

EFL Reading Motivations: Evidence from Kuwait

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Abstract

This study examines here the aims to deepen our understanding of what English language teacher trainees think about their own reading, their responsibility as teachers of EFL towards reading skill, and about the effectiveness of the education they have been receiving. The participants for this study are 171 female EFL teacher trainees who were enrolled in different courses in the English Department at the College of Basic Education. The participants were asked to answer a questionnaire. The results of the questionnaire show that the English language teacher trainees did not describe themselves as very competent readers. The findings suggest that even though the English Department courses require reading text books, the teacher trainees read less frequently since they have been admitted to the Department. Teacher trainees didn't show their reading interest in L2. They were not very enthusiastic about reading, even though they were expected by their English language teachers to read more L2 books as they proceed from first year in college to senior year.

Key Words: Teacher trainee, reading skill, EFL teachers, Motivation

1. Introduction

Literacy has long been considered the main evidence of a child's educational progress and reading is considered for some as decoding written symbols; whereas for others, it's the means to find out the meaning behind these symbols. Students need to know the language we use whether it's first or second language (L1/L2) for communicating or for academic language needed to be successful in school (Rea & Mercuri, 2006). Studies have shown that subjects with developed skills have a deeper understanding and matured of the act of reading (Baker, 1991; Ehren, 2005; Mason, 2004). As for students majoring in English as a foreign language, English language is needed to understand the academic language because they use this language in textbooks, in classroom discussions, and in formal writing. Furthermore, the ability to read and comprehend textbooks that are oriented for students majoring in English language is considered one of the most important skills that university students of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) need to acquire (Scarcella, 2003). It is important that they build confidence in their abilities to make sense of written text, and pronounce and read orally in the classroom without embarrassment. In addition, for students to be teachers of EFL, they should have the experiences in effective reading based on the knowledge of the five components of effective reading programs: phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension (McIntyre, Kyle, Chen, Kraemer & Parr, 2009). So, our ultimate goal in supporting English language learners as EFL teachers, is that they become fluent in English reading and writing so that they have access to all the doors that open to truly well- educated people in an English-speaking nation.

2. Statement of the Problem

The Kuwaiti Ministry of Education (KMOE) introduced English as a compulsory subject in the elementary school curriculum since 1993 (AlDarwish, 2006). However, students in public schools in Kuwait are not exposed to reading materials until they reach third grade; even though, English is implemented and taught from first grade. This is due to the policy of the Kuwaiti Ministry of Education which its focus is on developing learners' listening and speaking skills and to accomplish this, students recite drill patterns of speech in English and listen to taped conversations between native English speakers. Furthermore, with such an emphasis on listening and speaking, it is inevitable that the other two skills, reading and writing, would be neglected. In addition, second language vocabulary, speaking fluency, and writing ability as well as reading proficiency are some of the result that are gained from reading skills (Adams & Burt, 2003). Because of this, a lot of students in Kuwaiti public elementary schools reach certain grade level without the ability to read well. In addition to this problem, students academic reading falls behind and their capacities to use multiple thinking skills reaches dead end. Also, we should realize that for the most part, reading instruction in the ESL and EFL college and university courses tends to focus on comprehending the language of the texts. As students majoring in English have to earn a degree from the College of Basic Education (CBE) to be English teachers for primary grades, students are facing problems in understanding their academic language especially as Scarcella (2003) explains the importance of this academic language which plays out in linguistics, higher-order thinking skills and cognition, and society and culture. The English Language program at this college (CBE) focuses on three areas. The first consists of the knowledge and skills needed to be a competent teacher of English language and culture, including communicative

competence in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The second area comprises the knowledge and skills of pedagogy. The third area covers conceptual knowledge of English (Course Description Catalogue, 2000; see also Chapter 3). However, the objective of the only EFL reading course at the CBE is to prepare students to face their professional academic material written in the target language (English) in their fields of study. Moreover, by encouraging students to read outside the physical boundaries of the classroom, it would help students to move on from learned reading skills to authentic reading skills. This in turn would raise the students' motivation in reading in English as a Foreign Language.

3. Aim of the study

This research paper is intended to find out in what way these English language teacher trainees have developed their English vocabulary, knowledge of English structures, and understanding of English phonology by the impact of their reading ability. This study attempts to answer the following research questions.

3.1 research Questions

1. How do English teacher trainees comprehend their English language texts?
2. Is there motivation for English language trainees that influences their ability to read in the target language?
3. Does the use of second language books contribute to the development of reading skills in the EFL academic reading class?

3.2 The significance of the research

Because reading is not only considered just a mechanical act decryption of graphic signs, it is also an act of reasoning, symbolization, imagination so, what matters is what the students convey and interpret the printed letters, and build a new meaning in the mind from the signs. Therefore, the resulting enjoyment from a written text, coming from both the signifier and the signified, is not immediate (Sotozaki & Hatin, 2011). This paper is of great importance because we need to find out if the English teacher trainees have the motivation and the habit to read second language text books not only for the sake of graduating from college and earning a degree in teaching English as a foreign language, but for their future carrier development especially when we know from other research papers and articles that the majority of Arabs, read in the Arab world, mainly because their interest focuses on topics related to politics, news and current events which they get the access for this information through the internet. The crisis goes beyond this where Arab people read four pages annually while in the USA 11 books, and the EU more than 30 books, and the average reading in Israel to 40 books annually (Zaazou, 2009). Furthermore, some studies show that many adolescents have significant difficulties when reading for information or to understand instructions. Unfortunately, there is growing evidence that students do not read effectively, that their understanding is minimal and literal. In addition, it has been noted by many that reading in the Arab world is not valued and considered a problem for learners of L2/FL (Clarity, 2007). Therefore it is of great importance to see the EFL teacher trainees' level of comprehension especially if they are the tool for EFL reading program in the primary level.

4. Literature Review

Reading is considered one of the four skills as a crucial aid in learning a second language because it is necessary to ensure that the learners have sufficient vocabulary to read well (Grabe, 2009; Hudson, 2007; Koda, 2005). In many cases, reading in a target language serves as an example that students can learn on their own beyond the classroom (Bowey, 2005). Therefore, depending on the exposure and the learning process of English language, learners have varying levels of proficiency in English which may influence their reading comprehension (Tan, Moore, Dixon, & Nicholson, 1994). Besides the learning of content concepts, students benefit from reading challenging academic texts in mainly by learning a large amount of new language from reading (Zwiers, 2008). In many EFL situations, English is learnt as an extra curricula subject and therefore students will be examined in this subject rather than learning English language to be used as a tool for life. If students read a lot of easy, enjoyable books (Helgesen, 2005), as Bomford and Day (2004) suggest, these easy books build speed and reading fluency. In addition, having a wide and a variety of reading, seems to support all four skills, even speaking and listening because of the increased exposure to English vocabulary and discourse.

Hott considered students' motivation for studying English as a foreign language would reach its high level especially in senior high school year when they know this will open entrance doors to college admission (2001). However, their motivation drops down with regard to studying English language once they are admitted. Hott examined two types of motivation in the EFL Japanese context and came up with mainly students motivation to read increase if the materials and the text attract students' interest and understanding to other cultures (2001).

The students' motivation based on individual personality and social identity in which encourage students to read more L2 texts and in return it will develop and enhances the social being of the foreign language learner (Thanasoulas, 2002). Furthermore, when students read, their intrinsic motivation get high based on the students' understanding of how well they read and how they can improve their reading performance (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997), higher frequency of reading, higher achievement in text-comprehension tasks (Benware & Deci, 1984; Gottfried, 1990) and higher sense of competence (Miller, Behrens, Greene, & Newman, 1993).

To gain the best results, Campbell (1989) suggests that teachers should explain or criticize about books they recently read. This action will encourage students in class to become eager to do the same. Atwell mentioned that "If we want our adolescent students to grow to appreciate literature, the first step is allowing them to exert ownership and choose the literature they will read" (1998, p. 161). Furthermore, many students who struggle to read at grade level lack the many hours of being read to those proficient readers have had (Zwiers, 2008). However, when students read texts or materials in English in the classrooms is usually facilitated by mainly the classroom teacher compared to when students read outside the classroom authentic materials and have nothing to do with academic books may be considered a difficult task. The reason is due to the traditional EFL reading classrooms, students work under the guidance and interferences of the teacher and the instruction is carried out in a ascending manner in order to build up appropriate reading skills. The reading situation is different, however, when the ESL/EFL student is called upon to deal independently with authentic texts. In such cases, students may not have someone to provide guidance or to intervene when a reading problem occurs (Peacock, 1998). In addition, using multimedia and technology shows how it has a great role in enhancing and improving the relationship between the number of vocabulary words memorized and comprehending L2/FL reading texts reaches maximum value (Chonstantinescu, 2007).

The cognitive process of reading is also restricted in the target language. Reading, like speaking, occurs in context rather than in isolation (Cook, 2001). Cook also added that the meaning of a text is not found just in the sentences themselves, but is derived from the previous knowledge stored in the reader's mind and the processes through which the reader tackles it (pp. 89). Because the reading process is such an individual process that takes place inside readers' minds, moving it into the public arena of the classroom in order to monitor, analyze, discuss, and modify it is difficult (Aebersold & Field, 2007). Aebersold and Field added that this public discussion is the most important activity that occurs in the reading classroom (p.95). In a research paper based on Content Schema, world's knowledge and Formal Schema, format and genres knowledge of the text, plays an important role in L2 text comprehension (Stott, 2001). Stott adds that the readers comprehend the text based on their own interpretation to the information included in the context of the text in comparison to the same text author's interpretation.

5. Procedures

This study was carried out in Kuwait through the summer and fall Semesters of 2012. The size of the selected sample is limited and confined to only students majoring English in the College of Basic Education. The subjects of the study were 171 undergraduate full-time female students majoring in a program especially designed to graduate teachers to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This program is offered by the College of Basic Education (CBE). This college is a 4-year full time teacher training program, and it includes many disciplines in which English Department is considered one of the departments for those who wish to teach English in primary schools. The reason for only questioning female participants in CBE is because schools in Kuwait are segregated by gender into all-girl and all-boy schools. Only female teachers at the elementary level teach both genders because in the State of Kuwait, elementary public schools are taught only by female teachers according to the regulation of the Ministry of Education. Although all of the participants speak Arabic as their first language, they demonstrate relatively equal and adequate English reading, speaking and writing proficiency. In addition, they have been enrolled in different courses during summer and fall semester 2012 and were taught by English major instructors who hold PhD degrees from universities in the USA and UK. Also, the sample was randomly selected during the students attending their classes with the authors of this study through the two semesters. The authors handed the questionnaire which was written in English to the students at the beginning of the courses both instructors were teaching in these two semesters. The questionnaire {Appendix (I)} was handed to them to be filled out and given back to the authors.

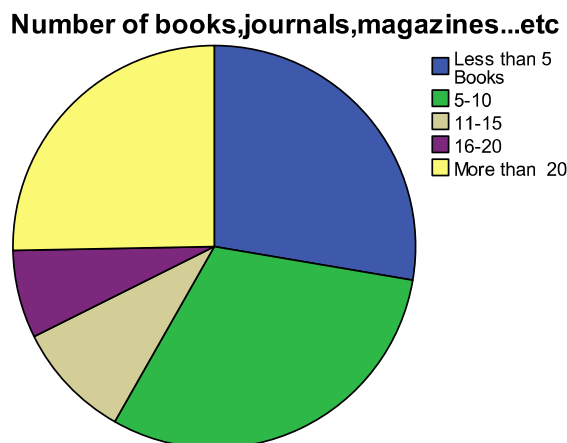
6. Results & Discussions

The study was conducted on a hundred and seventy one female participants, who study at the College of Basic Education at the English Department in Kuwait. A descriptive analysis of the participants showed that a majority of about 80% claimed to be under the age of twenty five, which meets the age expectancy of college students in

Kuwait in general. Only 8% of the participants claimed to be between 26- 30, and another 8% ranging between 31- 35.

As for the number of books that was read by each participant, the results showed the majority falling within those who read 5-10 books only with a percentage reaching (30%), while (27%) claimed to have read more than 20, 10% claimed they read 11- 15 books, and 7% claimed to have read 16- 20 books (Graph 1).

Graph 1



As for the number of years of study in college, the majority of the participants were of those who have spent more than two years in college, comprising about 53% of the total number of the group under the study. Bearing in mind the previous result on the majority of the group under the focus of the study to classify themselves as those who have only read 5- 10 books, this result specifically poses some serious question marks on whether the courses the students study at the department require enough reading to be done by the student. The rest of participants were distributed among those who described themselves as beginners (15%), those who have spent less than a year (14%), and those who have spent less than two years (18%).

Participants were asked to respond to a number of statements in regards to their opinion on a number of ideas relevant to their style of reading using a five point likert scale. The results on each of the participants' responses were examined in relation to each of the three questions posed by the researchers. A one-way between groups ANOVA was implemented on each of the three independent variables (age of participant, number of years in college & number of books read in the target language), in relation to the statements that were designed to reflect on each of the three questions posed by the researcher. Analyzing responses to statements 2 and 8, the results show that, among the three factors that were examined (age, years of study in college & number of books read by the participant), the quantity of the books read tends to affect how well the participants believe they are required to comprehend what they read (Figures 1-3).

Figure 1

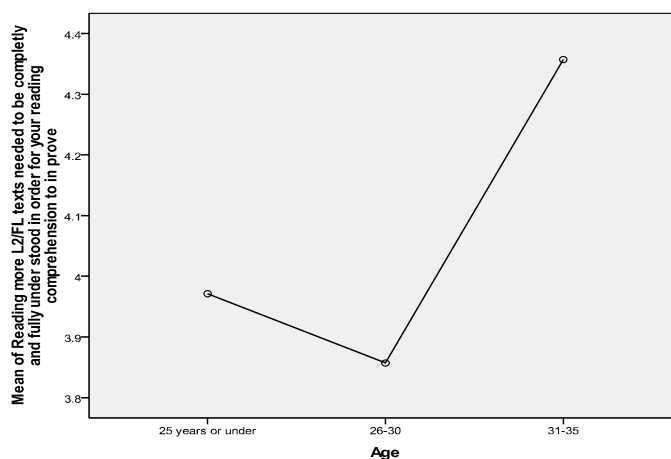


Figure 2

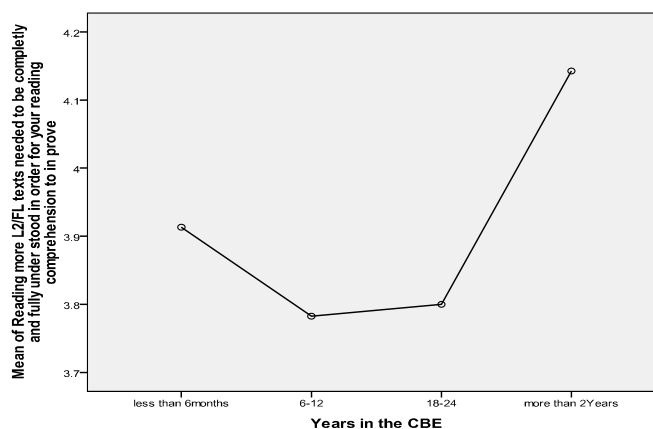
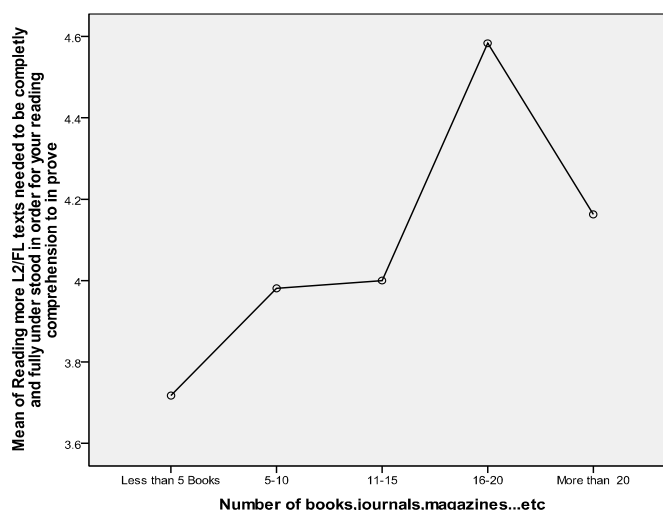


Figure 3



The finding has been indicated through a significant mean difference of ($0.003 < 0.05$) on the dependant variable for the participants with different number of read books. A further analysis of the post-hoc results show that the main difference tends to lie between those who strongly agree and those who slightly agree with the necessity of full comprehension of what they read. On the other hand, the results show another significant mean difference of ($0.008 < 0.05$) in the statement stating the importance of giving the reader an opportunity to choose his/her own reading texts. Examining the results of post-hoc tests shows that the difference tends to lie mainly between those who disagree and those who strongly agree with the statement.

The overall results might indicate that both quantity of the read books and the number of years in college might have influenced the students' opinions in regards to presenting better comprehension levels of what they read.

As for the second research question "Is there any factor that influence or contribute to the ability for the students to read in second language?" I examined the participants' responses to statements (9, 10 & 11). A closer look into responses to statement 9, where participants were asked to respond on how much they thought lack of concentration to be problematic on being successful readers, the results showed no significance mean difference in relation to any of the three independent variables. Examination of the results on statements 10, where the attempt of translating the text, or the increase of reading in L2/FL (statement 11), has also showed no significant mean differences in relation to any of the independent variables (Figures 4-6).

Figure 4

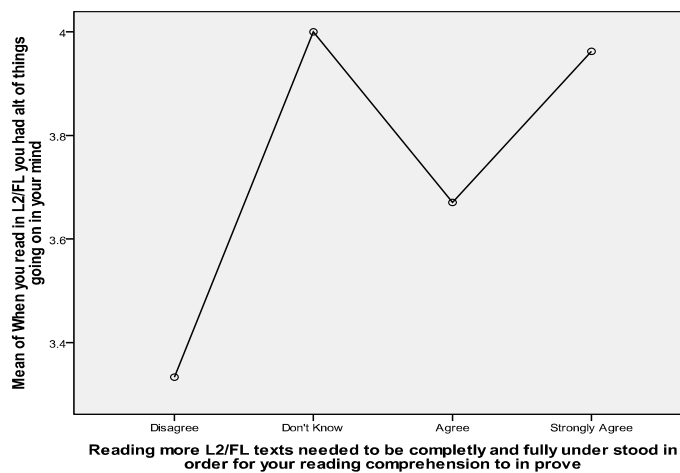


Figure 5

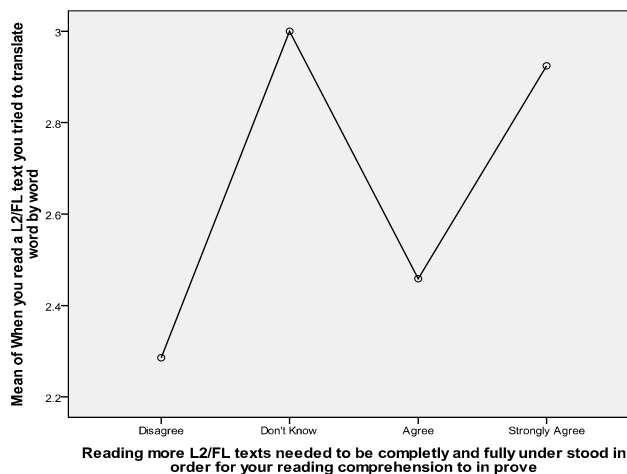
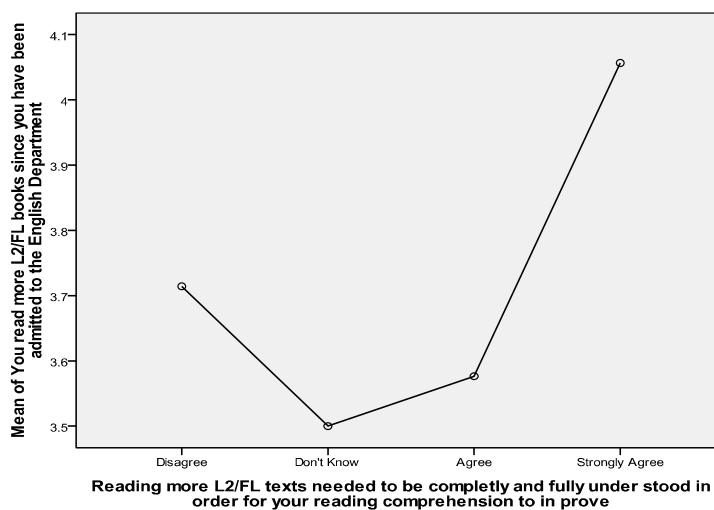


Figure 6



The use of authentic tools and its affect on the development of the readers' reading skills and strategies were also examined in relation to statements 3 and 8, with the results showing no significant mean differences on any of the three independent variables posed by the researcher.

7. Conclusion

Through this research paper, the results indicate that many students do not choose to read often or in great quantities; therefore, the amount of time students choose to read has an effect of literacy on cognitive functions. 20% of the teacher trainees in this paper, spent time engaged in reading 20 or more books, whereas 58% read between 5-10 books or less even though they totally agreed that reading books in the target language improves their ability to read. Furthermore, 73% strongly agreed that since their admission to the English department at the CBE, they had the time to read more books in the target language; however, 40% of the previous group read 5-10 or less than five books in these two years after being admitted to the English department. This might be as a result of as students get older, the amount of reading they do decreases, and might be the result of the way reading is taught during 12 years of school which is not conducive producing students who love to read. Or the courses in the English Department at the College of Basic Education needs for improving its standards regarding reading especially if the teacher trainees had little attention on the reading skill which was through a focus or literary reading, and that is arguably a bit narrow.

In short, students, young and old, are not always motivated to read and when faced with such attitudinal or motivational problem, teachers are often at loss about what to do. The problem with reading is not just the language but the whole process of getting meaning from texts. Furthermore, L2 learners read their second language much slowly than they read their first particularly when they are changing from one overall writing system to another as in our situation, Arabic to English. Therefore, there is no single or simple way to change students' attitudes toward reading, but there are things teachers can try by introducing students to readings that match mostly through extensive reading books that really comes out of their own lives.

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Appendix (A)

(A.1) Questionnaire

Part (1): Demographic Questions

1. Age _____ (25 years or under), _____ (26-30), _____ (31-35),
2. Years in the CBE _____ (less than 6months), _____ (6-12),
_____ (18-24), _____ (more than 2Years)
3. Number of books, journals, magazines, ...etc. you have read in the target language (English) since your high school graduation _____ (Less than 5 Books), _____ (5-10), _____ (11-15), _____ (16-20), _____ (More Than 20).

Part (2):

Thoughtfully read each statement and then rate yourself on how your reading improved in an L2/FL.

Strongly Agree (5)

Agree (4)

Don't Know (3)

Disagree (2)

Strongly Disagree (1)

- ___ (1) Reading more L2/FL books or texts greatly improved your ability to read.
- ___ (2) Reading L2/FL text needed to be completely and fully understood in order for your reading comprehension to improve.
- ___ (3) L2/FL reading ability improved when you read for real reasons: to get information to use for an argument, a report, to find out what is going on in the world.
- ___ (4) You knew best which texts were appropriate for improving your reading ability.
- ___ (5) You knew how to choose your own reading materials.
- ___ (6) Reading to get the general idea of an article or just the main ideas was sufficient to improve reading skills.
- ___ (7) The quantity of reading was not as important as the quality of the comprehension of the text.
- ___ (8) L2/FL readers should be able to select the texts that they read.
- ___ (9) When you read in L2/FL, you had a lot of things going on in your mind.
- ___ (10) When you read a L2/FL text, you tried to translate word by word.
- ___ (11) You read more L2/FL books since you have been admitted to the English Department.
- ___ (12) You had no interest in reading L2/FL books before your admission to the English Department.
- ___ (13) Since your admission to the English Department, you have the time to read more L2/FL books.
- ___ (14) Since your admission to the English Department, you prefer to read L2/FL books than your L1 books.
- ___ (15) You are encouraged by your English Department instructors to read L2/FL books.

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