



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DEVELOPING READING SKILLS AND THE USE OF ONLINE TEACHING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

While teaching a foreign language to students, reading skills has great impact along with other skills such as listening, speaking and writing. Reading is about understanding written texts. It is a complex activity that involves both perception and thought. Readers typically make use of background knowledge, vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, experience with text and other strategies to help them understand written text. Through reading in a foreign language, the student enriches his knowledge, of the world around him/her. He/She gets acquainted with the countries where the target language is spoken. Reading develops students' intelligence. It helps to develop their memory, will, imagination.

Generally, it has been observed that many teachers don't develop this skill in the students in the right way, and even provide little time for it. It is, therefore, necessary to work to know about reading skills and to incorporate them in in teaching practices.

In this paper an effort will be made to analyze reading skills of the first-year students of the International Programming faculty of Samarkand State University.

In order to do so the students will be provided reading materials Their patterns of difficulty, that affect their comprehension will be highlighted.

Keywords: reading skills, online teaching, good readers, distance learning, Moodle

Introduction

In traditional and non-traditional foreign language teaching and learning reading is most emphasized in many countries (Susser & Robb, 1990). Meanwhile, in comparison with the teaching of other aspects of language use-such as grammar, listening, speaking, and writing-reading has received the most attention from English as Second Language (ESL) teachers (Aebersold & Field, 1997). Grabe and Stoller (2002) claimed that becoming a highly proficient reader in a second language is very difficult. It is also found that many non-native English-speaking students have difficulties in understanding what they read, especially complex, academic texts (Snow, 2002). Reading effectively in a foreign language is one of the most challenging activities for many students at school. Certainly, this important skill helps students





succeed in their learning process at school and in their lives in general (Dechant, 1991).

For years, several authors have studied the ways in which reading could be taught effectively. At the beginning, the conception of reading was merely that of a decoding process (Carrell, 1998). In contrast, authors such as Dechant (1991) claims that reading is about meaning and comprehension of meaning. As she says “comprehension is the goal and purpose of reading. Without it there is no reading” (p. 9). Indeed, reading involves not only the recognition of printed symbols but the development of meaning to the words the writer intends to transmit. Comprehension of the text is the essence in the reading process.

One of the most important goals for today’s educators should be to train individuals with good literacy who can comprehend and question what they read, because there is a close relationship between literacy and academic achievement (Grove & Hauptfleisch, 1982; Moreillan, 2007).

A good reading competence is a necessity for those studying English for academic and occupational purposes and many curricula therefore must devote large amounts of time to reading lessons in order to achieve such competence.

Good readers have automaticity in word recognition and discrimination (Garrod & Pickering, 1999; Pilten, 2009). It can be argued that readers having difficulty with word recognition and discrimination may lose the meaning of the text. Poor readers having reading difficulties as a result of a lack of skills such as perceiving the unity of meaning, using strategies and connecting prior knowledge to new information; hence, they experience reading difficulties (Bonds & Bonds, 1992; Jitendra, Hoppes & Xin, 2000; Moddy, Kennedy & Brady, 1997). The students having reading difficulties are observed to distract their attention and feel anxious during reading. The main goal of reading is comprehension. As reading difficulties increase the anxiety of individuals, they make reading comprehension more difficult; hence, such have more limited reading experience and this hinders the development of vocabulary knowledge and information accumulation (Lyon, Shywitz & Shywitz, 2003).

Current Situation for Teaching and Learning Reading in Samarkand University

The perceived role of English in international economic success has led Uzbek government to require English courses at all levels of the education system. Although today’s requirements lay great emphasis on the development of students’ listening and speaking skills, English instruction at the university level is also devoted to reading as it has been intricately intertwined with language teaching itself. The





textbooks used in the university English classes are designed for intensive reading courses and are well above the students' current comprehension levels. They include short and authentic texts followed by a variety of exercises that encourage students to study vocabulary and grammar because they know they will be given tests and quizzes, or at least they will be asked questions in class that demand a detailed knowledge of vocabulary, structure, and comprehension details (Field, 2002). Teachers control the conditions of reading by instructing, explaining and illustrating vocabulary, grammar and sentence formation, teaching reading strategies and testing students' comprehension in the hope to help students to learn English, which turns reading into a process of detailed study, memorization, analysis and guessing (Field, 2002). Urquhart and Weir (1998) describe this kind of reading lesson as 'testing, but not teaching'.

Literature Review

Because of COVID-19, we have to work with students online (web-distance learning). There are different names for computers and internet-based teaching and learning such as web-based learning, e-learning, computerized-learning, on-line learning or virtual learning (Jorge Hugo).

According to Sampson (2003) distance learning referred mainly to students' independent learning at a distance, developed through the means of self-study texts, non-contiguous communication, and not controlled by the teacher.

Holmberg (1986) explained how "distance education includes the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organization" (p. 26).

The role of teachers in web distance learning is essential as Easton (2003) stated that web-based teaching is not about "putting up a website or turning one's lectures into text and then stepping back" (p. 89) because this approach is not effective for learning. While Wallace (2003) made explicit the growing interest in understanding the role of the web-based teacher in courses in which communication and interaction among students and teacher is a must. She states how web-based teachers should be able to "create presence in online discussions through a number of techniques including facilitating discussions, providing direct instruction, and giving feedback to students" (p. 260). Salmon (2000) presented a model for teaching and learning in web-based environments that includes five components: access and motivation; web-based socialization; information exchange; knowledge construction; and, development.





At Samarkand state University teaching and learning processes are being held by MOODLE, one of the most popular course management systems (CMS) where students get materials and tasks prepared by teachers and by ZOOM meetings where teachers and students work together.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data presented here were gathered through data records in the CMS Moodle, focus group sessions, and the teacher's journal. Data were collected at the beginning of first academic semester (November-February) of 2020-2021. The selected groups are first year students of International Programming faculty of Samarkand State University, 101- group specialized on History of Great Silk Way and 106-group specialized on Computer programming. Each group consists of 7-10 students, ages about between 18 to 22. When they were questioned about their background English in the introduction lesson as it was off-line, the majority students have studied English for six months to one year. There is considerable difference in level because they came from different places with different level of English learning.

Since it was the beginning of the study year, I could analyze only one reading material which was taken from the Internet (www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglishteens). When both groups were given the same level reading materials (level B1), the students of group 101 asked to change the reading material as it was difficult for them, while group 106 students showed the ability doing it. And the reading materials with level A2 was chosen to the group 101.

Data records in the CMS Moodle

There are the course content organization, evaluations, assignments, forums and chats sessions, as well as the e-mail exchanges that occurred between the teacher and the students. The course content in the platform, assignments and evaluations were presented in English. Students sometimes used Uzbek in the forums, chats and e-mail communication with the teacher. They spoke their native tongue because they found that their proficiency in English was not enough to express their opinions, ask questions or request clarifications and explanations. The teacher accepted English and Uzbek as the means of communication to facilitate the learning process. The course content, readings and exercises were presented in English.

First Data Collection

Since reading is one of the difficult skills, many students could not show good result in the first given task. Though most students' (in the groups) speaking and listening





skills are fairly proficient in English, their reading results were not satisfying. To the group of 106 “How to be happy” reading task and the text “Happiness” for 101 group were given according to their levels. The given tasks were: recognizing words, filling gaps, true/false for the group of 101, recognizing words, multiple choice, true/false/not given and grouping words for 106 group.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data, I checked the students’ answers to the given tasks on reading and I calculated them as following:

Errors in percentages from 100%;

Students from 101 group

Types of tasks:

Recognizing words	90%
filling gaps	90%
true/false	15%

Students from 106 group

Types of tasks:

Recognizing words	50%
multiple choice	10%
true/false/not given	25%
grouping words	5%

From errors, it can be said that students from both groups made maximum mistakes in recognizing words (90%/50%) and minimum in true/false and grouping tasks (15%/10%). These errors appeared to be due to the lack of reading practice and the students’ insufficient vocabulary building to their required level. The good results of the students indicate that they had practices for reading exercises such as true/false and grouping words.

Conclusion

In conclusion, teaching a foreign language to students reading skills has great impact as other skills such as listening, speaking and writing. Reading is about understanding written texts. It is a complex activity that involves both perception and thought. Readers typically make use of background knowledge, vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, experience with text and other strategies to help them understand written text.





To know about students' difficulties, mistakes in reading and how to correct them and how to teach reading I have analyzed reading skills of the first-year students of the International Programming faculty of Samarkand State University.

In order to examine the discourse I gave according to their levels different reading materials and tasks to two first-year groups of this faculty. Data analysis shows that the students' ability of using their knowledge of language in reading is not satisfying. To improve their reading skills I would like to carry this research forward by teaching and testing the students by creating more friendly and productive in a stress-free environment, where students can feel themselves more confident and shure of their understanding of any reading texts.

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