Improving Reading Skill of Freshman Students at the English Department of Kabul University

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Abstract: *This research paper is about freshman students' problems in improving their reading skill at the English Department of Kabul University. The goal of the study is to find out why instructors are not able to improve their students' reading skill, and why the students are not able to comprehend and understand a reading passage. Moreover, this paper will indicate how that data of the study was collected and analyzed from ten freshman students. In addition, the study reveals that the main cause of the mentioned problem is not applying diverse while teaching reading subject. Also, there are no assignments given to the students to improve their reading skill. Consequently, the paper overviews some basic problems and recommends solutions to them in order to improve teaching reading and improve students' reading skill.*

Keywords: comprehension, receptive skill, strategy, skimming, scanning

1. Introduction

Reading is a key skill for most students in a foreign language and it should therefore take its place besides the development of the other three skills of language: listening, speaking and writing. The greatest use at the end of language study is reading since most materials are printed, so it can be a basis for students. Further, "the ability to read will stay longer than the other skills, and it is the skill that will be must convenient to use. Reading remains a valid goal in the second language classroom."(Akyel&Ercetin, 2008:135).

Reading as well as listening are called as receptive skills while speaking and writing are called productive skills. Frankly, without reading, second language readers cannot perform at levels they must succeed in reading. For many people, reading is the most important of the four skills in a second language, especially in English as a second or foreign language. It is one of the most important skills, if not the most, among language skills.

Reading is a fundamental skill that is not only important for a student at any level of studies but also important and vital when the studies finish. It is an important skill for a student of every faculty. Students who have good reading skill can understand how to read a text and how to get the idea out of it. Farrell (2009) believes that an instructor can produce that kind of strategic readers and that reading skills and strategies can be taught explicitly while students are learning subject content through reliable reading task.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The students at the English Department improve their skill of reading through different years of study. I have taught reading for freshman students at the English Department for several years. I have noticed that students have many problems in improving their reading. These problems vary. Some students cannot join words as they read. Others cannot comprehend what they read.

Looking at the importance of reading, I think, the instructors at the English Department do not teach students how to be good or strategic readers. There is seemingly less use of reading strategies, such as scanning (reading for specific information), skimming (reading for general information), summarizing, paraphrasing and etc. The instructors also do not design effective activities to activate the learners and to get their interest.

1.2 Research Objective and Questions

This paper aims to improve teaching at the freshman classes of the English Department of Kabul University. When the students learn a language, there is a serious need for reading the written literature of that language and for that improving reading skill is vital. Finding the effective methods and techniques for teaching reading is the main objective of this research. The research questions posed in this study are:
1) What techniques help in improving reading skill for freshman students at the English Department of Kabul University?
2) How can students be involved in improving their reading skill?

2. Literature Review

As you know, English language has four skills. Listening and reading are called as receptive skills and speaking and writing are regarded as productive skills. All these skill play a key role in acquiring the language. I think that reading is the most important skill leading to better understanding of a language. Alan (2011) said "Reading is the most important skill a child can develop, learning to read is an important skill every child must develop to be successful in school." (p. 37). He also added that good reading skills are the foundation for a proper education.

Reading comprehension is the process of constructing meaning from the text. The purpose of every kind of reading is ultimately targeted at helping a reader to comprehend a text. The main purpose of reading is to comprehend the text that is read, if comprehension does not take place then the activity of reading is without purpose.

Reading strategies are important part of a reading class. It should not only be taught theoretically, but practiced in all

sessions of reading classes. According to Pressley &Afflerbach (1995), reading is a skill that is used in all subject areas and can greatly increase or decrease a student's success in the classroom. Reading strategies can be used to vary the approach students are given of any given text. As Nunan (2003) mentioned that strategiesare the tools for active, self-directed involvement that is necessary for developing communicative ability.

"Strategies are not a single event, but rather a creative sequence of events that learners actively use" (oxford, 2003, p. 19). This definition underscores the active role that readers take in strategic reading. To achieve the desired results, students need to learn how to use a range of reading strategies that match their purposes for reading, and teaching them how to do this should be a prime consideration in the reading classroom. Some of the research that I have done indicates that "there is no single set of processing strategies that significantly contributes to success…" in second language reading tasks. Strategic reading means not only knowing what strategy to use, but knowing how to use and integrate a range of strategies (Anderson, 1999).

Teaching reading is a wide area in which the learners' different learning characteristics play an important role. The students learn reading comprehension skills by their personalized styles and strategies they possess. Therefore, instructors must have a strong knowledge of different methods for teaching reading. They also should be aware of their students' current skill level, strengths and challenges, interests, needs and goal.

According to Nishino (2007), students should be involved in both extensive and intensive reading. Reading extensively and intensively allow students to develop their receptive skill such as reading for scanning, reading for skimming, reading for inference and attitude.

Harmer (2007) believed that students should read the materials which is understandable for them. He adds, if students struggle to understand every reading, they would face with difficulties of reading. Hirasawa (1990) stated that the instructors should use familiar materials at the first stages of reading such as earlier dialogues, conversation, and reading passages. Before the instructor expects students to read the passages, he/she should give them some oral practices in the use of vocabulary items and structures before students meet these in the text; instructor will then ensure that the students have the ability to read by their own.

To improve extensive reading of students, it is not enough to tell the students to read a lot; it is important to their improvement extensive reading to offer the appropriate martials, guidance, basics, and facilities, such as using long term or moveable libraries of books (Harmer, 2007).

Harmer (2007) argued that building a library of suitable books is the need of students to set up an extensive reading program or we need to make static libraries in classroom or in other part of school; if it is not possible, we should use some other ways to carry books with ourselves in boxes. He explained, instructor should ensure that the collection of the books does not disappear over time; in this case students can

easily understand and identify the books. If students work hard and participate in extensive reading program, we will know that spending time and money will not wasting.

An instructor can encourage students to read extensively; students should be taught about the benefits of extensive reading by their instructor (Herasawa, 1990). Herasawa said, once students are aware from the benefits of extensive reading, instructors can organize reading program and they can fix students have many books they expect students to read in a specific period of time. Instructors also should show that students can choose which book they want to read (Harmer, 2007).

Harmer (2007) explained that instructors should encourage students to read the tasks which are interesting to for them. Harmer added, for keeping students to read extensively, instructor should encourage students to report back their reading in some ways. One way is to set a time and students in every two weeks can ask questions or students may tell their classmate about the books they have chosen and are very interesting and enjoyable for them. If it is not possible because students are not studying at the same time speed or they may not like to say about their books in front of their classmates, soinstructors can ask them to keep a weekly reading and writer reading journal by their own (Harmer, 2007). At the end of a month, a semester or a year, they can vote on the most popular book in the library. Some other instructors ask students to keep a reading note book or they may capture the students in oral interviews about what they are reading, also, we can give students a sheet to write their comments in that sheet about their reading.

Harmer (2007) defined the roles of instructor in order to keep students in reading intensively. First of all, instructor can be an organizer. Instructor needs to tell students what is the purpose of the reading and gives them clear direction about the time of the reading. Harmer also said that the instructor should not change that time unless it is necessary. Second, instructor should be observer when the students are reading, instructor should observe their speed. Next role of the instructor which Harmer (2007) reported is getting information about how well the students do individually and collectively. Macalister (2008) supported the same idea. Then the instructor will decide to give them extra time or move to organize feedback. Another role of the instructor in intensive reading is feedback organizer, then students finish their reading, instructor asks them questions and students work with partner and answers to the questions. Instructor should ask students to say where they can find relevant information of the text, because it will be easy for other students to find it in the future if they want. Harmer (2007) added, instructor is the promoter when students have read the text, the instructor should clarify ambiguities as controller, and direct them to the new language feature which they had not come across previously.

As Celce Murcia (2001) stated, in every class session, provide students to have silent reading in the class room. By giving 10-15 minutes of silent reading for students you can make students extensive readers, especially when the instructorassign them the text which is according to their interest.

Farrell (2016) described that giving chance for students to read the text, help them to improve their reading skill. He adds that when students read the text, the instructor can hear them and give them comments to correct their mistakes. For example, the student may pronounces the word incorrectly and the instructor should pronounce it in correct way. Hirasawa (1990) supportedFarrell's points of view and he added, reading the text will provide students to be fluent and automatic readers. By asking students comprehension questions you can get students attention to the reading text and to the importance of passage (Harmer, 2009).

Celce-Murcia (2001) said, there are several ways to capture students in extensive reading. He added, provide students interesting, attractive, and based on their level readings. Instructor should give students readings like magazines and books to take them home and read it for pleasure and comprehension (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Harmer (2009) reported that giving unlimited time for reading is very helpful for students to improve their reading skill. They can promote their extensive reading if they have reading both in classroom and out of the classroom from different resources which the instructor provide them. Also, Celce-Murcia added that when students read different text, they can increase their information and build their vocabulary as much as they can. This will help them to read fluently and to create appropriate reading speed and reading rate.

Harmer (2009) believed that working different activities help students to be interested in reading the texts. Making sentences for new words can be useful for students to learn different structure of the English language. Celce-Murcia (2001) suggested three kinds of activities that are helpful for fluency, reading rate, developing rapid recognition skills of students. Activities that specifically target overall fluency include rereading practice and rereading for other purposes. Activities that promote reading rate include timed readings and paced readings. In time reading,the time is allocated for the reading and the instructor asks the students at the end of the allocated time some simple comprehension questions. Paced reading is more quickly than timed reading. For example, the instructor may ask students to read 100 words in a minute. Activities that develop rapid recognition skills include word recognition exercise, flashcard practice, and instructor's reading aloud. Word recognition exercise asks students to match the words of two columns. Using of flashcard is also helpful for students to improve their speed of word recognition. Flashcard activity means that the instructor asks students to read aloud the words that are flashed very quickly in one second, and it should be done two or three times in a week (Celce-Murcia,2001). On the other hand, the instructorswho teach reading at the departmentdo not work these activities for improving students' reading activities.

3. Method of Research

The study was conducted at the English Department of Kabul University. The number of the participants were ten. Five participants were male and five were female who came from different parts of the country. They all learn English as a foreign language. They aged between twenty and thirty.

They speak either Pashto or Dari as their native language. They all had good background knowledge of English.

The data was collected through a questionnaire that contained five questions. The questionnaire was designed answering "always", "usually" and "never" for the questions; this is, they answered those questions by choosing one of the options. The participants completed a language background survey form. The aim behind this was to find out the students' weakness in English as they came from different provinces and had different ages and level of knowledge.

After the data was collected, it was reviewed and the resultswere counted accurately. From the students' answers it was revealed that students have lots of problem in reading skill in freshman classes of English Department at Kabul University. Also, based on results of data collection we can say that the method which is used by reading teacher in freshman classes is Grammar Translation Method because most of the focus was on students reading and using dictionaries for unfamiliar words. The significant correlation between the use of strategies and reading comprehension highlights the importance of improving reading skill in the process of language learning in English Department at Kabul University.

4. Result

The study was conducted to find the problems that students face while reading at the English Department of Kabul University. It also was to examine if the instructors use different reading strategies while reading classes or not, namely making predictions about reading a text, scanning, skimming, guessing meaning from context and making inferences about reading text. To achieve this aim, a questionnaire was designed and given to the participants of the study to fill it in. The results of the study are shown in the following table:

Table 1: Questions related to teaching reading method

	Questions	Responses					
		Always		Usually		Never	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
1	Do students have silent reading in the classroom?	0	0	3	30	7	70
2	Does the instructor give you the chance to read the text?	7	70	3	30	0	0
3	Does the instructor provide you to summarize main point of reading text?	0	0	0	0	10	100
4	Does the instructor design your extra reading?	0	0	0	0	10	100

According to the questionnaire which was designedall the four questions were designed to find out whether the instructoruse appropriate teaching method for reading skill or not. Thefirst question was asked to find if the instructor ask students to have silent reading. Most of the students chose the never option and it shows the weakness of the instructorin teaching method of reading. The second, third and fourth questions were asked to observe the teaching reading method. Majority of students had negative answers.

The instructorsdid not ask students to answer comprehension questions or to summarize the main points of the text.

According to the questionnaire that I designed, the fourth question asked whether the instructor designs students extra readings or not. All students replied that the instructor never design them extra readings.

All in all the data analysis showed that the problem is in teaching method of the instructors. The instructors do not use strategies to improved students' reading skill, instead they read and translate texts. Another issue to be considered is that instructors only consider the textbook for improving the reading skill and did not provide extra reading assignments.

5. Discussion

The results of the study showed that there are many issues that should be considered in teaching reading skill at the English Department of Kabul University. Looking at the previous literature regarding this issue and the new results, I think the instructors should have various strategies and methods applied.

It was found from this research that the teachers should design activities in reading classes to activate students' interest in reading. Also, both, intensive and extensive reading should be provided to the students. All in all, the strategies and methods proposed by renowned scholars which are applicable in Afghan context can improve freshman student's reading skill to a great extent.

6. Conclusion

This research, conducted at the English Department, found out that the current methods of teaching reading is not effective, and it does not fulfill students' language needs. The aim behind the questionnaire and the language background survey was to find the main problems of students' reading deficiency to realize the methods used in reading classes.

Four questions in the questionnaire were related to reading. Most of the participants' responses were negative that it means in total participants indicated that the method of teaching reading skill is not effective. It means that the students are not taught according to their needs. According to the questionnaire, reading strategies are not applied in current teaching method. There is no reading practice to improve reading skill. As Celce Murcia (2001) said, reading is improved through practice.

In conclusion, this study found out that the teaching method in reading classes is not effective. It shows that the instructors are unprofessional in teaching this receptive skill. Therefore, theinstructors need to know the principles, techniques, and strategies of teaching reading skill to improve students reading and to teach appropriately.

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