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Understanding the importance of reading among learners and teachers: A study based on EFL students in Kuwait

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Abstract

The present study aims to highlight the significance of reading skills among the students and teachers of the EFL setting in Kuwait. The purpose of the study is to find out the factors responsible for poor reading and comprehension skills and to find out the teaching methodology best suitable for developing English reading skills. English is the second language for Kuwait students, thus it is treated as a second language or as a foreign language in the present study. The study used a mixed approach i.e. quantitative approach and distributed worksheets to test the comprehension skills and a qualitative approach to interview the selected sample. A total of 10 participants were selected for worksheet test and 10 for survey interviews, out of which 5 were students and 5 were teachers. The findings of the study are; poor vocabulary, lack of creativity and lack of teachers and students interest with a habit of rote learning and cramming strategy were the contributing factors for lack of developing interest for reading.

Keywords: English reading, EFL setting, Kuwait

الملخص

تهدف الدراسة الحالية لتسليط الضوء على أهمية مهارات اللغة لدى المتعلمين و المعلمين في بيئة تعليم اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية في دولة الكويت. والغرض من هذه الدراسة هو معرفة العوامل المسؤولة عن ضعف مهارات القراءة و الاستيعاب والذي ينسب بالتدني، كما تهدف الدراسة لاكتشاف المنهجية التدريسية الانسب لتطوير مهارات القراءة باللغة الانجليزية وهي اللغة التي تعتبر اللغة الثانية لطلبة دولة الكويت. و لهذا فقد تم التعامل معها في الدراسة الحالية كلغة ثانية او كلغة اجنبية. وتجدر الإشارة لتوظيف النهج المختلط في منهج الدراسة . و يقصد بذلك استخدام كلا من المنهج الكمي و أوراق العمل والتي وزعت في اختبارات مهارات الفهم والمنهج النوعي لدى العينة المختارة، إذ تم اختيار مجموعه مكونة من 10 مشاركين لحل اختبار ورقة العمل، اضافة ل 10 آخرين تم اختيارهم في المقابلات الاستبائية. انقسم هؤلاء ل 5 طلاب و 5 معلمين. و قد أظهرت نتائج الدراسة مايلي: من أبرز العوامل المؤدية الى عدن تنمية اهتمام المعلمين بالقراءة هي ضعف في كمية المفردات والافتقار لعنصر الابداع اضافة الى قلة اهتمام كلا من الطلاب و المعلمين لعادة التعلم عن ظهر قلب و اتباع المعلمين لاستراتيجيات تنسم بالحشو.

الكلمات المفتاحية: القراءة باللغة الانجليزية ، أعداد اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية ، الكويت.



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Introduction

Apart from using body gestures in communicating messages, language is the significant tool used for conveying messages and interaction between people. For the past decades, English language is the most commonly used mode of communication all around the world (Applebee et al.,2003). From the perspective of Kuwait, English has a vital role in influencing lives of people in several ways because having a strong economic condition, people from various parts of the world visit Kuwait to establish their business and get benefits from its robust GDP and economic system. Business industry, tourism industry and educational sector are considerably influenced due to foreigners meeting and interacting local people. However, the local language of Kuwait is Arabic, but learning English seems paramount for them to excel in this era of globalization (Takallou, 2011)

However, in universities and educational institutes, students acquire knowledge and study various degree programs in English because in this way the English language skills can be enhanced and they can easily excel their skills in day to day life routine. Kuwait students acquire knowledge for English as a foreign language (EFL) and utilize different methods and tools for learning English formulated in schools in primary and secondary curriculum (Alhabahba, Pandian & Mahfoodh,2016).Notably, because of different language background, when teachers conduct a class in English language, some students easily understands the lecture, whereas, others find it difficult. Such students believe that foreign language is not considered as an effective language for them and they cannot build strong skills in it. According to Hayati & Mohmedi (2011), teaching English in Kuwait is demonstrated as learning English as a foreign language because Kuwaiti people do not communicate in English very often, thus, they are not considered as progressive people in global world of trade. The research survey conducted by Gilakjani & Ahmadi (2011) exhibit that significant amount of people in Kuwait lack ability to read and comprehend English text because they face multiple errors in pronunciation of words, thus, they tend to avoid learning English skills in their



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later life. For this purpose, the researcher applied the technique of reading aloud in the class for English comprehension, which clearly demonstrated weak articulation of words with low volume and less confidence level and characterized by many pauses. The researcher further concluded that EFL teachers lack emphasizing students on reading text aloud in the class, nor do they rectify students for their incorrect pronunciation of words (Hwang & Huang, 2011).

Reading comprehension enables a person to strengthen their skills to interpret, read and learn new words, and new vocabulary, more accurately. In this way, learners know and acquire the knowledge about new words and increase their productivity in the practical life. However, if a teacher applies the methodology of reading comprehension loudly in the class, learners avoid reading comprehension in pauses and do not get the wrong meaning of the text.

In reading comprehension, the more learners know and understand words, the more learners understand the whole text in a chapter and perform well in the test. When a teacher applies this strategy for learners, found that this method helps learners avoid reading by breaking sentences and get wrong meaning and interpretation of the contents. Nevertheless, English linguistic skills are important in getting proficiency, which in effect can involve reading and listening skills and/or writing and speaking skills. According to Ghoneim (2013) the former two are related to receptive skills, which means that a person learn them by either oral or written material. For this reason, the significance of reading skills cannot be ignored, particularly in the context of educational purpose. However, poor reading skills lead to bad academic performance in students. This problem extends beyond the academic institutes and they face various challenges. Considering all these essential points about English language skills and reading comprehension skills, the present study aims to find the importance of reading skills among the EL students and teachers in Kuwait.



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Objectives of the study

- To find the significance of reading comprehension among the students and teachers of EFL setting in Kuwait
- To know the reading methodology implied by students and teachers in EFL setting in Kuwait

Research questions

- Does reading help EFL students to gain a deeper understanding in English language and learn vocabulary?
- What is the perception of EFL students and teachers about the importance of reading comprehension?
- Which reading technique is applied by EFL students and teachers to comprehend better; self-directed or reading loudly in the class?

Literature review

The era of 21st century has increasing demand for imparting knowledge in a different manner with effective techniques that enhance student's skills and abilities. Undoubtedly, English is a most commonly taught language in almost every country, even in those areas where English is considered as a second language. This is the reason that teachers are enforced by educational authorities to enhance their teaching techniques and adopt different ways to strengthen student's way of learning a new language. Teaching reading comprehension and identifying importance of comprehension are the two most essential aspects, which help instructors to reach their goals of imparting knowledge in the class. The aim of the instructor is to help students acquire knowledge, learn new concepts, new words and gain a command over English language (a second language) (Takallou, 2011).



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English reading comprehension skills help a person to construct the actual meaning from the given text. However, the aim of reading instructor is directed at facilitating a reader to understand the text and respond accordingly. The research conducted on EFL students by Afflerbach, Pearson & Paris (2008) reveal that there are two basic types of people involved in comprehension; the reader and the writer. In the whole process of reading comprehension involves decoding process of words, which is used by the reader to extract the meaning from the words, relate them to the background knowledge and understand the writer's message. Another study confirmed that EFL learners emphasize on reading aloud in the class, which is considered as important as reading aloud by the teachers in the class, particularly in the early phase of learning the language. Eventually, teachers and students both are benefited due to reading aloud and developing the skills for comprehension.

The EFL students encounter learning second language (L2) reading comprehension, which seems to them highly complicated and dynamic because it includes various elements of the reader (L1) that influences the language proficiency such as first language literacy, background knowledge, knowledge of the genre, metalinguistic understanding, motivational orientation and strategy employed to comprehend the text (Qian & Schedl, 2004). Generally, in the EFL/ESL setting, students apply the same strategy for reading as they apply in their first language prospect, however, in this way their second language reading is significantly weak as compared to their due to the factors involved in it such as text difficulty, vocabulary used and language proficiency. Nevertheless, teaching English in the context of EFL is highly demanding because it needs exquisite understanding of the teacher, not only confined to the pedagogy of the teaching but to cover all the aspects of the reading, the background knowledge of the learners and the prospect where teaching and reading is carried out (Ricketts, Nation & Bishop, 2007). Although significant advancement have been observed in L2 or EFL setting for the application of different pedagogy styles in reading practice but as the EFL students face innumerable difficult vocabulary and unfamiliar words with syntax structures that need them to evaluate the sources of context. Thus, at the time of difficulty in reading context, teachers are required to regulate or



monitor processes as advanced-level processing and assess their comprehension because it can adversely influence the efficacy of reading. However, it may also reduce the reading speed but it helps readers to enhance their probability of achieving reading skills.

According to Nassaji (2003), reading is demonstrated as a self-discovery process because the type of strategy implied in the control processing element in their relevant human processing model furnishes information processing events. As identified by Nation et al.,(2004), reading is linked with written context, where readers use their cognitive and metacognitive skills to fragment new knowledge to conclude some meaning. As Brantmeier (2005) .concludes that reading is frequently unnoticed in the context of the language class, however, teachers believe that reading classes must be teacher-focused. Implying the strategy of rote learning, students are anticipated to handle comprehension issues by themselves, thus, teachers shall not only emphasize on developing language, but, they should intensify reading practice in the class.

Baumann (2009) noted that due to reading difficulties, students in the EFL setting confront enormous issues in learning English as a second language. To acquire the knowledge about grammar and words are not only required in reading context but to understand the logical association between the ideas exhibited and information provided in comprehension. The survey conducted on Turkish EFL students' exhibit lack of training in reading abilities because they did not understand the solution to this schema; consequently, they face multiple difficulties at the time of comprehension. As a result, students achieve poor marks in the reading section and they start complaining about their marks because they fail to understand the text written in the paper. Various studies have focused on the importance of reading skills and comprehension in the educational context. Yang (2016)found that readers' level of knowledge is influenced by the level of their understanding the text. Although according to Wichadee (2011) students might feel lack of confidence because they think they do not have the ability, but in reality the problem is their strategic approach towards the given text.



Background knowledge about a second language is an essential element to acquire the reading comprehension abilities in the EFL setting (Yang, 2016). It has a vigorous role in comprehension and its non-existence can adversely affect reading comprehension. Notably, those with the background knowledge comprehend easily, thus, if the learners lack exposure to reading diverse range of materials face multiple issues in understanding them and they need to read the text various times to comprehend it properly. Those with good background in reading have improved level of proficiency as compared to those who have weak background. Similarly, according to Akkakoson (2013), learning for reading skills is started from getting enrollment in school and those who have motivational orientations from paternal side since childhood have more advantage of awareness about reading conceptions, strong vocabulary and understand reading motive.

Research methodology

The present study is descriptive in nature, which implied mixed research approach i.e. qualitative and quantitative research. Survey method had been implied, which included two essential instruments

- Worksheet for testing the reading comprehension skills (quantitative)
- Interviews from the selected students and teachers selected from the EFL setting in Kuwait (qualitative)

The use of worksheet helped researcher to know the weak areas of comprehension and vocabulary mistakes, whereas, interviews helped explore the issues encountered by students during comprehension and the problems face by teachers whilst teaching reading skills to EFL context. Moreover, suggestions were collected from the participants of the study to resolve the issues. Interviewing teachers facilitated their observational skills to understand those factors, which seem responsible for poor reading comprehension in English language.



For testing the reading comprehension skills, a total of 10 students from the first semester were selected from a private university where English is used as a source of foreign language i.e. Gulf University for Science and Technology and for the interview purpose, a total of 5 students and 5 teachers were interviewed selected from the different departments of the university. A systematic random sampling technique was used to select a sample of the study.

Research analysis

For the purpose of research analysis, the passage was given to the students in the worksheet and was asked to read the passage in a louder voice to evaluate their reading speed and vocabulary pronunciation with word recognition (Aghaie and Zhang, 2012) In addition, students were asked to write the answers of the reading comprehension to assess their syntax structure and to analyze their level of understanding for the text. This also helped to gain the understanding about the students' comprehension and the relevance of answers to the questions with critical writing. Reading aloud and self-directed method also helped to understand the teaching methodologies to strengthen reading skills in the students.

Findings of the study

The findings of the study from the given worksheet revealed that the students were unable to furnish meanings in English to the difficult and unfamiliar words. Notably, all 10 students did not provide the meanings nor do they able to comprehend the text with relevance. The underlying reasons were found during interview session for the weak comprehension skills in students under EFL setting. However, English is used as a source of medium between students and teachers, but, teachers did not teach meanings of difficult words, nor did they focus on the importance of reading and comprehension skills. The results of the study revealed that 7 out of 10 students were failed to comprehend the text and 2 out of 10 students gave the meanings to the text, whereas only one student partially comprehend the text.



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At the time of interviewing students and teachers, students revealed that teachers had been following reading aloud strategy in the class, yet, for difficult words rote learning process could help them to increase the efficiency of building vocabulary and improve comprehension skills. Students also confirmed their weak abilities to read the text fluently; therefore, they were unable to develop interest for reading books and various other written materials. Weak grammar, poor vocabulary and feeble comprehension skills were the leading factors for students to develop the habit of reading. Similarly, teachers revealed that lack of interest from the students' perspective were the leading factor for them to develop interest in the class for strengthening students' reading and comprehension skills.

Few students complained about the course syllabus, which lacked emphasis on reading skills and did not employ vocabulary building strategy useful in their day to day activities. Moreover, the vocabulary used in their text books was substantially different from the words used in newspapers, novels and articles. Even students provided their viewpoint about weak teaching methodology, which did not propel them to learn ample amount of vocabulary, thus, they have impoverished reading skills. One student also opined that the educational institutes do not emphasize on speaking English, thus, they are unable to use words from the text books or teachers in their day to day conversation and as a result words disappear from their mind. The students also revealed that they lack a habit of reading newspapers and news articles other than their text books, and this is why their grammar and pronunciation of words are feeble. Poor grammar, weak tenses, and poor syntax structures keep such students away developing reading habits. Even few students also complained about including English in the curriculum are to demean students and fail them in their examination. However, for improving English reading skills, students suggested that they should be first taught with grammar skills and explain them tenses based on the situational factor. Moreover, to strengthen their vocabulary, each day a new word must be taught and ask them to use in their sentences.

In addition to students' interview, teachers were also interviewed to provide their suggestions and share their observations about the fundamental reasons and factors



that cause poor reading skills in the EFL setting. Teachers revealed that students want rote learning system because they lack creative skills, thus, this approach curb development of their reading skills and hinder their vocabulary building. Even teachers also said that students are least interested in making a habit of reading books because they think that they need to pass the exam only and English reading skills would not help them in practical life. Teachers admitted that they lack focus on creative skills of students due to weak background knowledge for English language, therefore, in various instances they encourage students to write whatever is taught in the class. This is the reason that students do not develop the habit of reading books, stories, newspapers, essays and novels because they have weak comprehension skills for understanding the text.

Discussion and conclusion

From the given study and the detailed discussion on the importance of reading among the learners and teachers in the context of EFL setting in Kuwait revealed that various factors contribute to weak comprehension and reading skills of the students in the chosen university under EFL context. However, in the contributing factors, teachers also had the major role in poor vocabulary with less interest for reading amongst the students. The habit of rote learning instead of understanding and comprehending the text were the key elements for poor grammar, weak sentence structure and tenses of the students. With no habit of reading newspapers, articles, books, novels, stories and absence of interest from both teachers and students were found in poor reading habits of students. Moreover, teachers do not adopt various teaching methods for developing reading skills in the class; however, reading aloud in the class with a core focus on difficult and unfamiliar vocabulary words can help comprehend the text and develop interest amongst the students (Al-Ghazo,2016).

Nevertheless, with improved reading skills, a person can develop linguistic and written skills. Reading books, articles, newspapers and novels with well-structured and meaningful sentences can help students to build a strong vocabulary and



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furnish knowledge about various cultures, which facilitate them to speak and write well. Although, not a single teaching methodology is completely effective, but applying various strategies and choosing the most effective strategy by the teachers can improve the reading comprehension and persuade the students about the significance of reading skills in their all endeavors.

The main **recommendations** that this study can suggest can be summarised as follow;

- Encouraging teachers to utilise new teaching methods for the purposes of developing student reading skills
- helping students to infer meaning from the given text can also encourage students to learn the habit of reading and avoid cramming during exams.



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