

The Effect of Pre-reading Strategies on Adult ESL Learners' Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

Reading comprehension plays a significant role in second language learning. Yet, it is still the most challenging skill to acquire for second language learners. Because reading is an active process, research indicated that readers need to apply different strategies before, during, and after reading. This study aimed to examine the effect of pre-reading strategies on reading comprehension of adult ESL learners. Fourteen adult ESL students participated in the study. Data were collected through pre and post reading comprehension tests during a period of three weeks. Students' performance was measured before they were introduced to the pre-reading strategies and was compared to their performance after learning and applying those strategies. Results showed that students' scores increased significantly after using pre-reading strategies.

Keywords: Adult ESL Learners, Pre-Reading Strategies, Pre and Post Reading Comprehension Assessments.

1. Introduction

“In a foreign language (FL) curriculum, reading has been, and is still, a critical source of input for the language learning” (Osa-Melero, 2012, p.300). Reading in a foreign/second language does not only enrich learners' vocabulary and grammar skills, but also opens their eyes and minds to the target language culture and enables them to gain a deeper understanding of the target language (Osa-Melero, 2012; Chen

& Intaraprasert, 2014). Naidu, Briewin & Embi (2013) state that most EFL students would read the whole text from the beginning to the end and still have difficulties comprehending the article. According to Osa-Melero (2012) and Naidu, Briewin, & Embi (2013), misunderstanding the message and inability to identify the main ideas and supporting details are expected problems for EFL/ESL readers to face. Previous research shows that in order to achieve reading comprehension, second/foreign language learners need to apply a variety of reading strategies (Iwai, 2008; Mihara, 2011; Osa-Melero, 2012; Bui & Fagan, 2013; Naidu, Briewin, & Embi, 2013; Abdelrahman & Bsharah, 2014; Chen & Intaraprasert, 2014). Researchers also indicate that readers need to interact with the text and become active readers in order to fully comprehend the reading. Peregoy & Boyle (2013) describe in details the reading strategies that the readers need to engage in before, during, and after the reading process to boost their comprehension. Aebersold & Field (1997) and Peregoy & Boyle (2013) highlight the purposes of applying pre-reading strategies and list three functions. First, pre-reading strategies help L2 readers to establish a purpose for reading a particular article or text. Second, they help L2 learners become more motivated and interested by building and activating their background knowledge, connecting exist information to the new one which is presented in the text, and making predictions. Third, those pre-reading strategies help L2 students get the gist of the article and identify the main idea of the text by skimming and scanning and looking at the headings, subheadings, tables, graphics, pictures, etc. (Aebersold & Field, 1997; Peregoy & Boyle 2013). In the same vein, Hedge (2000) points out that readers should be encouraged to activate their prior knowledge, review their experiences, look at pictures and questions, and predict from the title in order to become active readers, achieve reading comprehension, and eventually become successful readers.

1.1 Pre-reading Strategies

Pre-reading strategies are the techniques that the readers employ before they start reading and their main function is to prepare the readers for the reading process. There are many types of pre-reading strategies such as vocabulary pre-teaching, pair/group discussion, field trips and role plays, etc. However, this study focusses on the type of strategies that the students can implement individually and independently. Those strategies were also recommended by previous research. Therefore, the present study examines the effect of three pre-reading strategies; 1) activating and building background knowledge and prediction method, 2) skimming and scanning to get the main idea and supporting details, and 3) looking at the questions to get an idea of what to focus on when reading. Those strategies were selected to explore the effect of a combination of pre-reading strategies.

2. Literature Review

Previous studies have investigated the effect of different reading strategies in general and pre-reading strategies in particular on L2 reading comprehension showing that they were both beneficial. In a study by Naidu, Briewin, & Embi (2013), skimming for the main idea as a reading strategy was examined to determine whether it helps EFL learners with their reading comprehension or not. The study found that students' performance improved significantly after they applied the pre-reading strategy. Similarly, Abdelrahman & Bsharah (2014) examined the effect of speed reading strategies, skimming and scanning, on reading comprehension among EFL students in Jordan. The study suggested that the students who applied the speed pre-reading strategies scored significantly higher than those who did use those strategies. This study provides additional support for the significance of pre-reading strategies as an academic tool to help ESL students improve their reading comprehension. According to Osa-Melero (2012), there were another two pre-reading activities, guided cooperative and textbook-based individual activities, which were examined and

compared to explore their effect on reading comprehension of students of Spanish as a foreign language. This study found that students who used guided cooperative activities performed significantly higher than the students who worked individually and that the guided cooperative strategy helped the students to identify the main idea of the reading more than the supporting details. Bui & Fagan (2013) investigated another types of reading strategies; 1) integrated reading comprehension strategies such as story grammar, story maps, prior knowledge and prediction method, and word webs (IRCS) and, 2) integrated reading comprehension strategies plus multicultural literature and cooperative learning (IRCS Plus) on elementary students' reading performance. The study revealed that both groups who used the two strategies made a significant progress in their reading comprehension. Mihara (2011) examined the effect of vocabulary pre-teaching and comprehension question presentation on reading comprehension of EFL students and concluded that comprehension question presentation strategy was more effective than vocabulary pre-teaching. Based on that, we can see that vocabulary knowledge does not necessary improve the overall reading comprehension. Furthermore, students' levels seem to be an important variable to consider when investigating the pre-reading strategies as Chen & Intaraprasert (2014) reported that students with high reading levels were more aware of the importance of reading strategies than the low level students. This study suggested that teachers should encourage their low level students to use more reading strategies to improve their reading comprehension. In a similar study, Iwai (2008) investigated the perceptions of ESL Japanese students regarding their academic reading in English. The study found that ESL students can benefit from learning reading strategies and therefore should be encouraged to apply different reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, note taking, critical reading, and using dictionaries. From the above literature review, it can be clearly seen that reading strategies in general and pre-reading strategies more specifically helped ESL students to improve their reading comprehension.

3. Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. Do pre-reading strategies help adult ESL learners improve their reading comprehension?
2. To what extent do pre-reading strategies enhance adult ESL students' reading comprehension?

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants and Context

The study involved 14 adult English as a Second Language (ESL) learners who were studying at an institution of teaching English to speakers of other languages. The students were enrolled in different classes (reading and writing, listening and speaking) to improve their English language skills and were all planning to complete a degree in an American university once they graduate. Five of the ESL learners were females and nine were males. Furthermore, the participants' native languages were Arabic, Chinese, Finnish, Korean, and Vietnamese. Their ages were ranged from 17 to early 40s. Before they started to study in this ESL program, they were required to take a placement test and were placed in different proficiency levels; beginners, intermediate, and advanced. In addition, there were 4 students enrolled in the beginner classes, 6 in the intermediate classes, and 4 in the advanced classes.

Table 1: Participant's description

| Students' levels | Beginner | Intermediate | Advanced | Total | |
|------------------|----------|--------------|----------|--------|------------|
| | 4 | 6 | 4 | 14 | |
| L1 | Arabic | Chinese | Finnish | Korean | Vietnamese |
| | 8 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Gender | Female | Male | | | |
| | 5 | 9 | | | |

4.2. Research Design

In order to investigate whether there is an effect of pre-reading strategies on adult ESL reading comprehension or not, a quasi-experimental study was conducted and focused on two variables: pre-reading strategies and reading comprehension of adult ESL learners.

4.3. Instrument

The data were collected from pre- and post- tests. The participants were divided into three groups according to their proficiency levels; beginners, intermediate, and advanced. Nine reading passages with their multiple-choice comprehension questions were used in this study. In order to select the reading passages, the researcher met with the three teachers who were teaching those different levels to discuss what type of articles fit their students' levels. Then, the researcher met with each group three times during three weeks. For the first meeting, each group was given an article which was suitable for their levels and each member was given half an hour to read and answer the questions individually. The time limit was also discussed with the teachers based on how long the students would usually spend on in-class reading. Additionally, the students were not allowed to use their cell phones or talk to each other. The purpose was to measure their comprehension without translating vocabulary or getting help from other students. For the second meeting, the researcher taught each group the pre-reading strategies (Activating and building background knowledge, skimming and scanning, reading the questions) for half an hour. For the last meeting, each student was given another article and half an hour to read and answer the questions. Moreover, the students were asked to spend the first five minutes applying the pre-reading strategies and then read and answer the comprehension questions during the rest of the time. The time for applying the pre-reading strategies was set to make sure that the students will have enough time to read and answer the questions and that they do not spend much time on those

strategies. It is also worth noting that all participants were told that those three readings are part of their class activities to guarantee authentic performance. In other words, if the students were aware that this was a part of a research, they were more likely to be less motivated to do the tasks. Therefore, all students were asked to do the readings as a class requirement.

5. Results and Discussion

The study scope was to examine the effect of the pre-reading strategies on reading comprehension skills of adult ESL learners. The data were analyzed quantitatively using SPSS application. Before analyzing the data, however, the sample in this study was tested confirming that it was normally distributed. Then, T-test was run to compare the means of student's scores before and after applying the pre-reading strategies.

Table 2: The mean scores for the pre and post-reading comprehension tests

| | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|--|-------|----|----------------|-----------------|
| Student's scores before pre-reading strategies | 58.31 | 14 | 16.951 | 04.530 |
| Student's scores after pre-reading strategies | 75.08 | 14 | 14.468 | 03.867 |

Table 2 shows that the mean score in the pre-test was (M=58.31), whereas the mean score in the post-test was (M=75.08). Accordingly, it can be seen that students' performance improved after applying the pre-reading strategies. The study also found that there was a significant difference between students' scores before and after carrying out the pre-reading strategies ($P < .00$) suggesting that students' performance in the post reading comprehension test was significantly higher than their performance in the pre-test. According to the previous research (Iwai, 2008; Mihara,

2011; Osa-Melero, 2012; Bui & Fagan, 2013; Naidu, Briewin, & Embi, 2013; Abdelrahman & Bsharah, 2014; Chen & Intaraprasert, 2014), pre-reading strategies were highly invaluable for ESL learners in terms of reading comprehension skills. The results of this study came with no surprise confirming that pre-reading strategies improved L2 students' reading comprehension. Therefore, the results above provide substantial support for the effectiveness of the pre-reading strategies. Unlike other studies that focused on students of specific proficiency levels and/or language backgrounds (Mihara, 2011; Bui & Fagan, 2013; Abdelrahman & Bsharah, 2014), this study have looked at students with different proficiency levels; beginners, intermediate, and advanced and a variety of language backgrounds; Arabic, Chinese, Finnish, Korean, and Vietnamese. Interestingly, we found that pre-reading strategies were beneficial for all students despite their proficiency levels and/or L1 backgrounds.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated whether or not there is an effect of pre-reading strategies on adult ESL students' comprehension. The findings of previous research (Iwai, 2008; Mihara, 2011; Osa-Melero, 2012; Bui & Fagan, 2013; Naidu, Briewin, & Embi, 2013; Abdelrahman & Bsharah, 2014; Chen & Intaraprasert, 2014) indicated that pre-reading strategies helped ESL learners to improve their reading comprehension. This study confirms the results of previous studies showing that students' scores increased significantly after using pre-reading strategies. The study suggested that pre-reading strategies helped adult ESL learners with their reading comprehension. The study also found the pre-reading strategies were helpful for students with different proficiency levels and L1 backgrounds. However, there are two limitations to this study that must be acknowledged; the sample size was small (14 students), and there was no delayed post-test to measure the delayed effect of pre-reading strategies on students' performance over time.

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