

Developing Second Language Reading Comprehension through Short Story

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Abstract

This study will examine the effectiveness of short story on the reading comprehension of the second language learners. The interaction and reciprocal, collaboration of literature and language teaching has been the focus of interest to many EFL (English as a Foreign Language) researchers, especially in the 20th century. Using literature as a vehicle for the teaching of a second language has proved very handy. Predominantly the short story's unique features, i.e., its brevity, modernity, and diversity make it appealing and interesting to language learners and a value source for the improvement of L2 reading comprehension. The short story can proffer learners ample linguistic, intellectual, and emotional involvement and enhance their learning experience.

Keywords: Short story, reading comprehension, EFL

Introduction

Students must master reading skills earlier and faster than ever before. Instructional methods should be based on scientific research, assist teachers with identification of learning barriers, and provide assessments and accountability. Research shows that materials of common interest like short story increases reading skills and comprehension.

Al-Bulushi (2011) aptly appends, "Recent developments in teaching foreign languages stress learner-centered approaches. Literature teaching in language classroom has also been influenced by communicative language teaching since it motivates students to continue language study and prepare them for the type of communication they would experience in the target culture. One such approach, which has a growing influence on English as a Foreign language (EFL) literature teaching, is the Reader-Response Theory (RRT)" (p.450).

Reading is Fundamental

Introduced in 1966 by Margaret McNamara, is a phrase that has permeated the American culture. As a nation, it is recognized that all other curricula areas necessitate reading; students who do not master reading skills are commonly unsuccessful in their school endeavors. In order to succeed in school or life, one must be able to read (Feldman, 2002). Teachers are asked to select the correct approach or approaches to successfully teach students to read. Research shows that the teaching of reading is multifaceted and that a combined approach, including all reading components, is most successful (Moats, 1999).

This research suggests that reading comprehension can be positively influenced by literary texts, specifically through the use of the short story. The short story and related materials is reasonably priced and readily available, so it should be studied in order to ensure a wise expenditure of instructional funds.

Statement of the Problem

Academic abilities, in the educational system of Pakistan, are closely linked with proficiency in reading. If a student is good at reading he will make good grades otherwise he will stay low in the order of merit. And unfortunately, most of the students are not very proficient in reading. Their reading is ill conceived, lack momentum and comprehension, which results in clear and disciplined thinking. Textbooks are dull and boring just filled with contrived and emotionless language with no interest or humour at all. They fail to attract student attention and arouse their curiosity. Majority of the texts are meant to enable the students to master some grammar rules with no communicative objective. Slobodina (1995) sums up the situation aptly, "Most students entering our institute after high school are false beginners with no motivation to learn English. There is no way to inspire them to use the traditional, dry-as-dust textbooks filled with her Majesty's grammar" (p.40). The interaction between the teacher and the students is almost absent. In most of the cases teacher dominates the

class with no student's participation. The teaching goal is merely rote learning with no practical communications or exchange of ideas. This very fact provoked me to introduce short story, which are interesting, lively and inspiring. Short story will arouse the curiosity in the students and will activate their minds. There will be a lot of inspiration and motivation for them to try and hone their reading skills.

Assumptions

In this study, regarding the effect of short story, on the reading comprehension of 8th graders, the following assumptions have been made:

- (a) Students have successfully completed seven grades, as evidenced by a review of report cards and student files;
- (b) The school has appropriate national curriculum text books for student to benefit from;
- (c) The teachers are credentialed and have appropriate training in text book instruction;
- (d) The teacher using the short story program has completed both training seminars and is willing to use this program as recommended;
- (e) Reading instruction will be in a like manner within the two classes; short story will be the only dissimilar instructional method;
- (f) The school administration will be supportive of the research study;
- (g) The parents will be agreed to their child's participation in the study;
- (h) The Pretest-Posttest scores will be a reliable measure of student achievement;
- (j) Students took the complete reading progression in their earlier grades and a Pretest would be conducted to evaluate their present reading knack; and
- (k) Students will be willing to participate in the study.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis of this study is that short story has a positive effect on the reading comprehension skills of 8th grade students. The null hypothesis is that short story has no effect on the reading comprehension of 8th grade students.

Objectives of the Research

The objectives of the research are: -

- (h) To develop the reading comprehension through short story.
- (i) To arouse the element of curiosity.
- (j) To make them more motivated to learn the language skills.
- (k) To bring something of the everyday world into the classroom and to remove the monotony of the contrived texts.
- (l) To make them feel as the users of the language rather than a mere learners.
- (m) To give them awareness about the usefulness of short story.
- (n) To bring a sense, culture and traditions in the classroom.

Ethics of the Research

This research involves people as research subjects, the researcher have to include an ethics statement in research proposal. Such a statement is an indication of his awareness of the ethical considerations and an agreement to conduct the fieldwork in accordance with ethical procedures.

In short, the researcher will ensure:

- (a) That he has an appropriate training and preparation for conducting the research.
- (b) That the rights and welfare of the human subjects he will work with are protected.
- (c) That he will protect the identities and interests of those involved.
- (d) That he will guarantee the confidentiality of the information given to him.
- (e) That he will conduct his research in accordance with the ethical and professional guidelines as specified in his disciplinary association.

Limitations

- (a) The research could be affected by student access to technology at home.
- (b) The research could be affected by student access to books/literature at home.
- (c) The research could be affected by previous reading skill development.
- (d) The research could be affected by student absenteeism.
- (e) The research could be affected by transient students.
- (f) The research could be affected by teacher attitude toward short story- assisted instruction.
- (g) The research could be affected by individual student's test anxiety both on the short story quizzes

and tests.

Delimitations

The boundaries of this study are limited to two 8th grade classes at a School in Wah Cantt, Pakistan or at a Pakistan International School in Qatar.

Significance of the Study

Educators struggle with the need to provide the best education for students while prudently spending allocated resources for curriculum implementation. Students are expected to master reading skills at earlier ages than ever before. Inevitability of reading comprehension puts reading skill acquisition at the forefront of education reform. Teachers are expected to use the best methods available to teach children to read (Bush, 2001). Researchers are beginning to identify that reading instruction should be a multifaceted approach to ensure all students receive instruction in a way that makes learning meaningful (Moats, 1999). If this approach is the most beneficial to the student, then educators must carefully choose the most appropriate materials to get the job done. Short story, since it supports an individualized learning approach, may prove to be an effective method of contributing to this multifaceted approach. It is very cost-effective, does not need any substantial investment and not the one that needs to be researched before adoption.

Literature Review

It is an old saying that you have to “read between the lines” to get the most out of anything.

The foremost undertaking of EFL teachers is, to teach students to read. The relationship between a student’s ability to read and their success in school is overwhelming.

What is Reading?

To read is to fly: it is to soar to a point of vantage which gives a view over wide terrains of history, human variety, ideas, shared experience and the fruits of many inquiries. The path of a reader is not a runway but more a hack through a forest, with individual twists and turns, entanglements and moments of surprise. (Holden, 2004). Ours is a time of great interest in and concern about reading. Research and experimentation in all fields of initial reading instruction proceed at an ever-increasing pace. Reading comprehension research has a long and rich history. There is much that we can say about both the nature of reading comprehension as a process and about effective reading comprehension instruction.

What is Reading Comprehension?

Reading comprehension is a process in which the reader constructs meaning using as the building materials the information on the printed page and the knowledge stored in the reader’s head. It involves intentional thinking, during which meaning is constructed through interactions between text and reader. Reading is comprehension. Comprehension is what reading is all about. Decoding without comprehension is simply word barking— being able to articulate the word correctly without understanding its meaning. Effective comprehenders not only make sense of the text they are reading, they can also use the information it contains.

Factors That Affect Reading Comprehension

Many factors affect a child’s ability to comprehend text. These include

- motivation/purpose/goals/engagement
- vocabulary/word knowledge/background knowledge
- automaticity of decoding
- fluent reading
- understanding and use of strategies employed by effective readers
- the nature of the text itself (difficulty and interest)
- the type or genre of text (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, poetry)
- the amount of reading done

Effective Comprehension Strategy Instruction

All comprehension Mini-Lessons—shared, read-aloud, and guided reading—should focus on teaching students to:

- identify their purpose for reading
- preview text before reading
- make predictions before and during reading
- activate relevant background knowledge for reading
- think aloud while reading
- use text structure to support comprehension

- create visual representations (make pictures in their heads)
- determine the important ideas in the text
- summarize what they read
- generate questions about text
- handle unfamiliar words during reading
- monitor their comprehension during reading
- use fix-up strategies (Duke and Pearson 2002, 235).

Assessing Reading Comprehension

Because comprehension is a mental process, it can only be observed and assessed indirectly. We cannot get inside a reader's head to observe comprehension, but we can infer comprehension strategies or make them more visible. Reading comprehension can be inferred and assessed through:

- oral or written retellings
- read-alouds and think-alouds
- answering questions
- filling in missing words in a cloze: Is the word defensible?
- the arts/acting out stories through puppet plays or Readers' Theater; art
- written responses
- group discussions
- peer and self-assessments
- questionnaires
- interviews
- audiotapes of children's readings

Vocabulary Development and Background Knowledge

"It is well established that good comprehenders generally have good vocabularies. And beyond that, there is evidence that teaching students vocabulary, in fact, increases their comprehension abilities" (Pressley 2002, 293). Although vocabulary can be taught, most vocabulary words are learned through reading. That is why people who read a great deal generally have large vocabularies.

Prior knowledge affects comprehension. The more one already knows, the more one comprehends, and the more one comprehends, the more one learns new knowledge to enable comprehension of an even broader array of topics and texts (Fielding and Pearson 1994, 62).

Efferent and Aesthetic Reading

Imaginative literature primarily pleases rather than teaches. It is much easier to be pleased than taught, but much harder to know why one is pleased. Beauty is harder to analyze than truth.

Perhaps the best-known theorist to explicate Reader Response, as a pedagogical as well as critical stance, is Louise Rosenblatt, who formulated the "transactional theory" of reading and the distinction between "efferent" (utilitarian) and "aesthetic" reading. Rosenblatt describes "aesthetic reading" as one that engages readers so that they live through the experience and, in so doing, recreates the text. The main aim of the short story-assisted instruction is to accept multiple interpretations to a text rather than just one correct interpretation. If this aim is important for native speakers, it is even more crucial for EFL/ESL students who need the added motivation to read literature in a foreign language. Short story-assisted instruction differs from the other approaches to read literature in a foreign language.

Benefits of Short Stories

Researchers who advocate the use of short stories to teach ESL/EFL list several benefits of short stories. These include motivational, literary, cultural and higher-order thinking benefits. Nevertheless, before instructors look at these benefits in more details, they need to be reminded of one benefit that all instructors should take advantage of, reinforcement of skills.

Reinforcing the skills

Short stories allow instructors to teach the four skills to all levels of language proficiency. Murdoch (2002) indicates that "short stories can, if selected and exploited appropriately, provide quality text content which will greatly enhance ELT courses for learners at intermediate levels of proficiency" (p. 9). He explains why stories should be used to reinforce ELT by discussing activities instructors can create such as writing and acting out dialogues.

Teaching Higher-order Thinking

Of all the benefits of short stories, higher-order thinking is the most exciting one. High intermediate/advanced

students can analyze what they read; therefore, they start thinking critically when they read stories. Young (1996) discusses the use of children's stories to introduce critical thinking to college students. He believes that "stories have two crucial advantages over traditional content: First, because they are entertaining, students' pervasive apprehension is reduced, and they learn from the beginning that critical thinking is natural, familiar, and sometimes even fun. Second, the stories put issues of critical thinking in an easily remembered context" (p. 90). Howie (1993) agrees with the use of short stories to teach critical thinking. He points out that instructors have the responsibility to help students to develop cognitive skills because everyone needs to "make judgments, be decisive, come to conclusions, synthesize information, organize, evaluate, predict, and apply knowledge." By reading and writing, students develop their critical thinking skills (p. 24).

Teaching Culture

Short stories are effective when teaching culture to EFL students. Short stories transmit the culture of the people about whom the stories were written. By learning about the culture, students learn about the past and present, and about people's customs and traditions. Culture teaches students to understand and respect people's differences. When using literary texts, instructors must be aware that the culture of the people (if different from that of the students) for whom the text was written should be studied. As students face a new culture, they become more aware of their own culture. They start comparing their culture to the other culture to see whether they find similarities and/or differences between the two cultures.

Methodology

The study will employ the Pretest-Posttest Equivalent-Group Design, including a questionnaire for both groups. It is predicted that the short story program will have a positive effect on reading comprehension.

Subjects

The subjects of this study are 20 eighth grade students at a school in Wah Cantt, Pakistan or at a Pakistan International School in Qatar. The school serves a predominately middle class neighborhood. The majority of the students are from the surrounding homes, and apartments. The students are randomly selected from a total students entering eighth grade at the school. Through random assignment, efforts will be made to balance the two groups by background, and academic achievement.

Students in the treatment group will be placed in a class of ten with a credentialed teacher (the researcher himself) who is trained in teaching literary text instruction and the short story program. Students in the control group will be placed in a class of ten with a credentialed school teacher. All students in the treatment group will be taught basics of literary texts sufficient to understand short story program. The school will be committed to provide literary texts, and the availability of two classrooms.

Instruments Employed

To serve this purpose, two instruments will be employed in this study: a reading comprehension Pretest-Posttest and a questionnaire. The questionnaire will be used to elicit student's attitudes towards the short story-assisted reading comprehension. The data obtained from the two instruments will be analyzed using descriptive statistics and t- tests.

Procedure

This study will examine the effectiveness of the short story-assisted program on eighth grade students' reading comprehension. This study will begin at the start of the school year and will continue for four weeks. Treatment group will have access to short story reading materials and the control group will use the normal text book prescribed by the school.

A Pretest will be conducted, the scores will be recorded and then the students in both groups will be given thirty minutes of sustained silent reading time each day in addition to their reading instructional time. During sustained silent reading, students in the treatment group will read selected short story and the control group will read text books according to the program. In addition, the time will be given for completion of the quizzes.

The researcher will spend four weeks visiting the school and teaching the short story to the treatment group twice a week. The control group will be taught by one of the school teachers. This will be done to avoid the influence of short story-assisted program on the researcher's performance in the control group. The researcher will, nevertheless, monitor the control group frequently.

After four weeks, students in both groups will take a Posttest. Points earned will be recorded for analysis. The percentile increase in the reading scores of Posttest will be compared to the Pretest percentile scores.

Findings and Analysis

The data obtained from the two instruments will be subjected to different statistical techniques, namely descriptive statistics and t-test.

The selection of the Pretest-Posttest Equivalent-Group Design allows the researcher to compare the gain scores of both the treatment and control groups and to test the significance of any differences between the means. The internal validity is good because between the pre and post tests no confounding variables exist. The external validity is good due to the selection of students using randomization.

The independent variables are the two groups and the dependent variable is the gain score from pretest to posttest. The pretest will be conducted at the beginning of the experiment and the score will be recorded. The posttest will be performed at the end of the experiment and the score will be documented. The gain score will be computed based on the percentile increase from pretest at the beginning to the posttest at the end of the experiment.

The hypothesis to be tested is that the short story-assisted program has a positive impact on the reading comprehension of eighth grade students. The results of this study will be analyzed with Pretest-Posttest Equivalent-Group Design.

The null hypothesis is that there is no difference in the gain scores of the control and treatment groups. The independent sample t-test will be used to examine the relationship between the control and treatment group's gain scores. If there is a significant gain, then the null hypothesis will be rejected. Related sample t-tests will be done for each group to test for significant improvement in each group.

Short story based quizzes and reports will be used by the treatment group's teacher for monitoring of adherence to the short story-assisted program instructions and to ensure student progress toward reading goals and advancement of reading levels.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The current study is expected to reveal that there will be an affirmative outcome of short story-assisted program on students' attitudes and comprehension. This implies that teachers and curriculum designers should perhaps use more students-centered methods of teaching that promote critical awareness in students and help them become more independent learners.

Consequently, literary texts, must not be reduced to exercises or drill, but must be allowed to live as a work of art, influencing the reader to see, think, feel and reflect.

Finally, curriculum designers should guide teachers into using more students-centered methods in the classroom and should encourage teachers into designing and using their own materials, which may better suit their students. EFL teachers should be trained to use the short story-assisted program. Inter schools workshops may be organized, the In-Service Training could be enhanced by Education Department and the research culture ought to be encouraged.

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