

The Effect of the Social Constructivist Approach on Teaching Reading to Jordanian University Students

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The study aims at identifying the effect of the social constructivists approach on teaching reading to Jordanian university students and their attitudes towards reading. The subjects of the study consisted of 67 juniors at Princess Alia University College during the academic year 2014-2015. The subjects were divided into an experimental group (34 students) and a control group (33 students). Both groups were pre-tested to measure their reading skills before conducting the experiment. Quasi-experimental design was employed in this study. During the experiment, the instructor of the experimental group used the social constructivist approach while the instructor of the control group used the traditional approach in teaching reading. A significant difference is existed in the adjusted mean score in favor of the experimental group.

Keywords: constructivists, traditional approach, princess alia university college, reading skills

Introduction

Nowadays, English has become essential for students of English as a foreign language (EFL) for sharing ideas with others through reading electronic journals as well as learning new information. Thus, according to Hasman (2004), "English as a second or foreign language will exceed the number of native speakers." He added that the importance of English lies in the fact that 90% of information in electronic retrieval systems is stored in English. Accordingly, reading in English has become a fundamental activity to enable students to meet these challenges. In the academic settings, Naderi (2010) asserted that reading occupies an important place in most English language courses, and it is considered as the central means for learning new information and developing other language skills and vocabulary as well.

In the field of teaching English, reading is considered a difficult skill because students cannot understand the social practices which affect when, what, where, why, how, and who they read with.

In an attempt to determine a number of the problems of reading comprehension of English majors, the researcher conducted a pilot study on a sample of English majors at Al-Balqa' Applied University. The sample consisted of 30 seniors majoring in English. They were given different reading texts. The results of the pilot study indicated that the students majoring in English encounter several difficulties in reading comprehension. These difficulties were in the following areas:

1. Interacting with a variety of texts for different purposes;
2. Observing how language is used within different texts;
3. Making sense of what the writer is saying;

4. Deducing meaning from context;
5. Explaining the author's purposes for writing the text.

The researcher claims that the major causes of Jordanian university students' poor reading skills may be due to the lack of knowledge of reading strategies to overcome such challenges. More importantly, to the "one size fits all" approach, which is used by teachers for teaching reading (El-Koumy, 2009). In support of the researcher's claim, many researchers (e.g., McNamara, 2004; Al-Salah, 2004; Al-Zoubi, 2005; Al-Momany, 2009) found out that the major reason of Jordanian students' poor reading skill is due to the traditional approach used by most instructors. They asserted that students understand each word and sentence, but they fail to understand the relationships between the sentences and the meaning of the text as a whole. They added that most instructors spent most of their reading instruction time assessing students' comprehension at the word and the sentence levels rather than teaching reading skills. Along with the same reason, El-Koumy (2006) claimed that instructors spend most of the instruction time testing bits of reading, such as vocabulary and grammar, rather than teaching reading comprehension skills. Similarly, Wilson (2003) added that too often reading teachers dominate the lesson by telling students the meaning of the text rather than assisting them to create meaning themselves and teachers tend to read in the behalf of the students.

Another reason for the low level of English reading skill may be due to the negative attitude towards reading. In line with this reason, Khanji (1997) found that 80% of the subjects of his study expressed unfavorable attitudes towards the reading skill. In support of the same reason, many researchers all over the world (e.g., Lin, 2002; Kim, 2004) found that creating positive attitudes toward reading contributed to better reading skills.

In an attempt to improve students' poor reading skill all over the world, some educators and researchers (e.g., Wretsch, 1991; Lewis & Slade, 1994; Luke & Freebody, 1999; Wilson, 1999; Badger & White, 2000; Lantolf, 2000; Gibbons, 2002; Hayland, 2003; Lin, 2006; Kawabata, 2011) call for using the constructivist approach in teaching reading to EFL students. The social constructivist approach (of Vygotskian theory) views reading not only as decoding, but also as a social interaction in real life situations. Supporters of this approach believe that an individual can extend his/her reading proficiency together with a capable colleague. This type of behavior called scaffolding in which another person helps to engage students beyond the actual level of their development. During reading, this might take on the forms of peer tutoring and small group discussion.

Statement of the Problem

Jordanian English majors showed poor reading skills. In an attempt to find a solution for this problem, the present study investigates the effect the social constructivists approach on the reading skill of English major students at Al-Balqa' Applied University.

Hypothesis of the Study

This study aims at testing the following hypotheses:

1. There are no significant differences in the English majors' reading skill at the level of 0.5 between the experimental group and the control group due to the instructional approach;
2. There are no significant differences in the English majors' attitudes towards reading at the level of 0.5 between the experimental group and the control group due to the instructional approach.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for the following reasons:

1. Practically, it may help in the re-conceptualization reading as interactive learning tasks by both instructors and students;
2. The findings of this study may help develop English teachers' knowledge about teaching reading;
3. It may develop students' awareness of the different reading strategies in order to build positive attitudes towards reading.

Definition of Terms

The terms below, wherever seen in the study, have the following definitions.

The Traditional Approach

An approach for teaching reading that is mainly concerned with heavy emphasis on testing text content (grammar and vocabulary) rather than creating meaning by the students.

The Social Constructivists Approach

An approach for teaching reading that starts with providing a purpose for reading. Then, the teacher scaffolds by modeling reading practices through think-aloud technique helping students to enter a dialogue with the text in order to create meaning themselves. Afterwards, the teacher unleashes students from teacher scaffold into peer-scaffold helping them become more effective users of the text and makers of meaning. During peer work, the teacher moves among groups to support them as they move towards their potential level of performance. Finally, every student works independently as an active participant on another text.

Theory Underlying the Study

This study is organized around the Vygotskian theory which views learning as an active process of constructing knowledge. It contends that students acquire skills when they are operating in what Vygotsky refers to as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky asserts that learning within this zone occurs when students engage in a task that is difficult for them to perform independently, forcing them to seek support from a teacher or peers for their performance. In other words, the Vygotskian theory gives a quite important place to interaction between students and the teacher or peers. This interaction, as Vygotsky suggests, is essential for skills development and allows students to give feedback on each other's work. During interaction, the teacher participates with the students and helps them move towards their potential level. A teacher takes an authoritative role to support students as they move towards their potential level of performance. In doing so, he/she uses scaffolding strategies, such as explanations, demonstrations, and questioning. He/she also provides learners with opportunities for cooperative learning (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000). Wilson (1999) elaborated that learning takes place through dialogue and this dialogue takes place between teacher and student, between students, or even between text-author and reader. He added that students make sense of what is said or written through dialogue, and thus, learning is both interactive in the sense that learners must interact with a source of ideas/knowledge, as well as in the sense that they must take an active part in reconstructing ideas/knowledge within their own minds. Wilson added that another fundamental issue to Vygotsky is the concept of scaffolding and working within the learner's ZPD.

Methodology

Research Design

The design of the study was a quasi-experimental one. In this design, the researcher used an experimental

group and a control group. These two groups were selected from Princess Alia University College, Al-Balqa' Applied University. Before conducting the experiment, both groups took pre-tests to measure their achievement in reading and their attitudes towards that skill to find out whether they are equivalent. After conducting the experiment, the same test was repeated as post-test to investigate any significant differences between the groups. The attitude questionnaire was also re-administered to both groups to investigate any significant differences in attitudes towards EFL reading between the two groups after treatment.

Participants

The subjects of the study were purposefully chosen from Princess Alia University College, Al-Balqa' Applied University where the researcher works. It consisted of 67 juniors majoring in English. All were enrolled in one reading course (300134121) during the second semester of the academic year 2014-2015. These subjects were divided into an experimental group (34 students) and a control group (33 students). The experimental group was taught by the researcher herself using the social constructivists approach. The other group was taught by a colleague using the traditional approach.

Instruments of the Study

The researcher used the following instruments:

- (a) A reading achievement test;
- (b) A questionnaire for measuring students' attitudes towards EFL reading.

Materials

The instructional materials of the study consisted of several texts included in *College Writing and Reading Skills* by John Langan (5th ed., McGraw-Hill, 2000).

Procedures

Before being exposed to the instructional program, all participants were pre-tested on reading comprehension and attitudes questionnaire. The participants were divided into equivalent groups: the experimental group and the control group. Students of the experimental group were taught using the social constructivists approach and students of the control group were taught using the traditional approach. The program lasted for 12 weeks during the second semester of the academic year 2014-2015. After finishing the instructional program, the reading comprehension post-test and the attitudes questionnaire were administered to the participants of the two groups. To analyze the data, the researcher uses analysis of covariance (ANCOVA).

Results and Discussion

The results of the statistical analyses of the study are shown in the Table 1.

Table 1 shows that the students who were taught by social constructivist approach obtained a higher mean score on the post-test.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Reading Achievement Test for the Experiment and Control Groups

| Group | N | Mean | SD |
|--------------|----|-------|------|
| Experimental | 34 | 26.38 | 7.27 |
| Control | 33 | 20.85 | 6.68 |
| Total | 67 | 23.65 | 7.47 |

As shown in Table 2, the results revealed that the F value equals 7.501 which is significant at 0.008. This means that there is a significant difference in students' achievement test on the reading exam between the experimental and the control groups in favor of the experimental group. Therefore, the first null hypothesis, which states that there are no statically significant differences at the level of 0.05 in Jordanian students' reading skill between the control group and the experimental group due to the approach of instruction, was rejected. The better achievement of the experimental group is due to three reasons:

1. The social constructivist approach encouraged the students of the experimental group to interact through peer feedback where students shared ideas with one another and helped each other to move beyond their actual level of their development. This interaction could in turn help students combine different ideas into compact ones, so each of their ideas can be unanimous.

2. Peer feedback might have encouraged the experimental group students to negotiate alternative points of view, generate new ideas, and expand their own ideas.

3. The teacher-student interaction might provide the experimental group students with an opportunity to discover their mistakes and lead them to a better achievement.

Table 2

ANCOVA Results for Differences in Reading Achievement on the Pre-Post Test

| Source | Sum of squares | Df | Mean squares | F | Sig. |
|-----------------|----------------|----|--------------|-------|-------|
| Pre-test | 268.46 | 1 | 268.46 | 5.921 | 0.018 |
| Group | 340.10 | 1 | 340.10 | 7.501 | 0.008 |
| Error | 2,901.81 | 64 | 45.34 | - | - |
| Corrected Total | - | 66 | - | - | - |

Conclusion

Within the limitations of the study as well as the results reached, the research concluded that the constructivist approach was more effective than the traditional approach in developing the English majors' reading skill at Al-Balqa' Applied University.

Limitations and Recommendations

The findings of the study will be limited by the following:

1. The subjects of the study are restricted to English major juniors at Al Balqa' Applied University;
2. The instruments used for collecting data for the study;
3. The duration of the study is four months.

In light of the results of the study, the following recommendations have been formulated:

1. University instructors should reconsider their approaches of teaching reading and they should be familiarized with the new approaches in teaching reading;
2. University instructors should develop students' awareness of the reading skill by asking and encouraging them to practice reading socially through interaction, scaffolding, and peer feedback;
3. University instructors should make social reading part of their classroom activities under their own guidance and supervision to enable students to become independent learners;
4. University instructors should change students' negative attitudes towards reading by raising their own awareness of the benefits of reading socially, especially when it is a new experience to them;

5. It is recommended that university instructors should be aware of the integration of other skills into the reading skill.

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