The Development of Young Learners’ Reading Comprehension Skills

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Introduction

Based on my experience as a student and as a student teacher of English in Emirati government schools, I have found that the teaching of reading skills is often overlooked in schools. Part of my study in the Bachelor of Education program at the Higher Colleges of Technology was to be able to identify issues and concerns in the field of teaching English in UAE schools during my Teaching Practice placements. I have noted a great variety in the ways in which learners learn to read in English, and in their success at doing it. Students are rarely encouraged to read, and seldom have opportunities to read. A student can’t really know how successful a reader he/she is because of the lack of practice, lack of attention from the teacher, and the use of inappropriate strategies in the teaching of reading.

Because of these observations, I decided to conduct a study into the teaching of reading in a primary school for girls located in Ras Al Khaimah in the United Arab Emirates. The study was conducted over the sixteen weeks of my final year Teaching Practice and Internship. In particular, I was interested in investigating the use of the K-W-L reading comprehension strategy (What you know; What you want to know; What you learnt) that was first initiated by Donna Ogle (1986).

Research Questions

From the bottom-up reading model, which is widely used to teach reading in Emirati schools, to the top-down model, and more recently to interactive models, researchers argue about which reading model best aids the process of teaching reading comprehension. It is my belief that students learn best when they bring their background knowledge to the text they are reading. A continuous focus only on students’ syntactic understanding cannot create good readers, who can interact, interpret, and effectively comprehend the meaning of a text.

As a student teacher, I wanted to investigate a specific aspect of the teaching of reading: how reading comprehension skills are taught, and to what extent using the K-W-L strategy can improve this skill. The following questions highlight my area of concern:

- What reading comprehension models are used in this school?
- How effective are these models in developing and supporting children’s reading comprehension skills?
- Could the use of a new strategy affect students’ reading comprehension skills and their General attitude toward learning?

Literature Review

Most of what a student might know about a text, after reading it, is called reading comprehension (Ekwall & Shanker, 1993). There are three models that describe the process of comprehending a text, and they are the bottom-up, top-down, and interactive models. From these three models, researchers such as Wallace (1992), Vacca & Vacca
(2005), Ogle (1986), and others have argued about which reading model best explains the process of reading comprehension and which can develop successful readers.

**The Bottom-up Model**

Bottom-up processing takes the form of text-based decoding, in which the starting point is the text itself. The reader tends to understand each word in the text and then, gradually, s/he builds up an interpretation of the whole. However, this model is an incomplete method of teaching reading comprehension, and it can’t stand alone. This view is not shared by Wallace (1992), however, who argues that this model should indeed be used in teaching second language learners, because it offers them the probability to know the linguistic and structural part of the English language. Other theorists, for example Ekwall & Shanker (1993), disagree, saying that it is possible to understand every word of a text - but still not know what it is about. The reader must "have a prior sense of what could be meaningful in the text" (Ekwall & Shanker, 1993, p. 3), otherwise the reader won't be motivated enough to become a good reader (Yatvin, p. 4).

Knowing the meaning of each individual word in the text increases students' vocabulary, but does not necessarily improve their comprehension skill. Therefore using only this model with young learners is not very effective.

**The Top-down Model**

The top-down processing model of reading, where the starting point is within the mind of the reader, is reader driven. The reader holds his own information and background knowledge, which he brings with him when he reads a text. An important notion in this model is "Schemata". The schema or plural, schemata, according to Cook (2001), is "the background knowledge on which the interpretation of a text depends" (Cook, 2001 p. 89). This theory plays an important part in the comprehension process, as Coles (1998) asserts that the schema theory does not deny that there is a meaning in the text the reader interprets with; however, he believes that the reader can make more sense of the same text, by bringing new meaning to it and by depending on his prior knowledge.

Taken as a whole, the top-down model is the opposite of the bottom-up model, in the way the reader interprets the text. This leads us to ask, how do the top-down processing and the bottom-up processing relate to each other? How can these two models, together, create better readers?

**The Interactive Model**

The need for combining the two models arose since "neither the bottom-up nor the top-down models of reading process totally account for what occurs during the reading process" (Zakaluke, p. 6). The interactive model of reading came to be the new method for teaching comprehension. This model has been described by many theorists as one of the most successful models of reading that helps the student to decode and comprehend the meaning of a text (Coles, 1998). For tackling some texts that require a high level of meaning prediction, the top-down model may be used, while in situations where few ideas are presented, the bottom-up tends to be used more (Paran, n.d.). Overall, both are required, because even a high level student who can predict the
meaning easily from a word or a number of phrases, needs to bring his syntactic and semantic knowledge "together simultaneously to facilitate word identification" (Zakaluke, n.d.).

In short, part of this model is to be able to make sensible guesses as to what is coming next in a context, and the other part is to do with understanding the structure of the text and the meaning of the words. Both are essential in teaching reading in general, and in teaching comprehension specifically.

**The K-W-L Reading Comprehension Strategy**

Growing out of the belief that reader's prior knowledge is important, Donna Ogle (1986) developed the K-W-L reading strategy (What you know; What you want to know; What you learnt) which helps students to develop tactical ways to learn from different materials through asking and accessing different information (Ruddell, 1999). The K-W-L strategy is an instructional reading strategy that is based on moving from one stage to another. In the K stage: What I know, students access their background knowledge to the text they are reading by listing what they already know about a specific topic. Then in the W stage: What I want to know, students list what they want to know about the same topic, and finally, they summarize what they have learnt in the L stage: What I've learnt (Peregoy & Boyle, 2001).

Ogle (1986), Peregoy and Boyle (2001), Vacca & Vacca (2005), and Ruddell (1999) believe that the K-W-L strategy is useful in developing students' reading comprehension skills. Sampson (2002) acknowledges that this strategy facilitates engagement and interaction by keeping students motivated through activating their prior knowledge. When students share their knowledge with the teacher or any of the class members, they are taking risks. Being prepared to take risks is a fundamental part of language learning (Pollard & Bourne, 2001), especially in our local schools, where minimal communication opportunities occur in the classroom. This risk-taking can be clearly seen when a student expresses an idea, during the K and W stages.

Brainstorming is an important phase of the K-W-L strategy (Ogle, 1986). During brainstorming, instructions and guidelines must be "detailed and well thought out" (Tierney & Readence, 2000, p. 327). This phase allows students to work in groups. The idea of group work has become very popular in recent years, as it increases the amount of learners' talk possible in the classroom, which "leads to second language development" (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). At the same time, when the students are engaged in group work, they become less anxious, and more motivated (Freeman & Freeman, 1998).

According to Ogle (1986), the brainstorming stage involves an important cognitive process in language learning, which is categorizing information. This step in language learning is fundamental to "reduce the complexity of the environment", as students interact with a whole rather than a part of language (Elliott, Kratochwill, Cook, & Travers, 2000, p. 277). Also, the last stage of this strategy – the L Stage, where students have to list down what they have learnt (Ogle, 1986), can be used as an assessment tool to evaluate students’ general understanding of the reading materials, and/or their comprehension skills. This can be achieved through observing students’ written work; their ability to answer the question from the W stage; or the quality of their
overall discussions with their group members (Ekwall & Shanker, 1993).

Overall, according to Tierney and Readence (2000), “K-W-L represents a thoughtfully developed framework that appears to support students initiated learning” (p. 330), as it improves their reading, increase their motivation, their communication skills and their abilities to construct meaning from different texts.

**Action Plan**

From my observations during the first semester, I concluded that English teachers were mainly using the bottom-up reading model. Students rarely used their background knowledge to engage with texts, and this fact seemed to cause a decrease in students' motivation. From interviews with English teachers in the school, I realized that they considered reading comprehension to be difficult to teach children. Moreover, they seemed to believe that reading is not essential for ESL learners. I learnt from my own teaching sessions that the students seemed to have little or no comprehension skills, and I noticed as well that there was actually very little reading material in the textbook.

Because of these findings, I decided to try to implement some reading comprehension strategies. I decided to try to use the interactive model as the basic model for improving reading comprehension, and in particular, I decided to implement the K-W-L strategy to support reading comprehension. My action plan was based on introducing students first to a number of texts and information related to the thematic unit they are studying, through introducing the first four lessons of the unit. Second, after making sure that they had an appropriate amount of background knowledge related to the topics, I introduced and implemented the K-W-L strategy.

First, I measured the students' general performance in reading and writing by giving them a formative test. The results helped in identifying their ability levels. Second, I introduced the units to the students, to be certain that they would have the appropriate language to draw on later on, when they would activate their prior knowledge. Then I introduced the new strategy using the K-W-L chart. I wrote four stories related to the unit theme, in order to use them while working on the strategy. Students, while reading the stories, had to first use the K-W-L chart on the white board. Then they moved to group work, pair work, and then on to independent work.

**Research Methodology**

Action research is a powerful tool in the field of education. Action research starts with a question or concern, and in order to find answers, the researcher implements a plan to address this concern, and decides on what tools he'll be using to collect data to evaluate the plan (Mills, 2003). Then, the researcher follows four steps, which are planning, acting, collecting data, and finally reflecting (Mills, 2003).

I used several different means of data collection. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the classroom teacher and other teachers in the school because they are “open-ended and thus provide much greater flexibility” (Burns, 1999 p. 120). In this type of interview, the researcher has an image in his mind about what he would like to have
answers for; however, having prepared “guide questions” (Burns, 1999 p. 121) to help
direct the interview is essential, to get as much information as possible from the
interviewee.

I also collected data from observations, a way to understand different aspects of the
classroom and a school to discover elements of the teacher’s and the students’
behavior that might not be clear in using any other method of collecting data (Burns,
1999). Mills (2003) categorises different types of observation, determined by the way in
which the observer interacts with the environment. In this action research, at times I was
an active participant observer, and at other times, a passive observer. To be an active
participant observer, means that teaching is part of the observing process. I used
Rating Scales while observing student performance (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2003).
Basically, I filled in a checklist while observing group activities or whenever the students
were involved in a running task; and some comments about students’ behavior were
also included. I used these checklists later on to fill in individual performance cards, to
be sent home and signed by parents.

In the first semester, and in order to collect data about reading comprehension models
used in the classroom, I observed some English classes, as a passive observer (Mills,
2003). I observed various aspects of the teaching and learning process, when there
was no necessity for me to be involved in what was happening. As I carried out my
research, I wrote simple summaries about individuals’ performance during different
sessions. These written summaries, which I conducted during my teaching session as
well, usually describe a child’s reading abilities, interaction with the group member, his
motivation toward certain types of activities, and sometimes the number of mistakes he
made. To track students’ levels of understanding and motivation, I observed their
performance during my teaching sessions. I used rating scales, where I rated their
different skills in the classroom from 1-5. In addition to this scale, some written notes
describing their learning behavior in general were taken, and I wrote as well written
summaries to describe their performance in reading comprehension.

According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2003), formative tests are implemented
during a running program where the main objective is to indicate how well teaching has
succeeded and to measure students’ progression in a section of the program. I used
this type of test to measure my students’ achievements before and after implementing
the K-W-L reading strategy. As Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2003) assert, formative
tests are criterion-referenced tests, which "provide the researcher with information
about exactly what a student has learnt, and what she can do" (p. 319). I used the
results of the two tests to first indicate the progression in students’ level of
understanding; second, to integrate the scores with other data collected in the study;
third to report back to parents, and finally to support my belief that students’ reading
skills affect their attitude toward learning in general.

Before collecting any data, research ethics must be considered. Mills (2003) states that
ethics are simply the way researchers treat the research participants, including
teachers, students, administrators and volunteers. This treatment is to do with informing
the participants and getting their permission to use their statements, or any data
collected during the research project. For this study, as the participants are teachers
and students, I got verbal permission from the teachers to use their interview
statements in my research. Regarding observing the students, I got permission from the
school principal, and I asked the principal also to inform the parents that I would be observing their children for my research. I sent a permission letters to parents to be signed and returned to me to make sure of their approval. Besides, I got permission from the classroom English language teacher to observe her lesson, and to take notes about her teaching strategies, and students’ response. I explained to each of the above members what my action research is about, and what exactly I was observing and collecting data about.

**Data Analysis**

From the observations I conducted at the beginning of the first semester, I found that students couldn’t actually read texts intended for their level, or for lower levels. When I interviewed teachers, they claimed that students’ lack of reading comprehension skills comes from their lack of awareness of the alphabet, and the small amount of vocabulary they are required to memorize. From observation I found that this fact is true. There was a strong relationship between the vocabulary, the complexity of the text, and students’ reading abilities. Beside, teachers claimed that the textbook does not have challenging reading materials, which is also true.

In the formative tests I conducted, there was actually little evidence of improvement in the students’ comprehension skills form one test to the next. However I believe that the right decisions were made when implementing the K-W-L strategy. Referring back to the literature review and based on Ogle’s beliefs about K-W-L in improving reading, I expected better results. A possible reason is the time factor: it's possible that students needed more than five weeks to understand how to brainstorm, categorize, predict, and all of the other aspects involved in applying the K-W-L.

One purpose of my observation of students was to observe whether the use of the K-W-L strategy had increased students’ motivation towards reading. Motivation was measured according to the number of group or pair positive interactions; students’ use of English while discussing; and their use of imagination when asking questions in the W: What do you want to know stage. Aspects such as students' interest in stories and their enjoyment of reading are also signs of motivation(Lightbown and Spada, 1999). Taking all of the above aspects together, there was a significant difference between students' attitude over the weeks of implementation. However, it is noticeable that after using the K-W-L, students' motivation increased strongly in the first week, and then decreased again. A possible explanation for this unexpected change is that students become motivated towards change and enjoyed trying something new; however, their feelings of uncertainty about their success decreased their motivation.

From the data collected, it seems that students had improved not only in reading, but also in the other three skills of listening, writing and speaking. Students also showed a clear commitment to their learning by becoming active members of the class. It's difficult to determine whether this general improvement was a result of implementing the K-W-L or not. However, using new styles of teaching, and replacing the traditional ways of running the classroom with more modern methodologies, can be assumed to be a reason (Fullan, 2001).
Conclusion

I believe that Action Research is a powerful tool in evaluating the effectiveness of a strategy, a method, or even an activity that takes place inside the classroom. The results of this study gave me insightful knowledge about teaching reading in schools in general, and reading comprehension specifically. This knowledge created a strong bond between my professional growth as a teacher and as a researcher.

One limitation of this study to be taken into consideration was the text book used with this group of learners, New English Parade 3 (Herrera & Zanatta, 2000). As a teacher and researcher, I found it difficult to implement the K-W-L strategy in a situation where very limited fiction and non-fiction texts were available for the young learners. Besides, the one story in each thematic unit did not support students’ reading comprehension skills. From my perspective, students are not familiar with the fact that different reading genres have a different format and style. As Peregoy and Boyle state, students’ experiences of different reading genres provide them with “background knowledge not only about the content of particular stories, but about common narrative forms” (Peregoy & Boyle, 2001 p. 261), which these student did not have. As a result, I had to spend quite a long time in finding other resources that suited my students' level of understanding. I had to adjust my plan to suit the current situation, and so lost valuable time. The time factor was another issue of concern in the conduct of this research, as I had to give up some of my class time for school activities, which indeed affected my overall action plan and the outcomes.

The major limitation, however, was the students' limited English vocabulary. This fact led me to use more Arabic in the classroom than usual, when I was encouraging students to state what they already know about a topic. Students actually had a wide knowledge about the text they were reading, but the fact was that they were not able to share it in English.

Despite these limitations, the results of this study lend further support to my belief that students are positively influenced by how much of their prior knowledge is used during reading. Therefore, I would strongly recommend the use of the K-W-L strategy to aid comprehension skills in all school subjects; to improve reading; to create a better environment for learning English, and to help Emirati children develop their overall conceptual knowledge, their reasoning, and their inferential skills.

References


