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Developing Reading Skills through Critical Reading Programme amongst Undergraduate EFL Students in Libya

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Abstract

This paper investigates the lack of critical reading skills amongst undergraduate students in Libya, and produces an innovative Critical Reading Programme which can be used to develop their skills. Relevant literature was reviewed so as to be aware of empirical studies carried out by others. This was to situate a contribution to the field. Thistlethwaite (1990) emphasises the importance of critical reading; Davis (1992) highlights a variety of learning and teaching methods; Yopp (2001) suggests a model for the process involved in reading comprehension. The sample was selected randomly from Sebha University and was divided equally into two groups (control and research). Students in the research group studied the CR Programme which was initially developed by the researchers, while the control group participants were taught reading comprehension using a teacher-centred approach and a grammar translation method, which is the dominant pedagogy in Libya. Qualitative and quantitative methods were adopted to analyse the collected data. The findings recognise that critical reading skills are of utmost importance for EFL students. They also reveal that critical reading have close links to EFL students’ competence in reading comprehension. The findings further suggest that the intervention study can help EFL students develop their reading comprehension abilities. The findings are expected to provide the educational policy makers with insights into perception and practices of teaching reading comprehension skills.

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Keywords: Critical reading; critical thinking; programme

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1. Introduction

The researcher argues the lack of critical reading skills amongst undergraduate students of English in Libya, and focuses on the development of an innovative CR Programme to remedy this problem. The paper further investigates the methods, techniques and activities which were used by Libyan teachers to improve students’ reading comprehension skills.

1.1. Aims of the Study and Research Questions

The main aim of this study stems from the following main research question: “Reading comprehension skills amongst undergraduate EFL students in Libya: the development and evaluation of the critical reading programme”. To achieve this ultimate aim, the study is endeavoured to fulfil the following objectives: (1) to highlight what reading skills are currently taught; (2) to discover the students’ perception of reading comprehension skills in EFL; and (3) to design a CR Programme that may improve the reading comprehension skills of higher education students. The following research sub-questions were developed to assist in achieving these aims:

- Do the current pedagogical models take critical reading and thinking skills into account?
- Do Libyan teachers introduce their students to critical reading and thinking skills?
- What are the Libyan students’ perception of critical reading and thinking skills?
- Can reading comprehension skills be improved through a CR Programme?

1.2. The Innovative CR Programme

Considering the preliminary data from the test administered to a sample of 10 students. Through reviewing the literature, I examined a number of extant programmes and methods for improving students’ reading skills, such as those of Flynn (1989); Wallace (2003); and McWhorter (2007). The researcher set out to design a new CR Programme following the Vygotskian socio-cultural theory of cognitive progress to design the procedure (Xiao, 2007).

2. Literature Review

Reading has become an important skill in EFL teaching. Early in the Twentieth Century, in his classic work, Thorndike (1917) explored and studied readers’ errors. He stated that readers should connect aggressively with everyday tasks that necessitate their constructing judgements about their responses. He also stated that people should think critically about “the reading of the text-book or reference as a mechanical, passive, undiscriminating task” (Thorndike, 1917:332). According to Skinner (1957), the act of language learning is the type of routine that is developed like any other behavioural pattern. Hence, it can be learned through constant practice. Alexander and Fox (2009:37) argued for dividing problems into small subsets/components instead of treating them as whole units; therefore, the “top-down perspective of the holistic Gestalt modality was an evident in the orientation to reading development.

Reading has been studied extensively within language research. Some of the studies on reading comprehension, for instance, Pressley, (2002) has focused specifically on critical reading and thinking skills. As asserted by Rivers (2001) and Wolters, Pintrich etal. (2005), critical readers have been identified as having the ability to switch with ease to the most appropriate reading skills, even particularly difficult ones, as demanded by the situation. Cognitive and metalinguistic skills are crucial to the development of effective active and interactive reading (Anderson, 2003; Grabe and Stoller, 2002). According to Anderson (2003:1), “reading is an active, fluent process which involves the reader and the reading material in building meaning”. Crystal (2007:209), likewise, points out that reading “crucially involves appreciating the sense of what is written: we read for meaning”. From the foregoing, one can conclude that, during the reading process, information from visual, semantic, conceptual and linguistic sources combines to make sense of sentence and phrases.
3. Methodology

Mixed methods were used; a qualitative method was adopted in this study as well as a quantitative method. The former helped understand and appreciate the participants’ subjective view while the latter helped quantity the data collected.

3.1. Data Collection Procedures

The first phase was the pre-intervention evaluation which was divided into two steps: a) pre-intervention measurement of skills; b) pre-students’ perception questionnaire which was handed to the students respectively before implementing the CR Programme. The next phase, which was named “during intervention strategy”, focuses on the students’ perception of the CR Programme during its implementation. The third phase was the post-intervention strategy where the same measurement of skills and the students’ perception questionnaire was administered to the sample groups again to find out whether the CR Programme proved fruitful. Finally, the teachers’ questionnaire was developed and administrated in order to investigate teachers’ views of critical reading and thinking skills.

3.2. Qualitative Data

The procedure for analysing participants’ views of the CR Programme obtained from the teachers’ questionnaire and to follow up the student teachers’ questionnaire and their responses of the CR Programme involved three main steps. Firstly, it transcribed and coded the data. Secondly, it systematically organised and thematically categorised the data, putting it in comparable groupings. Finally, it summarised the participants’ responses in short statements/phrases.

3.3. Quantitative Data

The quantitative analysis in this research was applied to the data obtained from the measurements of the skills and from the closed questions in the students’ questionnaire. In the first stage, the researcher coded all the data responses which came from the questionnaires and from the measurements into different SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) files according to the type of data. Both descriptive statistics (mean, scores, percentage and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (t-test) were used in this part. The quantified responses were coded using a Likert-type ranking scale.

3.4. The CR Programme Development

The programme consisted of 10 sessions conducted over a period of 10 weeks, two hours per week. Each session lasted two hours, and each had its learning objectives, reading materials and methodology. The first two sessions were introductory and were informed by the argument that students can read more effectively if they learn reading comprehension through critical reading skills and become critical readers. The first session contained three skills (distinguishing facts from opinions, identifying the author’s purpose and tone and, making inferences), while the other two skills (making evaluations and analysing the text) were introduced in session two. In these two sessions, the researcher briefly introduced these skills and defined these skills and their role in developing reading comprehension skills.

The sessions of the programme are structured as follows: (a) in the first part of the session the teacher gives instructions and provides the theoretical analysis of what is to be learnt. After this he/she demonstrates the chosen critical reading strategy or skill while the students are guided through the think-aloud procedures; (b) the second part focuses on collaborative group work. Here, the students, guided by the teacher, work together to support each other, hence enabling the whole group to acquire the critical reading skills identified by the teacher. (c) The third part of the session relates more to enabling students to work independently, with every student required to answer a short evaluation questionnaire.
4. Results / Data Analysis / Discussion

4.1. Pre-Intervention Strategy

A questionnaire was administrated and presented to the subjects who failed to answer properly. This was due to their incapacity to grip the meaning. Therefore, help from their teachers was inevitable. This resulted in valuable information to my research.

The measurement of skills were used to assess the students’ understanding of the critical reading and thinking skills before the implementation of the CR Programme. An independent sample t-test was used to assess the differences between both groups before the application of the CR Programme. The means and standard deviations of the two groups are summarised in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Control group</th>
<th>Research groups</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facts &amp; opinions</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>1.51</td>
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<td>Author purpose</td>
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<td>1.32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making Inferences</td>
<td>5.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making evaluation</td>
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<td>1.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysing the text</td>
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<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29.03</td>
<td>6.99</td>
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</table>

The mean score (29.47) and standard deviation (7.41) of the research group were similar to the mean score (29.03) and standard deviation (6.99) of the control group in all the skills. These findings suggest that the performances of the two groups were almost at the same level in reading.

4.2. During Intervention Strategy

The following sections will offer a more detailed interpretation based on qualitative data and statistical analysis from the quantitative data. The next section presents the data from the students’ perception during the sessions of the CR Programme. The researcher developed a critical reading programme which was used in the research. Thirty students completed it, most of who had not been exposed to timed assessments in reading comprehension before, and all commented that they believed it was beneficial.

4.2.1. Students’ Perception of Session three (Distinguishing Fact from Opinion)

Distinguishing facts from opinions is the first skill which was applied by the researcher in the CR Programme. The following table presents the frequency distribution of the students’ responses

| Frequency Distribution of the Students’ Responses on Reaction Evaluation. |
|-----------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
|                             | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 1 Clear Objectives.         | 43.33%| 53.33%| 3.33%| - | - |
| 2 Understanding            | 43.33%| 53.33%| 3.33%| - | - |
| 3 Ability                  | 43.33%| 46.67%| 10%| - | - |
| 4 Methodology              | 46.67%| 53.33%| - | - | - |
| 5 Group Work               | 56.67%| 33.33%| 6.67%| 3.33%| - |
| 6 Level of material        | 10% | 80% | 6.67%| 3.33%| - |
To sum up the information shown in table 2 and Figure 1 majority of the students opined that the clarity of instruction, selection of teaching materials, understanding ability of the learners, duration of the class and group activities contribute more in improving critical reading skills.

4.3. Post- Intervention Strategy

To find out whether the intervention study affected the reading comprehension skills among EFL student teachers in Libya, the frequencies with which the participants used reading comprehension skills in Libyan universities before and after the CR Programme were compared. This demonstrated the impact of the CR Programme on reading comprehension skills in EFL student teachers in Libya.

The measurement of skills was conducted to evaluate the effects of the CR Programme intervention on the participants’ critical reading and thinking ability.

Table 3 shows the measurement of skills results, which indicate the statistical differences between the control group who are taught by the traditional method and the research group in the measurement of the impact of the CR Programme on the students’ effectiveness in applying reading comprehension skills.
Table 3. Means and Standard Deviation Scores of Research and Control Group Post-Measurement

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Research group</th>
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<td>Facts &amp; opinions</td>
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<td>Making evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analysing the text</td>
<td>5.97</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29.40</td>
<td>7.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.4. Teachers’ Perception

From the investigation, it was noted that the Libyan teachers had not been formally taught or studied critical reading; they could make judgments in the responses because unconsciously they used the skills without labelling it as “critical reading”. In addition, many of the teachers had studied on graduate programmes in Britain and USA. It was important to survey this group because they are the teacher trainers and it was important to include their voices in the study since the information collected could help in constructing a viable critical reading programme. In short, teachers developed their students’ reading skills in line with their professional training and personal experience of teaching reading skills. The data also shows that teachers did not teach critical reading, although they think it is an important skill for students in higher education English departments. It is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education in Libya to inform the teachers of the need for critical reading and thinking in developing reading comprehension skills and that they need to provide more teaching of that, since that might remove some of the obstructions that affect the development of the student teachers’ reading comprehension skills.

5. Findings and conclusion

It can be noticed that the majority of students in the control group were uncertain of their knowledge of all skills in the measurement of these skills. The reason for that is that these students did not have any previous idea of these critical reading skills. These results suggest that participants were drawing on their L1 skills to support their English language reading knowledge. In other words, they did not have any practice in teaching these skills in their reading comprehension lessons. Therefore, they did not make much progress in the use of critical reading skills. This indicates that there was a relationship between the improvement of critical reading strategies and the amount of practice they had. Most students faced some problems in understanding these skills and they did not acquire any more positive attitude towards critical reading and thinking skills. However, the impact of the CR Programme on scores of participants in the research group shows that the majority of the participants improved their scores in the reading sub-skills. Only a few students had not improved their grades in the five dimensions in the research group (facts and opinions; author’s purpose and tone; making inferences; making evaluation and; analysing the text). This can be seen as a result of the weak ability of those students and not as a defect in the programme. The discussion with the regular teacher stated that these students had missed lessons that would have helped them gain knowledge in the four language skills. This can be related to their struggle with this type of work. As a whole, the programme improved the reading ability of good students specifically in these kinds of critical reading skills. At the same time, the programme did not raise the abilities of the outstanding students as it did not add anything for them and this is as a result of their abilities and individual differences. For the remaining categories, it is integrating that the five dimensions had a positive impact in raising their scores which is the target of the programme, as it aimed to improve the level of the vast majority of students, especially the mid-level students.

5.1. Recommendations of the Study

Based on the findings of the study, it can be recommended that there is a need for fieldworks, training sessions for teachers, seminars, workshops and special attention towards critical reading and thinking skills.
5.2. Suggestions for Further Studies

Based on my research findings, there are possibilities for future studies relating to teaching EFL to Libyan students. For instance:

- Further research is needed to investigate the effectiveness of critical reading and thinking skills on developing students’ listening and writing skills.
- Research into how EFL students elsewhere in Libyan Universities and other Arab countries can use various theories underpinning the CR Programme.
- An investigation of the factors which affect reading comprehension and critical reading and thinking skills in a foreign language reading context, compared with L1 reading contexts.

References