

Improving Teaching Quality and Classroom Practice (A case study of Reading Comprehension-Jebel Awliya Locality-Secondary School)

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Abstract:

The secret of success in the profession of teaching is to continually grow and learn. Action research is a way for you to continue to grow and learn by making use of your own experiences. The only theories involved are the ideas that you already use to make sense of your experience. Action research literally starts where you are and will take you as far as you want to go. The steps of action research are simple and straightforward. As you work your way through the action research process, you will have chances to practice ways of writing, reflecting, analyzing data, and discussing your work with other educators. The techniques that we are about to show you have been found to be helpful in getting off to a good start in action research. But, eventually, it will be up to you to discover which tools of action research work best for you. Feel free to experiment.

Key words: profession of teaching, grow, analyzing data, action research

INTRODUCTION

Classroom Action Research is a method of finding out what works best in classrooms so that students' learning can be improved. We know a great deal about good teaching in general

(e.g. McKeachie, 1999; Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Weimer, 1996), but every teaching situation is unique in terms of content, level, student skills and learning styles, teacher skills and teaching styles, and many other factors. To maximize student learning, a teacher must find out what works best in a particular situation.

There are many ways to improve knowledge about teaching. Many teachers practice personal reflection on teaching; that is, they look back at what has worked and has not worked in the classroom and think about how they can change their teaching strategies to enhance learning. (Hole and McEntee (1999) provide useful steps for enhancing such reflection. A few teachers (most notably Education professors) conduct formal empirical studies on teaching and learning, adding to our knowledge base. CAR fits in the center of a continuum ranging from personal reflection at one end to formal educational research at the other. CAR is more systematic and data-based than personal reflection, but it is more informal and personal than formal educational research. In CAR, a teacher focuses attention on a problem or question about his or her own classroom. For example, do role playing help students understand course concepts more completely than lecture methods? Which concepts are most confusing to students? (See comparison chart at that they are closer to personal reflection. In this essay, I will describe the prototypical CAR project.

REASONS FOR CONDUCTING ACTION RESEARCH

First and foremost, classroom action research is a very effective way of improving your teaching. Assessing student understanding at mid-term helps you plan the most effective strategies for the rest of the semester. Comparing the student learning outcomes of different teaching strategies helps you

discover which teaching techniques work best in a particular situation. Because you are researching the impact of your own teaching, you automatically take into account your own teaching strengths and weaknesses, the typical skill level of your students, etc. Your findings have immediate practical significance in terms of teaching decisions.

Second, CAR provides a means of documenting your teaching effectiveness. The brief reports and presentations resulting from CAR can be included in teaching portfolios, tenure dossiers, and other reports at the teacher or school level. This information can also help meet the increasing requirements of the assessment movement that we document student learning. Third, CAR can provide a renewed sense of excitement about teaching. After many years, teaching can become routine and even boring. Learning CAR methodology provides a new challenge, and the results of CAR projects often prompt teachers to change their current strategies. CAR projects done as teams have the added benefit of increasing peer discussion of teaching issues.

It goes without saying that classroom action research follows the same steps as the general scientific model, although in a more informal manner. CAR methods also recognize that the researcher is, first and foremost, the classroom teacher and that the research cannot be allowed to take precedence over student learning. The

CAR process can be conceptualized as a seven-step process. (For more detailed information about conducting CAR research, see authors such as Bell, 1993; Sagor, 2000; and Hubbard and Power, 1993)

In order to conduct a successful action research, we have to identify a problem or a question. This question should be something related to student learning in your classroom. For example, would a different type of assignment enhance student understanding? Would a strict attendance policy result in

better test scores? Would more time spent in cooperative learning groups help students understand concepts at a higher level? The general model might be "what is the effect of X on student learning?"

Since the goal of CAR is to inform decision-making, the question or problem should look at something under teacher control, such as teaching strategies, student assignments, and classroom activities. The problem should also be an area in which you are willing to change. There is no point in conducting a CAR project if you have no intention of acting on your findings. Larger institutional questions might be tackled, if the institution is committed to change.

Finally, the question or problem should be feasible in terms of time, effort and resources. In general, this means to think small--to look at one aspect of teaching in a single course. Angelo and Cross (1993) suggest that you NOT start with your "problem class" but rather start with a class that is progressing fairly well. As you become more comfortable with CAR methods, you may attempt more complicated projects. The problem which will be considered here is the difficulty young Sudanese learners face in reading comprehension in relation to producing certain English Language consonant and vowels and the amount of vocabulary they have or possess.

The research design of a CAR study may take many forms, ranging from a pretest-posttest design to a comparison of similar classes to a descriptive case study of a single class or student. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are appropriate. The tightly controlled experimental designs of traditional research are rarely possible in a natural classroom setting, so CAR relies on the triangulation of data to provide validity. To triangulate, collect at least three types of data (such as student test scores, teacher evaluations, and observations of student behavior). If all data point to the same conclusions, you have some assurance of validity.

CONTEXT OF THE PROBLEM

Language conveys meaning and allows the sharing of information, ideas and perspectives. When written messages are successfully understood, reading can be a wonderfully inspiring, enjoyable and transforming experience. Written language has the power to take the mind to different places, times and events; it can put us in the shoes of fascinating characters and hold our attention through gripping plots, suspense and intrigue. Texts can provide escapism and offer alternative perspectives on the world; what's more, they can 'kindle' our imaginations to create rich mental images that may stay with us forever. Texts can inform and develop knowledge, provide us with new vocabulary and provoke new ways of thinking.

For many children, however, the messages conveyed through written text are not well understood; this has potentially far-reaching consequences for their learning, development and well-being. This chapter outlines the richness of written language and the complexities of the processes involved in reading for meaning. This serves to highlight the many ways in which children's ability to understand text can break down, and will provide points to consider when teaching and developing interventions to improve reading comprehension. Chapter 2 considers in more detail the difficulties that cause some children to have specific difficulties in understanding what they read.

Reading is an essential process in learning languages. A considerable number of researchers such as: Alderson, J.C. (1984), Bruch, W. (1991) and Badrawi, N. (1994) agree that reading is the main route to the command of languages. Secondary school students are expected to face a lot of reading problems. Students 1st and 2nd year are expected to face a lot of problems in reading skills. The pupil who faces early reading

problems (ERPs) often continues to face problems in later stages of education. According to Carrell, P. (1983) and Bright and Macgregor, (1970) a child's success in school and throughout his/her life depends largely on the ability to read.

If there is one skill that needs more concern than others it will be reading skill, because the rest of skills depend on it. The students who have problems in reading skills, particularly in English language, are likely to have problems in the other skills. So, reading skills should be developed in this early stage of education. According to Alderson, (1984) and Carrell, (1983) the focus on developing reading ability in the early stage of education in learning a foreign language (FL), particularly English language, increases motivation of the pupils to learn more about it and prevents many problems that might hinder their learning of English language.

Many young children experience some kind of early problems in learning to read. For many children, reading problems can be identified in kindergarten or in the First Circle (Grades 1, 2 or 3) and can be prevented or substantially reduced. Moreover, Panel, (2003) made a research on early reading problems (ERPs); he found out that children who continue to experience problems in Grade 3 seldom catch up in later grades. These children are at risk of failing school and dropping out, and they may have limited career opportunities in adulthood.

Although there are some similarities between English and Arabic languages, there are many differences between them. These differences lead to problems in early reading in English language among the pupils at Sudanese Basic level schools, particularly the pupils in the First Circle (Grades 1, 2 and 3). Pupils at Basic level schools in Karary Locality have a lot of problems in learning English language, but here in this study the researcher is going to investigate some of the most

important problems facing pupils in the First Circle (Grades 1, 2 and 3), which are the early reading problems (ERPs).

To consider the richness of written language, let us consider the following short passage as an example:

Jennie sprang bolt upright. Moments of disorientation followed before she recognized the now faded floral wallpaper and tatty matching curtains. Framed family faces stared down from the bookshelf. 'Home for the holidays' she remembered. Blinking and yawning she stumbled around for her slippers and gown. The tinny voice from the bedside table was delivering the news and warning of harsh winds and icy roads. Jennie reached across and hit the button. 'Today is definitely a two sweater day,' Jennie thought as she rifled around in her suitcase for her favorite winter clothing.

Reflect for a moment on your understanding of the passage and think about the following questions:

Why did Jennie spring bolt upright? Where was Jennie? Why might she have felt disorientated? What are the framed family faces? Why did she stumble? Where was the tinny voice coming from? What was the button? What did Jennie mean by a 'two sweater day'? What was Jennie doing in her suitcase?

Returning to the passage, consider your experience of trying to decipher its meaning. In the annotated version in Figure 1.1 we have documented some of the initial reflections that you may have when you reread the passage.

The complexity of comprehension is highlighted in these annotations. Engaging in this type of conscious 'think-aloud' activity focuses attention on aspects of reading comprehension that might otherwise go unnoticed. In the example, you can see that our understanding of the text's message gradually builds up over the course of reading it. Initial predictions are confirmed by later information, potentially ambiguous vocabulary is resolved by the context and assumptions based on previous experience are tested. The annotations, however, only

scratch the surface of the demands of the task. Making connections between parts of the passage in order to build up an interpretation requires recognition of the words, an ability to hold information in mind, an ability to scan backwards and forwards to relevant words and phrases, an understanding of cues from sentence structure and punctuation, an empathy with the character and many other skills and processes.

Only part of the task of reading comprehension is situated within the text itself; a developed understanding comes from the interaction between the text and the reader's response to it. The diverse perspectives that we bring to the task result in different interpretations of a text. When we watch films of books that we have read they rarely match up to our imagined versions.

NATURE OF READING COMPREHENSION

Reading is not a hobby as some people think. It's a skill which feeds the mind with information. Everyone has this skill so; it's not as acquisition skills. It is differ from them, but at the same time it is difficult to develop because it requires much effort and continuity.

Although it is more important for readers of all ages in all languages to have knowledge about how letters and sounds relate, reading in English language is much more complex process. It is complex because EL has 26 letters but 44 different sounds (phonemes).

Reading is a complex cognitive process. It is more than decoding individual words. Letters and words are, of course, required for understanding a text. These words: Understanding, knowledge and comprehension are often used to describe what the reader wants to achieve through the act of reading. Ruth Schoenbach et al. (1999, p. 17) defines reading as:

"Reading is not a straightforward process of lifting the words off the page. It is a complex process of problem solving in

which the reader works to make sense of a text not just from the words and sentences on the page but also from the ideas, memories, and knowledge evoked by those words and sentences."

Sometimes reading is a *receptive* skill through it the reader receives information. But the complex process of reading also requires the skill of speaking, so that the reader can pronounce the words that he/she reads. In this case, reading is also a *productive* skill. Therefore, during reading process the reader is both receiving information and transmitting it even only to him or herself. So, reading is a complex process that requires ability to read the text and at the same time ability to understand what is in it. Thus, reading without understanding the meaning is not really reading. According to Marie Clay (1991) and Patricia L. Scharer (2012) reading is a message – getting process through which the reader should read and understand the message that the text carries.

For children, reading isn't a simple process as some people think. It begins with identification of the letters and their sounds then learning how to make sense of words and sentences, and finally understanding the meaning of the text that they read. Patricia L. Scharer (2012, p.3) says "Children need to know that it's their job to figure out unknown words based on what they know about letters, sounds, words, language, and texts."

To sum up, reading is the process of looking at a series of written symbols and getting meaning from them. It starts with many steps which form at the end what is called Reading. When the reader reads, he/she uses his/her eyes to receive written symbols (letters) and he/she uses his/her brain to convert them into words and sentences with full of meaning. So, reading is a complex interaction process between the text and the reader.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the importance of early identification of early reading problems (ERPs) in English language this phenomenon is observed to be widespread among the students at Sudanese secondary schools particularly in the First and second year. Most of the pupils in this stage find problems in reading English texts. The pupils who study English language as a foreign language (FL) are expected to face problems in developing reading skills. These problems might hinder reading ability among them. Poor reading skills lead to low level in overall academic achievement. So, the first circle seems to be a critical developmental period for this skill.

The statement of the study problem claims that most of the pupils at Sudanese Basic Level schools, particularly in the First Circle, have a lot of problems in early reading in English. Although, these problems differ from one to another, they result together in low level of reading ability among the pupils in this stage. Therefore, this study will investigate some early problems in reading in English faced by Sudanese Basic Level schools' pupils. Also, it will investigate the causes behind these problems in this important stage of education and will hopefully provide some possible useful solutions and recommendations for these problems.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

This study sets of to explore the following objectives:

1. Identify early reading problems and how they can be improved
2. Find out some possible ways to develop reading in this important and crucial stage of education.

THE STUDY HYPOTHESES

In this study the following hypotheses are postulated:

1. The differences between the pupils' first language, which is Arabic language; and English language in the directionality of reading and grammar rules, are among some of the main causes of early reading problems in English language.
2. Most of the students who took the test face problems in reading English texts because the selected texts aren't sufficient to develop their reading skills.

METHODOLOGY

In this study descriptive and analytical statistical methods will be adopted, as well as two tests (one is written and the other is oral) were conducted for first and second year students at the secondary school of Jebel Awliya's Locality to assess their reading comprehension and to discover some of problematic areas of early reading problems. Moreover, a classroom observation checklist will be used to describe and explain more problematic areas of early reading problems encountered by the students. In addition to that, a Questionnaire for English supervisors and teachers of the secondary schools will be designed and conducted to discover additional problematic areas as well to find out the reasons behind these early reading problems.

The following table (1) reveals the distribution of Students from Girls and Boys schools:

School	Frequency	Percent
Jebel Awliya Boys Secondary School	117	60.3 %
Jebel Awliya Girls Secondary School	77	39.7 %
Total	194	100%

Table (2) T-test results of the written test

	School	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T value	P value
Q1	Girls' school	77	4.18	0.97	-0.144	0.175
	Boys' school	117	4.21	1.18		
Q2	Girls' schools	77	3.27	1.26	-5.002	0.022
	Boys' schools	117	4.12	1.08		
Q3	Girls' school	77	3.12	1.65	-2.384	0.040
	Boys' schools	117	3.64	1.39		
Q4	Girls' school	77	2.17	1.70	-4.147	0.02
	Boys' school	117	3.19	1.66		
Total		77	12.74	4.10	-3.926	0.03

As can be seen from Table (2), the T-test results showed that there were significant differences between the means degrees of the students in the test dimensions (Q2, Q3, Q4 and total of the dimensions). It was found that the means of the second question were (3.27) for the Girls' schools, (4.12) for Boys' schools and the difference was (0.85). The standard deviations were (1.26) and (1.08). As for the third question the means were (3.12) and (3.64). The difference was (0.52) whereas; the standard deviations were (1.65) and (1.39). For the fourth question the means were (2.17) and (3.19), the difference was (1.02) and the standard deviations were (1.70) and (1.66). The total dimensions of the test indicated that the means were (12.74) and (15.15); the difference was (2.41) while the standard deviations were (4.10) and (4.25). On the other hand no significant differences found between the two groups of the pupils in one dimension of the test which was question one. It was found that the means of the first question were (4.18) for the Girls' schools and (2) for Boys school, the difference was (0.03) while the standard deviations were (0.97) and (1.18).

Table (3) Opinions of the Participants on the Second Dimension:

Items	SDA		D		Nut		A		SA	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
5- Majority of the pupils in first year face Difficulties in reading in English, because of the difference between Arabic and English in directionality.	4	8.9	8	17.8	7	15.6	19	42.2	7	15.6
6 - Most of the students in second year find difficulties in reading English texts, because of the difference between Arabic and English Languages in grammatical rules.	6	13.3	7	15.6	7	15.6	10	22.2	15	33.3

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7 - Students in 2 nd year have problems in early reading in English, because of using Arabic language.	2	4.4	8	17.8	4	8.9	16	35.6	15	33.3
8 - Using Arabic language during English lessons hinders the development of pupils' reading skills.	0	0.0	9	20.0	3	6.7	13	28.9	20	44.4
9 - Pupils who have problems in reading Arabic texts have also problems in reading English texts.	4	8.9	13	28.9	4	8.9	13	28.9	11	24.4
10 - Most of the students in 2 nd year don't know the sounds of the letters.	9	20.0	6	13.3	3	6.7	5	11.1	22	48.9
11 - Nearly most of the students in this class find difficulties in reading vowel letters.	2	4.4	7	15.6	4	8.9	10	22.2	22	48.9
12 - Majority of the students in this year have problems in reading words with silent letters.	1	2.2	2	4.4	8	17.8	12	26.7	22	48.9
13 - Most of the students in this class don't pay attention to punctuation marks while reading English texts.	2	4.4	5	11.1	5	11.1	17	37.8	16	35.6
14 - Majority the pupils in 1 st year trace with their fingers when they read in English.	1	2.2	8	17.8	9	20.0	11	24.4	16	35.6
15 - students in 2 nd year find difficulties in early reading because of lack of reading materials. (For example listening and flashcards).	5	11.1	6	13.3	8	17.8	17	37.8	9	20.0

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