

Reading Strategies for Improving General Proficiency in EFL: A Study.

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Abstract

A number of scholars have put forward the hypothesis that reading is not only an effective means of improving the learners' competence in reading the foreign language they are taught, it is equally effective in raising the level of their general proficiency in the language they are learning.

More specifically, the hypothesis states that a combined extensive and intensive reading under appropriate instructions from an experienced teacher tends to raise the learners' proficiency in the language under instruction.

The present study was designed to test the validity of the above hypothesis with reference to the post-graduate students of science at Taiz University, whose proficiency in EFL needs upgrading in order to ensure their optimal success in their respective disciplines.

It is evident from the study that after 14 weeks of extensive and intensive reading instructions, the students who participated in the study under report showed a statistically significant improvement in their over all proficiency in English.

Thus , the study may be said to confirm the hypothesis. It further suggests that the kind of procedures and instructions used in achieving the positive improvement in the learners' proficiency in English should be made a part of the English Language Teaching Program at the level of university generally. Besides, teachers should select the right kind of teaching materials and adopt appropriate instructions and teaching techniques to motivate students to learn English.

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Introduction

In the past few years, there has been an increasing interest in the importance of introducing English Language Courses in different educational programs at all levels and almost without exception in Yemen. The post-graduate program at the Faculty of Science –Taiz University has included an English Language Course under this scheme.

The students need English for access to reading content in their academic classes and benefiting from lectures delivered in English. Unfortunately, the level of proficiency in English students have, is not good enough to make them comprehend the scientific material written in English or given through instructions and lectures. Besides, it deprives them of the opportunity to benefit from resources written in English as well as the access to the internet.

Students' low proficiency in English makes them rely on dictionaries to translate into Arabic their scientific materials such as texts, handouts etc. This makes them spend more time on translation than on studying science. Students' low level of proficiency in English could be attributed to a number of factors such as their background in English, lack of motivation, teachers' qualifications, methods and materials used etc.

But if some of these problems are solved, the level of learners' proficiency may be improved. This can be done through reading. Reading instructions programs used in foreign language settings have proved to be very effective means in improving students' proficiency in that language.

Students in these programs are provided with a selection of collective graded materials from books which have different vocabulary range and simplified grammatical structures with the goal of achieving reasonable level of proficiency in English among learners. That is, to enhance their ability to learn an increasing number of words and phrases as an important step to comprehend scientific texts written in English as well as being able to express themselves orally and in writing.

Hence, this study begins with a review of the effects of teaching in improving students' level of proficiency in English. Upon closer investigation of research on teaching reading, it appears that reading plays a very effective role in improving the learner's

language skills and as a result of that it should be given more attention in English Language Programs' instructions.

Research Background

Reading has been defined in a variety of ways as " every thing from getting meaning from print to bringing meaning to print"¹. Some authors even ignore meaning entirely at the beginning levels and define reading as " merely decoding or converting the printed form of language to the spoken form"². Harris (1970:3) has presented a succinct definition of reading as "the meaningful interpretation of written or printed verbal symbols". Bond and Tinker (1973:22) offer a more elaborated definition, expressing the same general philosophy:

"Reading involves the recognition of print or written symbols which serve as stimuli for the recall of meanings built up through the reader's past experience. New meanings are derived through manipulation of concepts already in his possession, and the organization of these meanings is governed by clearly defined purposes of the reader. In short, the reading process involves both the acquisition of the meanings intended by the writer and the reader's own contributions, in the form of interpretation, evaluation and reflection about these meanings".

"Reading is a multifaceted operation...It is a sophisticated process whereby the reader brings past experience to the printed page, recognize most words instantaneously, decodes a few, skips a few and in the process approximates the meaning intended by the author". (Hillrich, 1977:5)

The printed page has an abundance of redundancy. The mature reader processes the print in a manner that takes advantages of only as many of the superfluous clues as are needed to reduce uncertainty and to approximate the meaning intended by the other. On the other hand, the beginning reader and specially the non-reader don't have a repertoire of skills that he can use. (Smith, 1971) Moreover, there are certain abilities as basic to reading with comprehension that learners need to have. Davis (1974:186) has suggested certain abilities which are basic to reading with comprehension:

- *Knowledge of word meaning;*
- *Ability to select the appropriate meaning for a word or phrase in the light of its particular contextual setting;*
- *Ability to follow the organization of a passage and to identify antecedents and reference in it;*
- *Ability to select the main thought of a passage;*
- *Ability to answer questions that are specifically answered in a passage;*
- *Ability to answer questions that are answered in a passage but not in the words in which the question is asked;*
- *Ability to draw inference from a passage about its content;*
- *Ability to recognize the literary devices used in a passage and to determine its tone and mood;*
- *Ability to determine a writer's purpose, intent, and point of view, i.e to draw inferences about a writer.*

The question is: how can we teach reading to students? And which method would be effective?

Mainly, there are two major methods that are used in EFL settings known as Extensive and Intensive Reading.

Extensive Reading: - The aims of extensive reading are to build readers' confidence and enjoyment. According to Brown (1989) "extensive reading is carried out to achieve a general understanding of a text." (Quoted in Macleod). Long and Richards (1971:216) identify extensive reading as "occurring when students read large amounts of high interest material, usually out of class, concentrating on meaning, 'reading for gist' and skipping unknown words" (Quoted in Macleod).

Research on foreign language teaching suggests that one of the best ways to help students increase their proficiency in that language is to encourage them to read extensively for both pleasure and information inside and outside the classroom.

Extensive reading has proved to be beneficial in foreign language contexts as it improves FL readers' comprehension (Elley, 1999; and Mangubhai, 1983; Mason and Krashen, 1997; Robb and Susser, 1989), promotes their vocabulary knowledge development (Day, Omura and Hiramatsu, 1991; Pitts, White and Krashen, 1989), and enhances their writing skills (Elley and Mangubhai, 1983; Hafiz and Tudor, 1990;

Janopoulos, 1986) and oral proficiency (Cho and Krashen, 1994). Extensive reading has also been reported to be effective in facilitating growth of reader's positive attitudes toward reading and increasing their motivation to read (Cho and Krashen, 1994; Mason and Krashen, 1997). It has been shown to be effective in increasing reading speed and comprehension as well (Bell, 2001;Elley and Mangubhai,1983; Robb and Susser,1989).

(Quoted in Taguchi; Maass, D and Gorsuch, G, 2004).

But the most convincing evidence of the benefit of extensive reading comes from what has come to be known as the "Book Flood" Studies (Elley and Mangubhai 1981, Elley and Mangubhai 1983) which looked at the effect of extensive reading on the English Language Proficiency of Fiji Elementary School Children. These studies, which covered from about a hundred to several thousand school children, and for a period of about one to about three years, provide evidence of remarkable improvement attained by these students on measures of Language use, which the researchers specified as oral language, reading comprehension and writing.

Language knowledge, which included word recognition, vocabulary knowledge and grammar as well as academic performance, as measured by the examinations used across Fiji Elementary School System). (Asraf and Ahmad 2003) Other studies have also suggested that extensive reading leads to greater writing proficiency. Janopoulos (1986), for instance, found that writing proficiency correlates positively with the quantity of time spent on reading for pleasure in the second language. Tudor and Hafiz (1989) and Hafiz and Tudor (1990), in studying the effects of extensive reading among students in the UK and Pakistan respectively, and Robb and Susser(1989), in studying the same in Japan, found that of the language skills, writing was the area in which they had made the most significant improvement. Tsang (1996), in comparing the effects of three different programs on writing performance, also found that of the three programs, the one that included extensive reading was found to be significantly effective overall.

The effects of extensive reading are thus both cognitive and affective. Not only do they lead to improvement in reading, writing and language use, but also promote a positive attitude towards reading which helps to increase students' language proficiency in the long term. (Asraf and Ahmad 2003) In addition to that many

researchers have found extensive reading to have a positive effects on listening and other areas of language competence as well.

However, extensive reading alone is not sufficient for developing reading skills, and more focused intensive reading approach, including explicit instruction, is also needed. (Paran, 2003 in Loucky, 2005)

Intensive Reading: - The aims of intensive reading are to provide the students with a base to study structure, vocabulary, idioms and to develop a greater control of the language as well as to check the degree of comprehension for each individual student.

Brown (1989) explains that intensive reading "calls attention to grammatical forms, discourse, markers, and other surface structure details for the purpose of understanding literal meaning, implications, rhetorical relationships, and the like." Long and Richards

(1987) say it is a: detailed in-class" analysis, led by the teacher, of vocabulary and grammar points, in a short passage". (Quoted in Macleod) Paran (2003:40) states that intensive reading "deals with more detailed comprehension and has an important role in teaching reading strategies".

Loucky says "Explicit modeling and verbalizing of essential and effective reading and vocabulary learning strategies are therefore crucial, even more so for second language learners who are more often unaware of them". Adding that "intensive reading practice can focus more intentionally on essential core vocabulary, patterns of text organization and types of text processing needed to adequately comprehend any text. Intensive reading activities are needed for the following main reasons: to help learners comprehend written texts, to become more aware of text organization to better comprehend , to learn how to use and monitor effective reading strategies, and develop general literacy skills necessary to generate productive expression in L2. (Paran, 2003:40) (Quoted in Loucky, 2005).

What is needed therefore, is a well balanced reading program in English which includes the following:

- Vocabulary development activities;
- Intensive classroom reading and
- Extensive out-of class free reading activities.

"Combining the benefits of both more focused and intensive reading with the advantages of extensive reading can help to arrive at a more

well-integrated, balanced and effective foreign language program."(Loucky, 2005:3).

This balanced program will provide the students with the essential skills in the direction of improving their over-all proficiency in the English Language.

Aims and Objectives

Developing learners' reading skills has a significant role in improving their over-all proficiency in the foreign language. In the preceding section an attempt has been made to present an overview of the major reading instruction programs and the effective role they play in the process of learning English. The present study aims at exploring the importance of reading and how it can be utilized in helping the science students at the post-graduate level- Faculty of Science-Taiz University to improve their level of proficiency in English through a combined extensive and intensive reading treatment.

The Limitation of the Study

This study is limited to the post-graduate students at the Faculty of Science – Taiz University. The sample of the research consists of 13 students in the second semester of the academic year 2006.

The Hypothesis of the study

It was hypothesized that a combined extensive and intensive reading instruction will improve the science students' proficiency in the English Language.

Methodology

Participants: The participants in this study were 13 students (six female and seven male) of the first year Master of Science Program majoring in Physics, Biology and In- organic Chemistry at the Faculty of Science – Taiz University.

These students came with different levels of English proficiency ranging from poor to good. English is important to them

all because their scientific courses are taught in English. The students are highly motivated to learn the science courses but they are faced with the problem of the language.

Pre-test: Before starting teaching the English Language Course , all students were given an English Language Proficiency Test taken from (Barron's TOEFL Book 1999)

which included the following:

- a multiple- choice reading comprehension questions; - a multiple – choice grammar questions and - free composition question.(marked by two examiners)

Three components of the language i.e. (reading, grammar and writing) were tested as listening was excluded due to some technical conditions. The three components of proficiency test were all equally weighted and each scored out of 25% (total of 75%

which was converted to be out of 100. (see table 1 for individual scores).

It is important to note that the test was designed to measure the language proficiency level of the students and nothing else. It may be noted that our aim was to determine the effects of reading instructions in improving their over-all language proficiency.

Based on the results of the pre-test, the students were classified into 3 proficiency levels, low intermediate and high. 5 students who obtained score below 50% were classified into the low level, 5 students below 60% were classified into the intermediate level and 3 students who obtained 70% of the marks were classified into the high level.

Reading Instructions/Material Used

The participants were taught reading in 14 sessions two hours each over a 14 week period, that is, from April to July 2006. The instruction which was conducted by the researcher focused on developing students' reading skills as well as other skills important for improving their proficiency in that language.

The material used for teaching was taken from several different graded reading selections, (i.e. scientific and general knowledge topics), comprehension questions, vocabulary and grammar exercises. The students were trained in the following:

Extensive reading: In each class students were asked to read one or two passages for general understanding rather than word-by-word

decoding or grammar analysis with a minimum use of dictionaries. They had to answer questions with, yes, no, true, false or had to choose the correct option or do matching.

Outside class they were given the opportunity to read certain topics relevant to what they studied and what interested them. They were asked to write and prepare summaries of what they read expressing their feelings, opinions and comments.

Students' assignments were checked by the researcher regularly. Discussions of these reading and writing assignments used to take place in the classroom.

Intensive reading: In class students were asked to read certain passages carefully and thoroughly, focus on linguistic or semantic details as well as on grammar and discourse markers. They were directed to identify key vocabulary items. In each session, the researcher would do the following:

- Ask the students certain questions relevant to the passage and motivate them to know more.
- Give the students time to read the passage silently, find new vocabulary items, do certain grammatical tasks etc.
- Ask each student to read a paragraph aloud.
- Correct students' pronunciation when needed.
- Read the passage aloud as a model for them.
- Ask students to give the main ideas in each paragraph and give a summary for these paragraphs, as well as for the whole passage.
- Ask students to answer comprehension questions in detail and comment on the reading passage.
- Ask students to present their summaries orally in class and motivate them all to participate in class discussion.

Prior to teaching, students were informed that the more they read inside and outside the class what is assigned by the researcher or something relevant of their own choice the better their English Language would be in comprehending their science course.

Students were also informed that participation is very important and those who participated would be given extra marks every time they ask questions, give oral summary, write creatively etc.

Encouraging the students to talk in English, exchange information with their classmates and giving them marks as incentives as well as praise, made the students very active inside and outside the classroom.

At the beginning of the course, students read slowly and faced difficulty in understanding the reading texts. Besides, they were afraid to speak in English, because of their level of proficiency and they felt embarrassed in the presence of their classmates i.e. males and females. But as the semester progressed, reading became easier to most of them and they started participating more and more in pair work, asking and answering each other, presenting orally their written work, and discussing problems relevant to what they read and to what they study or face in life without any hesitation or embarrassment.

Post-test

When the students finished the English Course after 14 weeks of instruction a post test was administered to measure the students' level in English. The post test was based on the (Barron's TOEFL Book) which followed the same format and focus as of the pre-test, but the reading passages were different to avoid the effect of the training.

Data analysis

To find out whether this kind of instruction was effective in improving students' level of proficiency in English, the students' mean scores in the pre-test and post –test were calculated, along with standard deviation, minimum and maximum. To determine whether the mean scores gained in the pre-test and post-test were statistically significant, the nonparametric Wilcoxon–Signed-Rank-Test was used to examine the data for significance because of the small sample size. (see table 1)

Results

The result of this study supports the hypothesis that a combined extensive and intensive reading instruction is effective in improving students' proficiency in English.

Comparing students' scores in the pretest and post test on reading showed that there was a statistically significant difference with the $p = -3.064$ (0.002, 2 tailed) in a positive direction between the pre-test and the post-test. (See table 1).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the reading comprehension scores of the pre-test and post-test for an n=13

	Pre-test	Post-test
Participants	M=56.15SD=11.93Min=30Max=70	M=71.31SD=8041Min=60Max=90
Student 1	70	90
Student 2	60	80
Student 3	60	70
Student 4	50	76
Student 5	70	80
Student 6	70	75
Student 7	60	65
Student 8	60	69
Student 9	30	67
Student10	50	65
Student 11	60	60
Student 12	50	65
Student 13	40	65

Discussion

The objective of this study has been to clarify what a combined extensive, intensive reading instruction is and to describe how it might be used in improving students' level of proficiency in English. The result of the study showed that the choice of this kind of instruction proved to be effective in improving their level of proficiency in that language, as 12 of the students gained higher scores in the post test than the pre-test and only one student gained the same score as in the pre-test. (see table 1)

It is important to note, however, that although these two kinds of instruction usually discussed as though they were separate ones, in actual practice there is often a good deal of overlap between them. A combination of both provides the learners with the required level of linguistic proficiency which is necessary for comprehending their academic reading materials in English. Reading instruction, therefore, should aim at creating better readers through reading because students "learn to read by reading" (Smith, 1985:88). More over, experiments have shown that the reading ability of the learners can improve with extensive reading as well as with skills' training. (Robb & Susser, 1989).

Further more, the language teachers should choose the right kind of material and use appropriate teaching techniques to motivate students learn that language. Harmer (2001) notices that students who read a lot seem to acquire English better than those who do not. They improve their general language competence and also get a lot of affective benefits from reading which in turn, fosters motivation to learn English. Success in reading and its associate skills, most notably writing, makes learners come to enjoy language learning and to value their study of English (Nation1997). Without much exposure to reading material in class, EFL students are unlikely to make progress .

Conclusion

In conclusion, the efforts made to improve the level of proficiency in English Language among science students through a combined extensive and intensive reading instructions, were, to a large extent, effective as shown from their active participation in-class and out-side class, the effort they made in practicing reading and other language skills activities. In addition, students' motivation enhanced as they became aware of the relevance and value of English Language to their own academic needs. The results of the study showed that reading improved students' proficiency in English as they were trained in developing certain strategies which could serve them well as independent learners and language difficulty may not exist and probably have limited effect in comprehending the science course.

It is suggested therefore, to start introducing this kind of instruction in the language program at the university level, because a lack of such instruction will not promote students' competence in the use of English. In fact, it will deprive them of the opportunity to discover the linguistic, intellectual and emotional value that reading can bring.

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