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Teaching Reading Comprehension in Libyan Preparatory School

Zenb Abubaker Ibrahim
Faculty of Major Language Studies,
Islamic Science University of Malaysia, Nilai, Malaysia
hediaaa@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

In Libya, English is taught as a foreign language and it has been the focus of attention for several years. Many researchers have investigated and is still investigating the most effective approach/s for teaching English as a foreign language. Libyan students need to learn the four skills of learning English especially reading. In this paper, the extent of the successes and failures of an English Language teaching approach namely communicative approach specifically in teaching reading comprehension, will be explored. This study attempts to investigate the teachers' perceptions in teaching reading comprehension in the preparatory level and the teachers' and students' adaptation to this innovative method of learning the language. This paper is expected to give some insights on the past studies that are related to teaching reading comprehension skills at Libyan preparatory school and also reviews of some works that examine teaching reading comprehension skill in Libyan contexts.

Keywords: EFL, teaching reading comprehension, preparatory school, Communicative approach

Introduction

Reading is considered to be a very important channel for getting the required exposure of the target language and also helps the foreign language learners in understanding the intricacies and nuances of the target language. Reading comprehension skill "is a very important channel for getting the required exposure of the target language. It helps foreign/second language learners to understand the intricacies and nuances of the target language" (Pathan & Al-Dersi, 2013). Reading is very important for the Libyan students at preparatory level because they will continue studying English until the university level. Therefore, the teaching of reading must be well presented by their teachers. Thus a good preparation for the reading material is necessary, especially for the teacher, because with good preparation, the students can understand the reading materials more easily. Teaching reading can be a difficult task as it is often difficult to know how to improve student's skills.

Although recently the Libyan English language teachers tried to use the new methods of teaching such as communicative learning approach in teaching reading comprehension texts, still they have many difficulties to employ the approach properly and to motivate students to participate in the learning and teaching process. Changing the methods of teaching as well as curriculum innovation is beyond merely introducing and implementing such innovations as it involves changing the cultures of teachers, classrooms, and schools (Shakedi, 2006, P.719). Recently, the Libyan English language teachers attempt to employ new approaches and curriculum in their teaching programs; however, their preconceptions about traditional systems of teaching and their faith in its efficiency that has cultural background prevent them from applying the communicative methods appropriately. The researcher distributed a

questionnaire to one hundred Libyan teachers to identify their perceptions on the methods of teaching reading comprehension in Libyan preparatory school. The question for this study: Q1. What are teachers' perception on the methods of teaching reading comprehension in Libyan preparatory school?

EFL in Libya

Najeeb (2013) investigates the system of EFL education in Libya. She states that the ancient system of teaching English in Libya was heavily based on grammar-translation method. The curriculum contained a series of five books and their related volumes. It mostly emphasized on learning vocabulary through readings and translation. " However, the new curriculum entitled 'English for Libya' emphasized on teaching English through learning basic sentence patterns rather than vocabulary" (Najeeb, 2013:1249). After introducing this new syllabus in 1990s, the teaching method changed from the traditional grammar-translation method to the Communicative Language Teaching method. This method facilitates the learning of English language and assists students to use English language in their interactions.

Nevertheless, the new movement from conventional methods of teaching English to the communicative teacher-learner approach brought many challenges to the education system, as some teachers still follow the grammar-translation method. "The teachers use Arabic (the first language) to explain grammar and the meaning of EFL texts, and the students are asked to translate English sentences to Arabic or vice versa" (Najeeb, 2013:1249). In fact, teachers are not fully trained to teach the new curriculum by employing communicative teacher-learner approach. On the other side, the absence of technology has negative impact on teaching the target language. Teachers are not familiar with the new technological tools of teaching such as projectors.

Basic Education in Libya (Primary and Preparatory)

The first nine years of education (six years of primary school and three years of preparatory school) are compulsory to all students aged 6-15. The primary education target demonstrated that students at this stage have to learn the standard Arabic and improve their linguistic ability. In addition, the English language had been introduced at level three (students at age 9) to expose students to English at an early age. This stage of education was divided into four years and two years period with assessments at the end of fourth grade and sixth grade. Students study Arabic language, Koranic studies, Jamahiriya society, mathematics, sciences, history, geography, arts, music and physical education. The preparatory stage begins at the age of 12 and continues for three years. During this period, students study Arabic language, Koranic studies, English language, history, geography, sociology, mathematics, and sciences. At this stage, English language teachers use the 'English for Libya' series of textbooks and mainly use grammar translation method with a focus on the basic rules of English language grammar such as forming questions and using present tense.

The reading task was mainly about the Libyan culture and history. Upon completing the nine years of basic education, students get the Basic Education Certificate. Students who failed to complete the full nine years of the basic level have the opportunity to enroll in vocational programs of 1-3 years in length. According to Hamed (2011) "English was taught as a compulsory subject at all grades". Students at all grades of basic education need to pass the English exams in each year of school. "They cannot move to the next grade unless they have passed their English language exams successfully. Therefore, if they fail to pass the English language they remain at the same grade" (Warayte, 2011). Aldabbus (2008) also stated teaching method in the Libyan basic education schools problematic as she explains a mechanical process of learning which is aimed solely at passing exams and moving onto the

next stage; this focuses on memorization and repetition, and students are both unmotivated and reluctant to participate. Based on the above-mentioned arguments, English plays a very crucial role in the Libyan education system as it is a compulsory subject to be passed in each education level

Reading Comprehension Skill

The success of reading is determined by whether the reader can grasp the intended meaning. Reading is not only the activity of pronouncing the printed materials, or following each line of written pages carefully or quickly. Reading is more than that. Reading is complex activities, such as looking, thinking, and understanding. Howell, Fox, and Morehead, (1993:182) defines reading comprehension as an interactive process through which the reader uses code, context analysis, prior knowledge, vocabulary, and language, along with executive-control strategies, to understand text. The similar idea of the meaning of reading comprehension is stated by Howell, et al. (1993:183).

They say that reading comprehension is the act of combining information in passages with prior knowledge in order to construct meaning. Learners in Reading comprehension skill. The main purpose for reading is to comprehend the ideas in the material. Without comprehension, reading would be empty and meaningless

Libyan English Language Learners and Reading Comprehension Skill

Learning a second or foreign language is a challenging task that requires considerable efforts to handle over, thus there is always a need to modify and look beyond the different methods through continuous research to make the process of learning much practical and enjoyable. In this case, the teaching methods and approaches implemented by foreign language teachers, the material selected for teaching and learning the language skills and various motivational and learning strategies are fundamental role in the success or failure of foreign language teaching and learning. The Libyan education system encounters many challenges in preparing suitable environment and appropriate resources and materials for the effective teaching and learning of English as a foreign language.

Although, several efforts were done by the government and educational system to provide all the required resources that needed to offer an effective teaching and learning process, it is reported that implementations at the school level often leads to failure due to various reasons. This is reported to be resulted from unsatisfactory and poor teaching of English as a foreign language, particularly at the school level which affects the performance of English as foreign language learners who opt for university education whom are found weak in their English language proficiency.

During the era from 1986 to mid-1990s, foreign language teachers including English language teachers were banned off from schools and universities. According to Elabber (2011), this was due to the political forces which deeply influenced the educational system at that time, which in turn meant the teachers of English were made jobless or otherwise had to teach other subjects such as history and geography” (p:34). This act considers as the main problem that affect on the level of English proficiency in Libya and made Libyan learners differ from other learners to learn not only reading comprehension by also English language. Libyan students who take English language as a compulsory course are anecdotally reported that they regard reading comprehension as the most problematic and extremely boring activity which leads them to develop negative attitude towards the learning of English language in general. Some of the Libyan students have strong negative attitudes towards reading to the extent that they believe that reading comprehension skill should not be taught at all in their course. This negative attitude of the English as a foreign language often

becomes the main cause of their failure in mastering foreign language skills. Therefore, the present study tries to explore the factors underlying such negative attitudes of the Libyan English as a foreign language in preparatory level, focusing on the major problems believed to face students in the process of reading, and the role of teachers and teaching methods in teaching reading comprehension skill in overcoming these problems.

Besides the importance of selecting proper texts for reading skill in English as a foreign language, the methods that are implemented by teachers in order to teach the material and deliver the knowledge are very important. In the Libyan context, most teachers rely on Grammar-translation method for teaching reading comprehension, English language students are reported to find it boring and inappropriate; therefore, they lose their interest and motivation in learning English language (Orafi, 2008). According to Orafi (2008), the two stages of teaching reading comprehension in the Libyan context are teaching new words of the passage by translating them into Arabic language, and teaching grammatical structure included in the text. In Grammar-translation method, teachers play the dominant role in the classroom and consequently, students are given a passive role in language learning process.

Although recently the Libyan English language teachers tried to use communicative learning approach in teaching reading comprehension texts, still they have many difficulties to employ the approach properly and to motivate students to participate in the learning and teaching process. Changing the methods of teaching as well as curriculum innovation is beyond merely introducing and implementing such innovations as it involves changing the cultures of teachers, classrooms, and schools (Shakedi, 2006, P.719). Recently, the Libyan English language teachers attempt to employ new approaches and curriculum in their teaching programs; however, their preconceptions about traditional systems of teaching and their faith in its efficiency that has cultural background prevent them from applying the communicative methods appropriately.

Related Studies to Reading Comprehension Skill

Mustafa and Zamzam (2013) conducted a survey and analyzed major problem faced by the Libyan EFL learners in Reading comprehension skill. They stated that reading comprehension skill plays a significant role in any foreign language teaching and learning processes. However, Libyan EFL learners have many difficulties in reading comprehension skill which leads to negative attitude towards this important skill. In order to overcome this problem, they analyzed the role of short-stories, as remedial material in facilitating the reading comprehension process. They analyzed the collected data and found out that 75% of the participants were unsuccessful in reading comprehension skill and their failure was due to insufficient training and ill-preparation in reading from their school level as well as inadequate essential vocabulary. Furthermore, 80% of the participants had difficulties with pronunciation while reading. 75% of the participants were unable to comprehend and express the main ideas of the passages and to deliver the meaning of the readings.

Mustafa and Zamzam (2013) assert that short-stories, as the “product of creative writers, who have better command over language, are rich not only in linguistic aspects but also in motivational and other required pedagogical aspects”

In fact, short stories make the reading comprehension classes more interesting and they motivate the learners to master the language by integrating reading comprehension skill with other main language skills in effective and innovative ways.

In addition, another study has conducted by Ramlee, and Nor Rizan (2010) argued that the difficulty of planning a reading instructional method is affected by various complex and complicated factors such as “linguistic, cognitive and socio-cultural variables involved in reading comprehension in general and in English as a foreign language (EFL) reading in

particular” (Zoghi et al., 2010, P.67-68). However, strategic reading is an influential method in order to facilitate the process of reading comprehension for EFL learners by overcoming “comprehension breakdowns at both the word and sentence levels” (Zoghi et al., 2010, P. 68). Strategic reading is commonly combined with cooperative learning which means that language learners work in small groups and share their knowledge with their group mates. Such combination prepares the ground for the learners to “interact, help one another increase their understanding, and overcome their comprehension problems of the text” (Zoghi et al., 2010, P.68). Furthermore, this cooperative and team work reading will motivate students to develop their reading competence.

However, Zoghi et al. (2010) believe that the reason that the majority of EFL learners at tertiary level are ill-prepared in terms of their EFL reading comprehension skill is due to the conventional language teaching approaches such as Grammar-translation method. They offered a modified collaborative strategic reading (MCSR) which is an instructional practice in which “cooperative learning and reading comprehension strategies combine with each other” (Zoghi et al., 2010, P.71). Within their survey they proved that their offered modified collaborative strategic reading method is an effective, feasible, and responsive instructional technique at the tertiary level for EFL learners and the participants of the survey have a positive attitude towards the MCSR approach. As a conclusion, Zoghi et al. (2010) stated that English as foreign language learners strongly prefer communicative and collaborative methods of instruction as well as group activities rather than traditional learning approaches.

Moreover, Rahman and Jameel (2011) have conducted a study entitled “*Textual Reading Comprehension among the EFL Learners*”. It emphasize on increasing the level of reading comprehension skills among EFL learners within an EFL context by the application of very new method of textual reading. Through textual reading, they attempted to focus on readers and their point of view in order to “generate self-perception and self-motivation” Rahman and Jameel, (2011) within the readers rather than focusing on the text and its intention (P.1404). They assert that implementation of excessive reading plays a very significant role in improving reader’s literacy. Thus, textual or article reading emerges as a resource to promote reader’s self-perception of the reading (Krashen, 1993; Jiménez Jiménez, 2004, cited in Rahman & Jameel, 2011, P.1405). Furthermore, Rahman and Jameel (2011) believe that textual readings are very crucial in promoting students’ comprehension as well as their critical and met cognitive thinking. They considered four phases for designing textual reading namely (a) Contextual Phase (b) Pre-textual Phase (c) Textual Phase (d) Post Textual Phase.

Masoud Aboulgasim Ghuma (2011) in his Doctoral thesis “The transferability of reading strategies between L1 (Arabic) and L2” studies the Libyan EFL learners ability to transfer reading strategies from the first language (Arabic) to the foreign language (English) and vice versa at university level. In Libya, where English is taught as a foreign language, text books are generally the only medium for practicing reading in the target language, English. As every language has its particular “linguistic features, phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic” (Ghuma, 2011, P.1). language learning researchers have developed several kinds of analysis and comparison between such linguistic components in the first language L1 and in the target language L2. However, examining and comparing reading approaches in two languages according to the textbooks which is a matter of finding and conveying of learning is very important issue needs to be addressed. Ghuma’s (2011) survey proved that reading strategies have been transferred between L1 (Arabic) and L2 (English) (Ghuma, 2011, P.214). This result will be helpful for authorities and writers who prepare textbooks and curriculum and will direct them to offer the most appropriate material in the reading syllabus by considering the relationship between Arabic textbooks and English as foreign language textbooks.

Elmadwi and Shepherd (2014) conducted a critical Study of the Problems faced by the Libyan students in reading and comprehension of English as a foreign language. This study was conducted with the participation of the students in the English Department at the University of Zawia, Libya. This study is designed to explore the reading strategy most often used among Libyan university students, to show how male and females use learning strategies when they face a text in English, and also to show the relationship between the learners' strategies use and their EFL proficiency. The results of the study show that the most frequently reading strategies used was meta-cognitive strategies, there is a statistically differences between male and female learners in their use of language learning strategies. Furthermore, the results also show differences between students' level of proficiency and their use of language learning strategies.

According to the past studies, the effect of the traditional methods such as GTM and ALM consider as one of the problems that face Libyan teachers to adapt the new methods to teach reading comprehension. Also Libyan teachers in the classroom depend on Arabic language to discuss English lessons

The previous studies concern the problems that face Libyan students at the university level in reading such as transferring reading strategies from Arabic language to English language (Ghuma, 2011), and the problems that face Libyan students in reading comprehension in the university level (Elmadwi & Shepherd 2014). At the same time, this paper tries to identify the methods that Libyan teachers apply to teach reading comprehension at the preparatory level. Libyan teachers tried to apply another method (communicative language teaching approach) that comes with the new English curriculum in 2000 the Libyan preparatory and secondary school. The other studies concerns with teaching English in secondary schools and university level but this study concerns with preparatory school. The purpose of this study is to identify the methods of teaching reading comprehension in Libyan preparatory school.

Communicative Approach

“Communicative Approach in language learning is an approach that is used in learning the second language or foreign language that emphasizes on the improvement of communicative ability”, that is ”the ability of applying the language principle in order to produce grammatical sentences and understand ’when, where, and to whom’ the sentences used” (Richard, 1997). Communicative method focuses on language as a medium of communication. It recognizes that communication has a social purpose – learner which has something to say or find out .

According to Zare (2012), language learning approaches play a significant role in the procedure of language learning. Zare (2012) analyzes a synthesis of previous research results on language learning strategies among EFL/ESL learners and emphasizes on the prominence of these strategies in the acquisition of the second/foreign language. He states that there was a deliberate change from teacher-centered approaches to learner-centered or communicative approaches during the last decade. Therefore, students “received more attention and a more prominent place in research studies on second/foreign language learning, so did the engaged strategies and techniques they employed to learn the language and overcome its barriers” (Zare, 2012, P.162). However, there are various teaching strategies that can be employed for teaching and learning the language such as communicative approach, task-based approach. Zare (2012) argues that there are many factors that affect choosing the most appropriate strategy for teaching the target language such as education setting, level of students, teacher's knowledge and belief.

Students and Teacher's Roles in the CLT Classroom in an EFL Context

Teachers play significant role in application of CLT approach. Successful application of communicative language teaching is significantly influenced by teachers as a main part for controlling this method. Evidently, teachers with high fluency and oral ability can motivate students and improve their interests to be autonomous learners and to participate in communicative activities. Therefore, effective employment of communicative learning method requires proficient teachers with high oral ability. In the Libyan context, English as a foreign language lacks exposure outside the classrooms; the major focus is directed towards the teacher's role as a knowledge provider. In the communicative learning approach which is based on learner-centered methods and practices, the role and responsibilities of teachers are different from traditional approaches.

A Communicative Approach to the Teaching of Reading

P.A. Ezema (2012) in the communicative approach to the teaching of reading, the duty of the teacher is to transpose the world of a reading text into a form, which is recognizable to the students and relevant to their real life experience. What is more important is to make students feel that communication takes place during a reading activity. The purpose of this communication is not to arrive at a 'right' answer to any question on the text read but to give a hearing to a variety of different answers to such a question. This feeling will be engendered in students if a teacher is tolerant of the students' different views on what they have read. As a way of motivating his students, a teacher should avoid negative and damaging comments on their expressed views on a text. One other way of enhancing the communicative approach to reading is by exposing students to a variety of reading sources. Students should not be limited to the prescribed textbooks only for their reading activities. The contents of these textbooks cannot equip them adequately for their reading needs in their after-school life. Limiting the students to only the textbooks will lead them to feel that reading is unnatural and artificial and is not relevant to their needs.

Communicative Approach in the Libyan EFL Context

Libyan students typically believe that their role in the classroom is to be the receiver of the teachers' knowledge and information. They sit quietly and memorize the knowledge conveyed by the teacher. In other words, Libyan teachers and students of English as a foreign language are highly influenced by the silent culture of learning (Elaper, 2009). According to Imssalem (2001:14), the problem of this kind of language teaching lies in approaches of teaching, not methods as "methods are fixed teaching systems whereas approaches form the theory and leave the teaching system to the creativity and innovation of the teacher". Traditional approaches do not provide enough guidance to the Libyan English language teachers. However, applying new approaches such as communicative approach is very challenging and demanding in Libya.

Challenges Encountered in Implementation of CLT in Libya

Despite the popularity and acclaim of the communicative language teaching, not all countries have embraced and successfully implemented it. The question here is not the effectiveness of the approach itself but whether existing factors in these countries would have any substantial implementation of the approach, or they are potentially making assessment of its success inconclusive. There have been many attempts made by researchers to study about these constraints. In different third world countries, these inherent constraints against Communicative Language Teaching are believed to be followed. Libya is one of these

countries that has marked constraints to the implementation of the communicative approach in classrooms. There are existing factors that have in one way or another, led to the constraints against the communicative approach (Embark, 2011; Orafi & Borg, 2009).

Since teaching English is structured, there is no need to consider the student's needs and interests, which according to Nunan, (2001) is important in the communicative approach, further deterring its implementation because customization of learning is not done. Learning English in Libya is completely based on teacher-centered method and students usually do not have any opportunity to control their own learning (Shihiba, 2011; Orafi & Borg, 2009). There is also very little chance for Libyan students to exercise such since they need to abide by the structure, they have little or no opportunity to speak another language in society they live in close circuit groups and are very family focused.

They also lack the necessary motivation because they have yet to fully realize the utter importance learning language (Libya Education, N. D.) given that there is very limited opportunity to speak or use other languages since Libyans have remained closely knit people and their political history is such that it left no room in Libya except for Libyans. The number of students per class may also be a deterrent to the communicative approach where interaction is highly necessary and may be impossible with such large classes and given the limited amount of time. "The Libyan education system is suffering from a shortage of qualified English teachers at present. Learners are taught collectively in large classes and they are experiencing a lack of English language interaction in the classroom" (Sawani, 2009:31). In the Libyan context, the previous studies revealed that the effect of Grammar Translation Method is considered the main problem that prevent the teachers to adapt CLT in their way of teaching English Language.

Conclusion

The paper has offered an overall view about the related studies that concerns with the methods of teaching English and particularly reading comprehension. Also it studies communicative approach in teaching English and reading comprehension skill at the context of Libyan preparatory schools. It sheds light on the importance of reading comprehension skill in foreign language teaching and learning process. Then communicative approach of teaching was scrutinized as it gives the chance to the learners to learn reading skill actively and motivate them to learn English as a foreign language more willingly. Libyan teachers tried to implement the new methods of teaching English such as communicative language teaching but still their faith by the success of the old methods prevent them. Finlay, the implementation of the communicative approach in Libyan context was analyzed in order to give more insights about the difficulties and problems in its proper implementation. With the hope of solving the existing problems in implementing communicative approach properly in the Libyan preparatory schools.

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