

The Use of Sociocultural Approach for Teaching ESL Reading Skills to 'O' Level Students in Pakistan

Tahir Saleem^{1*} Summiya Azam²

1.Tahir Saleem , The University of Lahore, Pakistan

2.Summiya Azam,(M.Phil Scholar) University of Management and Technology, Pakistan

* E-mail of the corresponding author: tahirhallian2@yahoo.com

Abstract

Reading comprehension skills are very important for ESL Pakistani O, level learners. Paying attention to the troubles they and the instructors face in Pakistan, the present study was conducted to examine the effectiveness of sociocultural approach in reading comprehension skills. This is a novel approach for Pakistani teachers as it has not yet been tried in teaching especially in reading comprehension skills. To carry out this research, semi-experimental research design was employed including pre and post tests. Keeping in mind the nature of the data, it was analyzed quantitatively and interpreted qualitatively i.e. summary method. The findings of the study clearly exhibited that sociocultural approach is quite effective for teaching reading comprehension skills. The independent sample t-tests were conducted both for pre and post tests which strikingly show the difference of collaborative language learning approach. The results of this research suggest the use of more social and supportive methods in the perspective of language learning and teaching. It is more in support of a collaborative learning atmosphere which requires the presences of a professional or expert-peer that provides students with possibilities to correct themselves and simultaneously to understand the ideal procedures required for the learning of new and challenging abilities.

1. Introduction

Reading is one of the essential abilities in learning 'languages'. People believe that the more they read, the more they understand, or that reading is the road to information. Five hundred and fourteen million people communicate in English (Famighetti, 1999). Nevertheless, English language teaching and learning has been a tough job in Pakistani institutions; it does not produce fluent readers of the ESL, which should preferably be the primary objective of teaching English language. English has been considered as a "Lingua Franca" of the world for many years (Kitao,1996; Wierzbicka, 2006), reaches the position of formal, academic study and even court language in Pakistan, along with our national language, Urdu (Mehboob, 2009; Saleem, 2014). Despite its proven significance and function, unfortunately, the teaching of English continues to be discouraging as far as its reading skills on the part of the learners is involved. Majority of Pakistani learners lack reading skills, even though Pakistani learners start studying English language from the first grade as compulsory subject till graduating (Saleem, 2014). Though a number of aspects have been identified for this defective English language teaching, such as unsupportive program, over-crowded classes, obstructive evaluation system etc. (Kiran, 2010; Ahmad, 2004), yet the central critique is mostly set on flawed language teaching techniques and methods. Within our perspective, English is handled as 'subject' not as 'a language' (Kiran, 2010) thus, no particular focus is given on the improvement of reading skills of the learners.

The previous research performed in the area of ESL exposed that language cannot be learned in solitude rather it is a social effort in its substance it needs to be learned in a social context with the help of some peers or expert teachers (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Yang & Wilson, 2006; Zuengler & Miller, 2006). The works of Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) set the base for this social characteristics of studying in which the learners together work to achieve an objective (Lantolf & Poehner, 2008; Gibbons, 2002 & 2003). A significant perspective created within the sociocultural structure to back up the learners towards taking changes, starting discussion, creating ideas or bringing them towards producing and understanding more complicated texts (Gibbons, 2002, p. 15). Based on this sociocultural idea of second language teaching and learning, this study is designed to carry out trial analysis in which BS Level learners are offered with the collaborative language learning atmosphere which would accomplish the improvement of reading skills of the learners. To evaluate the learners' reading ability at the beginning as well at the end of the trial educating pre and post-tests are performed. This study will be useful for various stakeholders such as curriculum and material designers, instructors, and most importantly learners. The results of the study will be a major point for the instructors to apply sociocultural approach in teaching English language successfully. The present study sets out to apply sociocultural theory of second learning with an objective to improve reading skills, particularly reading skills at university level learners. To get the said objective, scaffold language teaching strategy is decided as it is greatly valued when growth of effective second studying and educating perspective is involved (Wells, 2000; Gibbons, 2002). Moreover, when looking back at the past studies performed in the sociocultural concept and its relevant areas, we come to understand that very few, if any, have been dedicated to teaching reading comprehension through sociocultural

approach. Most of the research performed in this area is relevant to teaching speaking and writing skills (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Barnard & Campbell, 2005; Cotteral & Cohen, 2003; Foster & Ohta, 2005; Gibbons, 2003; Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Mccafferty, 2002; Ohta, 1995), reading skills is the area which creates much trouble for Pakistani ESL learners (Kiran, 2010), where learners are hardly ever guided. In line with the above justifications, the objective of the present research is to explain how text comprehension and reading strategy use can be affected by applying sociocultural teaching techniques. To these ends, the following research question was posed:

1.2 Research Questions

As described previously, this study focused to apply the sociocultural framework of second teaching and learning, within our perspective, mainly working on the following question:

1. Is Sociocultural approach effective for teaching ESL reading comprehension skills to O, level students in Pakistani perspective?

2. Literature Review

For many years reading has been viewed purely from cognitive perspective and a great deal of research has focused on the cognitive aspect of reading. For those who are working in this area, reading is considered as a receptive skill and the central question is what cognitive processes underlie and account for success and failure in learners' attempt to master the second/foreign language in general and second/foreign language reading in particular (King, 1987; Rueda, MacGillivray, Monzo, & Arzubia, 2001; Segalowitz & Lightbown, 1999). Nevertheless, a child's intellectual growth or learning has long been a topic of discussion among scientists and educationists (Gibbons, 2002). Mainly, the two major ideologies regarding the goals of education as well as the ways by which it could be accomplished existed side by side since the concept of public education was emerged (Wells, 2000). The first ideology considered the learners as the "empty vessels" in which the teachers were supposed to deposit the information or knowledge. Opposite to it, the second philosophy transformed the learners into the centre of learning process, where they construct knowledge individually (Gibbons, 2002, p. 6). However, both these orientations have been criticized as far as the phenomenon of second language learning is concerned (Cummins, 2000).

The basis of this criticism lies in the fact that whether learners are treated as empty vessels or as an individual-productive intellect; fundamentally, they are considered as "independent and self contained" entities constructing their own knowledge all by themselves (Gibbons, 2002, p. 7). Dissatisfied with this "individualistic notion of learning", various researchers and educationists (Wertsch, Mercer, Wells) offered a radically different perspective of learning and cognitive development, called Sociocultural Framework of learning, originated by a Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), a philosopher, educationist and psychologist, was mainly interested in the interpretation of human cognitive and learning in purely social terms (Ratner, 1991).

In opposition to the contemporary philosophies which either focused on the external or internal experience, Vygotsky conceptualized development as the transformation of socially shared activities into internalized process" (Mahn & Holbrook, 1996, pp. 191-206). In other words, human development is regarded, as Gibbons (2002) perceives it, "intrinsically social rather than individualistic" –the result of one's social and cultural experience (p. 8). Vygotsky claimed that cognitive development within individuals appears at two cultural levels "first, between people (inter-psychology) and then inside the child (intra-psychology)" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.75). This implies that culture provides twofold contribution to learners' intellectual development. Not only do the children acquire much of their thinking or gain knowledge from it, the tools of thinking are also derived from cultural settings. Such cultural and social settings provide the learners with the means of 'what to think' and 'how to think', firstly, depending on the more knowledgeable or experienced others around them, and then, gradually taking on the responsibility of their own learning (Lev & Wenger, 1990). The sociocultural notion of human learning opened new horizons for researchers and educationists as "in the last few decades there has been increasing interest in this theory and its implications" for research on teaching and learning (Steiner & Mahn, 1996, pp. 191-206). And soon Vygotskian sociocultural theory started to appear in second language learning in the mid-1980's (Frawley & Lantolf, 1984, 1985 in Zuenger & Miller, 2006).

Sociocultural theory is the theoretical framework supporting the teaching of reading through discussion of text structures. In a social learning situation, the teacher provides problems or topics for students to brainstorm for the answers or information about the given topic. Students help each other in problem solving and learn from group working. Vygotsky's key idea is his notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) pointed out that all learners have two levels of their thinking development: actual development level and potential development level. The actual development level refers to the thinking level at which the children can solve the problems by themselves, while the Zone of Proximal Development is the distance between the actual development as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as

determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86).

Many researchers have examined how sociocultural theory applies to classroom settings. These researchers support the value of sociocultural principles in students learning and development. In general, these studies indicate that students improve their learning through the teacher's guides and discussion among their peers. Almasi (1994) studied the effects of peer-led and teacher-led discussion of literature on fourth graders sociocognitive conflicts over a period of 9 weeks. The students were matched into 2 groups on the basis of their reading comprehension scores, and they showed no difference in their ability to recognize and resolve conflicts prior to the study. On day 1 of each week, stories were introduced. On day 2, students read the entire story silently and recorded personal reactions, comments, and questions in their journals. On day 3 of each week, group discussion of the story occurred.

Dixon-Krauss (1995) found that students improved most in word recognition when peer social dialogue was integrated with teacher support to develop students' reading, writing, and thinking. The researcher matched 12 pairs of students, a more capable reader with a less capable reader. Each pair of students talked to each other about their reading and writing with teacher support. In reading, one student helped her or his partner by telling some strategies in sounding out the words, or constructing the meaning such as telling the partner to look at the pictures or asking questions about the details of the stories. In writing, the students wrote about the book they had read, gave those journal writings to their partners, and the partners wrote the feedback. Teacher supported the students by setting mini-lessons and demonstrating how to sound out the words or interpreting the meaning of text by thinking out loud. The researcher found that the teacher's assistance led to improvement in students' writing and use of a variety of strategies to share text meaning in verbal dialogue. These studies found positive effects of having students help each other in the classroom while the teacher provided some effective guidance.

3. Research Methodology

The focus of this research was on the application of Sociocultural approach in teaching ESL reading skills to O, level students in Pakistan. To implement collaborative language learning approach, the semi-experimental research including pre and post-tests was employed in which performance of control group and experimental group was assessed. The pre-test was carried out at the beginning of the study to determine the participants' current command on English for the purpose of reading comprehension. Then, experimental teaching was conducted with experimental group for a period of two month, having six hour teaching plan each week. On the other hand, control group kept on learning reading comprehension skills through traditional approach. The experimental teaching session was followed by the post-test administrated to critically analyze the outcome of this experimental research. Being semi-experimental research, the data produced in this study was first presented in tabular form and then was analyzed and interpreted qualitatively.

3.1 Population and Sample

The focused population of this research was students of O, level especially in their last year of study. The participants (80) were selected using *non-random, convenience sampling procedures* from Army Burn Hall College for Boys, Abbottabad. The sample was comprised of male students. The O, level students were studying in their final year. It was assumed that they would be more proficient and have knowledge and some L2 English reading comprehension ability. Two groups were formed as control group and experimental group.

3.2 Instrumentations

The instrumentations used in this study were: (1) reading comprehension pretest and posttest, (2) narrative and expository selections and (3) lesson plan. The researcher selected the Cambridge International Examinations English Language (1123) tests, the reading comprehension pretest and posttest because the Cambridge International Examinations English Language (1123) test is a standardized test used in measuring students' comprehension ability. The test assessed the reading comprehension ability such as text structures, inferring, implication, and vocabulary knowledge of O, level school students. These reading abilities should be evaluated according to Barr, Blachowicz, and Sadowi s (1995) work, which suggest that reading comprehension questions should cover the text structures, topic, main idea, and implicit questions (as cited in Piyanukool, 2001). The test is composed of one part, reading comprehension, 30 items (5-multiple-choice questions). The comprehension questions were about humanities and social sciences. The students did not need background knowledge of these stories. The time limit for reading comprehension parts was 50 minutes. The structures of the passages in the test were description (time sequence, autobiography, travel accounts) and compare-contrast.

The procedures and steps of teaching reading through discussion of text structures are described below. The steps of teaching reading to the experimental group through discussion of text structures are the following.

Experimental Teaching

Pre-reading steps

1. Teacher divides the students into small groups. The students decide to be a member of any group by

- themselves, but the number of students per group should be equal.
2. Teacher introduces the selection that students are going to read by showing them the title, author, or cover; and has them predict what the story will be about.
 3. Teacher explains the meanings of new words and idioms, and explains new grammar usages.
 4. (Only for the first period, the next periods, the teacher will remind them) Teacher teaches them narrative and expository text structures, and distributing examples of both types of text structures for students to practice. Teacher demonstrates how to identify the text structures and how to discuss as well. The discussion includes text structures and details of the stories.
 5. Teacher distributes the selection to each student, and has them read silently.

During-reading steps

6. Each student reads the whole story or passage silently.
7. Teacher helps students with vocabulary, grammars, and others if they need assistance.
8. Students discuss text structures and details of story within their group; with the teacher monitoring and helping as needed.

Post-reading steps

9. Teacher evaluates comprehension by having them answer comprehension questions by writing.
10. Teacher discusses the answers with students by having them tell how they find the answers and how the knowledge of text structures helps them (Piyanukool, 2001).

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

First of all, to determine the learners' current reading comprehension ability, reading comprehension test (Cambridge International English Language (1123) was administered as pretest. After the pretest, experimental and control groups received sociocultural and traditional reading instructions, respectively. It is also worth mentioning that both control and experimental groups were taught the same material by the researchers. The textbook used for this study was Oxford Progressive English Revised Edition (Redford, 2014). The book was designed to develop basic reading skills of the O, level students. After two months intervention, post-test was conducted to examine the performance of control group and experimental group in order to view the affects of sociocultural approach in EFL learners reading comprehension skills development (see table 1).

3.4 Data Analysis procedures

Using a codebook, all scores of participants were coded and compiled separately in different MS Excel data files and sheets. First of all, we used particular code characters and numbers for the participants. In the same way, particular principles were allocated to different factors of both participants' scores and demographic information. All MS Excel data files were turned into SPSS 21 (IBM local- version) for analysis. Descriptive analyses were run before to check any normality of data. The data sets were analyzed in the light of the research question using Independent Samples t- Tests. A mix of summary narrative, tables with numerals and figures were used for the description and discussion of results and findings.

4. Results

To be able to examine how ESL learners' reading comprehension can be affected from different teaching techniques (sociocultural and traditional); the information gathered from the two groups was examined using independent-sample t-tests for pre and posttest. Table 1 below provides the mean scores and standard deviations of the correct responses for the two groups before the intervention.

Table 1.

Independent-sample t-tests of the two groups in pre-test of reading comprehension

Groups	N	M	SD	T	Df	P
Control	40	14.85	2.59	-.65	79	.51
Experimental	40	15.32	3.75			

An independent-sample t-test was used to compare the reading comprehension scores of learners in control and experimental groups before intervention. There was no significant difference in scores for control (M=14.85, SD=2.59) and experimental groups (M=15.32, SD=5.79) before reading intervention. As the *p* value is more than .05 (.51 > .05), this means that the two groups of this study had no statistically significant difference in their reading comprehension performance before receiving instruction in reading comprehension.

During pre-test, both the experimental and control groups' overall responses towards reading comprehension tasks were observed to be very limited and unsatisfactory. Most of the students were simply unable to complete the given tasks. They were unnaturally hesitant and were completely lost in text comprehension passages. After the pretest, the researcher taught reading comprehension to experimental group. The participants were taught reading through discussion of text structures, the text that the students read were 3

narrative stories and 7 expository stories, and they were selected from Oxford Progressive English Revised Edition (Redford, 2014) a textbook used at O, level in Pakistan at secondary school level, passages from newspapers, and other sources.

All of the stories were new for the students, but the students had some background knowledge about them. Expository stories were read more than narrative stories because the students were school/college students. The teaching was composed of three stages: Pre-reading, During-Reading, and Post-reading Stage. At the end of this experimental study plan, the post-test was administrated with an objective to assess the results of this novel teaching approach within our context and the improvement, if any, in the reading comprehension skills of the learners.

Table 2.

Independent-sample t-tests of the two groups in post-test of reading comprehension

Groups	N	M	SD	T	Df	P
Control	40	16.78	2.45	-2.93	79	.005
Experimental	40	19.56	5.53			

To investigate the participants' reading comprehension performance after the intervention, another independent-sample t-test was run. The posttest scores were compared to see whether the difference in the mean scores of the control (M=16.78, SD=2.45) and experimental (M=19.56, SD=5.53) groups is meaningful or not (Table 2). The result reveals that there is a statistically significant difference between the scores obtained from the two group as the p value is less than .05 ($.005 < .05$). The experimental group which received peer and teacher scaffolding in their reading sessions outperformed the control group which were given traditional reading instruction. Their reading mean score increased drastically from 15.32 to 19.56 whereas the control group mean rose from 14.85 to 16.78 which is much lower than that obtained in experimental group. The mean difference and the meaningfulness of the difference show that the scaffolding mechanisms which were provided for the experimental group were much more conducive and beneficial to EFL learners' reading comprehension ability.

5. Discussion

The outcomes of the present research show an important statistical distinction in reading comprehension of the students which means that the sociocultural teaching methods (teacher and peer scaffolding) results in better reading comprehension for EFL students and consequences in higher ideal reading comprehension growth in an EFL perspective. It postulates that sociocultural teaching strategies provide a better reading perspective for EFL learners' reading comprehension in comparison to those of the conventional method. These results are similar to past research (Barnard & Campbell 2005; Cothral & Cohen, 2003; Gibbons, 2003; Promote & Ohta, 2005; Mccafferty, 2002), also support the brilliance of using social and collaborative methods in learning situations.

In addition, the other results of this research are that students who received sociocultural teaching methods outperformed those who did not in their use of reading techniques. It shows that the scaffolding methods cater for language learning methods in general and reading comprehension in particular. This result paves a new way for language instructors and researchers into how to provide EFL students with language learning strategies. Compared with some researchers (Anderson and Roit, 1993; Block, 1993) who stressed the importance of teaching reading methods as the only means for providing students with language learning strategies, the findings of this research prove that using scaffolding and sociocultural methods can also be effective and beneficial for reading techniques.

These results provide some ideas into the reading comprehension process. The EFL students found the sociocultural teaching techniques more favorable and facilitative for reading comprehension than the traditional method. There are some possible reasons for the brilliance of sociocultural group over control group in reading comprehension and reading strategies achievement. First, the sociocultural group had contact with more aural feedback than the control group had, by means of peer conversations, instructor reviews and team works. Second, the advanced stage of accomplishment may have been an impact of the particular passion and great contribution that the sociocultural learners revealed during the course. Lastly, sociocultural group had a much greater variety of activities and opportunities in doing the projects, which may have brought up the attention of the learners.

Conclusion

In summary, the results of this research suggest the use of more social and supportive methods in the perspective of language learning and teaching. It is more in support of a collaborative learning atmosphere which requires the presences of a professional or expert-peer that provides students with possibilities to correct themselves and simultaneously to understand the ideal procedures required for the learning of new and challenging abilities. This allows ESL students to be effective constructors of their own learning surroundings. It is also value referring to that the dialogic connections in the sociocultural perspective allows the students to shift from other-regulation to self-regulation; from the reliance on others to independency (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994). It indicates that this

technique is more facilitative and beneficial for ESL students to obtain expertise and independency on their reading material. Nevertheless, the findings of the present study recommend the use of more social and cooperative techniques in the ESL reading comprehension activities and tasks. And among many different techniques, asking students the related questions, telling them the related experiences or stories, and letting them have some discussion to their peers and/or also to their teacher are effective scaffolding ones which their interactive characteristics cause the learners to reduce their stress and also become independent students. These scaffolding activities can help the teachers act within the learners' zone of proximal development and provide the learners with comprehensible input. The learning strategies the students get familiar to as they are doing these activities are the best ladders that make the learning process much more facilitated and easier particularly if they are introduced, explained and emphasized by the teacher. As such, these mentioned factors could be other important causes of higher information processing in the ESL reading tasks.

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