reading. The readers should be encouraged to read as many books or longer texts as possible.

· Short reading passages can be suggested to develop comprehension and other reading skills like skimming. Scanning etc.

· The focus should be to develop 'fluent' readers and not 'Speed' readers. To read fluently, the readers must be able to detect quickly meaningful groups of words in spite of ambiguous lexical content.

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