

An Investigation into Trainees' Awareness of Reading Comprehension Strategies

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Abstract

Teaching reading through reading strategies is a must because the use of reading strategies is directly proportional to the effectiveness of teaching reading. Reading strategies can improve students' reading comprehension. This paper aims to investigate whether trainees are aware of reading strategies or not. A total of 250 participants were involved in this study. They are B.Ed. correspondence first year students who are teachers of English in their respective schools. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were utilized in this research. Questionnaires, which include both closed-ended and open-ended questions, were developed to investigate the backgrounds of the participants, their awareness of reading strategies and the inclusion of critical thinking questions in their reading activities. It was found that 4.8 % of the trainees have been using most of the reading strategies in the questionnaires as they received initial teacher training. A few reading strategies are known to 26.8% of the trainees. 68.4 % of the trainees reported that they have been aware of few reading strategies and they usually used spoon-feeding ways in their teaching reading. The findings indicate that more training needs to be provided so that teachers can employ reading comprehension strategies which are truly applicable to their own teaching contexts. It is hoped that the research will help raise the awareness of trainees' reading strategies which can help their students use these strategies in their actual reading.

Keywords: reading strategies, awareness, reading, trainees

1. Introduction

In Myanmar, English is taught as a compulsory subject in Basic Education schools. However, students have minimal opportunities to use reading strategies because some teachers tend to use traditional ways for teaching reading, unaware of these useful strategies. Basic Education Reforms for the 21st century have been initiated, so teachers need to be able to cope with these challenges in order to maximize improvements in learners' learning. Therefore, teaching methods/strategies currently used by Basic Education teachers should be taken into consideration as they are vital to reading comprehension success. Despite having a teacher's manual for the prescribed textbook, most teachers still have not applied the knowledge and ideas gained from the manual to their teaching, especially in teaching reading comprehension. Based on traditional ways of teaching reading, most students are highly dependent on teachers for meanings of difficult words in reading passages, translating these passages into Myanmar language and checking answers. Thus, they rarely use reading strategies. This can prevent students from developing critical thinking, problem solving and decision making skills. Thus, students' cognitive development is an area to improve in terms of reading comprehension. As a result, some students may find it hard to comprehend reading passages due to the lack of reading comprehension skills. It is obvious that an awareness of reading strategies is a necessity which can be passed down from teachers to students. The main aim of this paper is to investigate whether trainees are aware of reading strategies or not. The objectives of the study are to find out which reading strategies are most frequently used by teachers and to let them know reading strategies which help their students to develop their critical thinking skills.

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2. Literature Review

Awareness of teaching reading comprehension strategies plays a vital role for teachers in preparing lesson plan and doing activities for teaching reading. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary (2018), awareness is defined as “(1) the quality or state of being aware (2) knowledge and understanding that something is happening or exists.” Only when teachers have knowledge and understanding that there are reading strategies which can improve their students’ reading comprehension skill, they can utilize them. Teachers should have awareness of what kinds of teaching strategies that they are using, whether their teaching strategies are effective or not.

Farstrup (2002) states that teachers should be aware and knowledgeable of many instructional methods and strategies available to promote students’ reading comprehension and motivate students towards reading, promote their interest and encouragement in reading comprehension, develop their reading comprehension skills, and aid them in accomplishing reading comprehension tasks successfully. Numerous studies on learning strategies maintain that teaching strategies can facilitate students reading comprehension (Cohen, 1998; Chamot, 1999).

Reading is a decoding process in which students interpret texts in order to construct meaning. The ability to read and interpret reading texts is a major academic skill that ESL/EFL university students need to acquire (Levine, Ferenz & Reves, 2000). Thus, it is necessary to develop the reading skill of students at the tertiary level as effective reading is indispensable for academic achievement.

Reading is an essential skill for students and enables them to acquire knowledge and develop their academic areas. One of the vital goals of teaching reading is to train students to read efficiently and quickly so that they can access to information and meaning from the written material rapidly with a better understanding and enjoyment. Reading is defined by Smith (2007) as follows:

“Reading is a process of interpreting/understanding the text in terms of the questions that the reader formulates about the text”.

Sayed et al (2010) view comprehension as “the ability to go beyond the words, to understand the ideas conveyed in the entire text” (P, 376-380). Additionally, based on Snow (2002) defines reading comprehension as “the simultaneous ability used by a reader to construct and extract meaning through interaction and involvement with written materials” (P, 11). Reading comprehension involves figuring out intended meanings of given texts. There is an interaction between students and the texts which they are reading. In this case, they usually try to either construct or extract meanings. Comprehension is the goal of reading. Paris and Hamilton (2008) note,

“Without comprehension, reading words is reduced to imitating the sounds of language, repeating text is simply memorization and oral drill.”

Reading strategies can be taught to students, and when taught, strategies help improve student performance on tests of comprehension and recall (Carrell, 1985; Carrell, Pharis, & Liberto, 1989; Person & Fielding, 1991). They are worth teaching because these strategies can enhance students’ reading comprehension skills, help them perform well in comprehension tests and recall what they have read before. As stated by Oxford Advanced Students’ Dictionary (2009),

“A strategy is a plan which is intended to achieve a particular purpose.”

Strategies are like the tools which can help students to deal effectively with reading, so appropriate strategies should be employed at different stages of reading activities for different reading purposes. Teachers can inspire students to cultivate a reading habit. They are also responsible for enhancing students' reading comprehension skills. The knowledge and awareness of reading strategies in teachers allow them to assist students to carry out the assigned tasks related to reading comprehension. Therefore, they can stimulate their interest in reading comprehension.

Duke and Pearson (2005) highlight the importance of introducing strategies to students as follows:

"It is important to teach the strategies by naming the strategy and how it should be used."

There is a pressing need to equip students with strategies. Therefore, they need to learn what these strategies are and how these strategies can be utilized for their learning purposes. Therefore, teachers play a crucial role in students' reading skill development through reading strategies. A gradual release of responsibility for using reading strategies from teachers to students should be preceded by introducing these strategies to students. This can lead to students' autonomous learning.

Reading strategies can be defined as "plans for solving problems encountered in constructing meaning" (Duffy, 1993, p.232). Reading strategies can be regarded as ways to overcome difficulties in making sense of what students are reading. In addition, McNamara et al (2009) views that reading strategies are more useful and beneficial for students who show lack of knowledge in the domain of reading, as well as those with lower reading skill, these kinds of students are strongly needed to these strategies to achieve reading comprehension". Reading strategies are strongly recommended for students with the low level of English. They can benefit these students who have little knowledge of how to approach reading texts to some extent.

A well-planned comprehension strategy for instruction that involves directly teaching reading strategies is especially recommended for second or foreign language readers (Ediger, 2001). It is essential that teachers make efforts to develop comprehension strategies in students through direct teaching.

Caverly, Nicholson, and Radcliffe (2004) indicate that developmental students showed significant improvement in a teacher-made reading comprehension test and a standardized reading test, as well as a significant growth was found using cognitive, metacognitive, and affective strategies in their study. A reading comprehension test was developed to encourage students to utilize their cognitive, metacognitive, and affective strategies in their study which indicated a marked improvement in a tailor-made reading comprehension test.

According to Nuttall (2005), there are six strategies for reading that help the students read more quickly and effectively. They are previewing, predicting, skimming, scanning, guessing meaning from the context, and paraphrasing.

Texas Education Agency expressed the comprehension skills that are particularly important for comprehension. Examples of comprehension skills that can be taught and applied to all reading situations include summarizing, sequencing, making inference, comparing and contrasting, drawing conclusions, self-questioning, problem-solving, relating background knowledge, distinguishing between fact and opinion, Finding the main idea, important facts, and supporting details.

3. Research Methodology

Research procedure

250 first year correspondence trainees who attended ELT (English Language Teaching) classes participated in this research. First, the researchers taught them some reading passages using reading strategies so that teacher trainees could reflect the way they teach reading passages and they could be introduced some reading strategies. Then, trainees were provided with the concepts of Revised Bloom's Taxonomy. In order to check their awareness of reading strategies, a questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire was designed to answer the questions: (1) Are the trainees aware of reading strategies? (2) Did the teacher use reading comprehension questions which develop students' Higher Order Thinking Skills? (3) Why do some teachers fail to use reading strategies? The questionnaire was distributed to each ELT class. Then, trainees were provided an explanation of how to respond to the questionnaire and asked to express their own opinions freely. They were asked to fill in the questionnaire about the strategies they used in teaching reading passages to their students. The data were collected to elicit what teaching strategies they used. The collected data were analysed and found out which reading strategies are mainly used in their teaching. Finally, the evaluation on their teaching reading strategies was made so that they could have self-awareness that they had taught their student reading passages without using reading strategies and they could have a desire to utilize reading strategies in their teaching.

Subjects

In this present research, a total number of 250 trainees were chosen from two ELT (English Language Teaching) classes. All participants with diverse backgrounds were BEd correspondence students whose ages ranged from 20 to 60. They are either Junior Assistant Teachers or Senior Assistant Teachers who are teaching English to students in different grades (from KG to Tenth Grade). They responded to the given questionnaire related to background information such as age, gender and educational qualification. The research location is Yangon University of Education where researchers are working. The researching took place during the BEd correspondence intensive course in October, 2018.

Instrument

The instrument employed in this study was the questionnaire which can be divided into three parts; background information, questions for how often they used reading strategies in their teaching, the inclusion of critical thinking skills in reading comprehension and open-ended questions related why they did not make attempts to use reading strategies. The questionnaire was developed with the aim of investigating the trainees' awareness of reading comprehension strategies. They are also intended for finding out whether they received previous training or not, whether they are aware of reading strategies or not, what reading strategies they know and why they rarely use them in their reading classes.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected depending on the nature of questions. First data for teachers' personal background educational information were collected. 98.4% of trainees got BA (English) degree. Only 1.6% got their degree specializing in Law, Geology, Psychology and Philosophy. Their teaching English experience is more than five years. Only few trainees are tutors from educational colleges. Then numbers of teacher who used each reading comprehension skills were recorded. The data collected reveal the reading strategies they use in their teaching. Although there are 10 strategies in the questionnaire, they used only a few strategies. The following figure 1 shows the names of reading strategies and the number of trainees who use these strategies.

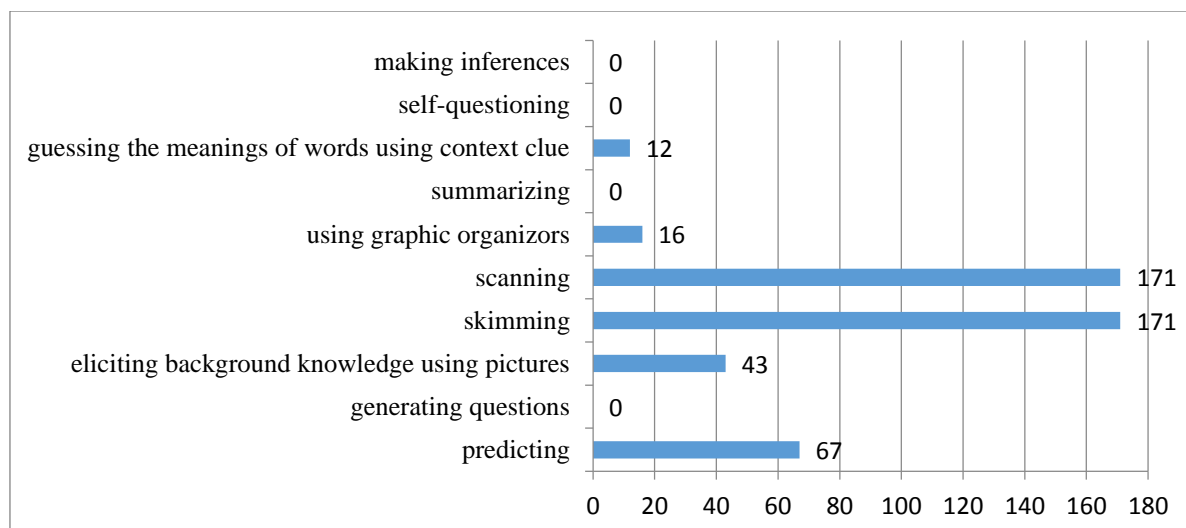


Figure 1 Number of trainees and reading strategies they used

Based on the data collected, the most reading strategies used by teachers are skimming and scanning. The result shows that only 4.8 % of the trainees (12 trainees) have been using most of the reading strategies (6 strategies out of ten strategies in the questionnaires) as they received initial teacher training. Some reading strategies which can develop critical thinking skill were not used. A few reading strategies – predicting, skimming and scanning are known to 26.8% of the trainees (67 trainees). 171 trainees (68.4 % of the trainees) reported that they have been aware of few reading strategies (only skimming and scanning). Although they expressed these strategies in open-ended questions, their answer to the open-ended questions showed that they were teaching their students by translating reading texts into the mother tongue and asked them to answer reading comprehension questions. Therefore, students who even got good marks in English in their matriculation examination may feel reluctant to read texts. As meanings of some unfamiliar words were explained before reading the texts, students could not guess the meaning of unknown words and did not what they read. Therefore, dictionaries are the last resolve whenever they came across unfamiliar words.

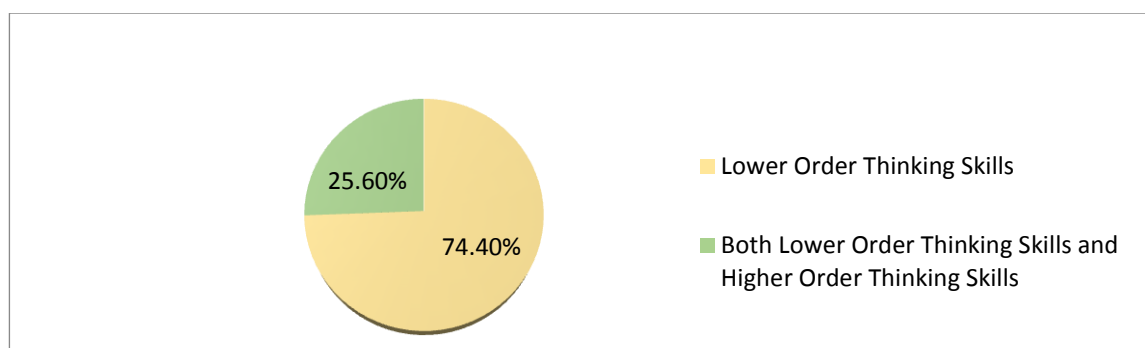


Figure 2 Number of trainees who utilize LOT Skills and HOT Skills

The above pie chart illustrates the number of teachers applying LOT skills or both LOT and HOT skills in their reading comprehension questions. 186 trainees used LOT skills in setting questions whereas only 64 of them set questions focusing on both LOT and HOT skills. The data collected show that most of the teachers did not include comprehension questions related to HOT skills.

4. Findings and Discussion

It was found that some trainees do not have much exposure of reading strategies whereas most of them could describe only two reading strategies: skimming and scanning. Apart from skimming and scanning, very few teachers know a few more reading strategies, namely guessing the meaning from the contexts, predicting and activating background knowledge. Some said they rarely used reading strategies in their reading classrooms. Only 12 teachers who aged between 20 and 30 received training on teaching methodology and English Proficiency. Hence, these teachers have been familiar with these strategies. They applied the knowledge to their actual teaching. Thus, they trained students to use these strategies in dealing with reading materials. That could help resolve difficulties in reading. Some are still reluctant to set up reading activities which allow students to utilize this knowledge in constructing meaning even though they know what reading strategies are. The awareness of reading strategies urges trainees to facilitate and shape students' reading comprehension and make them proficient readers. It is believed that this study helps make better changes in teaching reading by the use of reading strategies. It is suggested that the incorporation of reading strategies into setting higher order thinking questions should be part of teaching reading because developing higher order thinking skills is a necessity in the 21st century. It is suggested that teachers should be able to set HOT questions which help improve students' reading skills as well as cognitive development. These questions are a better alternative to traditional ways of teaching reading. Reading strategies can help them reduce the time taken in their actual reading. Some teachers stated that they failed to incorporate reading comprehension strategies into reading teaching due to large class size and teacher-student ratio and time constraints. Others stressed that some students may think that reading is difficult owing to lack of structural knowledge, limited vocabulary and lack of knowledge of reading strategies. The questionnaire used in this study elicits their previous experience of teaching reading comprehension and make them reflect how they deal with reading materials. This study investigates trainees' awareness of reading strategies which can be employed in developing reading comprehension skills.

5. Conclusion

The trainees' awareness of reading comprehension strategies was assessed by the use of questionnaire which consists of both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Reading can develop students' thinking skills and other language skills such as speaking, listening and writing. Hence, reading strategies should be taught to students so that they can read effectively. Lack of awareness of reading strategies makes students fail to engage with reading comprehension. Teachers should utilize HOT skills in order that students' cognitive developments can be improved. They need to be encouraged to analyse and evaluate the text and create in different ways. Therefore, the responsibility of teachers is to impart this knowledge to students and their colleagues. The inclusion of reading strategies in reading lessons helps reduce reading difficulties that students may encounter in reading. This research indicates that why students may face difficulties in comprehending any texts written in English. More research is required to find out the effectiveness of using reading comprehension strategies in teaching reading. This research enables trainees to be aware of effective teaching reading strategies and urges teachers and teacher trainers to adopt effective teaching practices regarding reading strategies for the betterment of language learning. More training on teaching methodology needs to be provided.

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