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FULL LENGTH ARTICLE

Training Saudi English Majors in extensive reading to develop their standard-based reading skills

Antar Abdellah

Dept. of Curricula and Instruction, Qena College of Education, South Valley University, Egypt

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Abstract Saudi English majors' level in reading achievement has been reported to be of low quality. Lack of extensive reading materials at the secondary stage is assumed to be one reason behind this low level. As a remedial treatment, the study proposes an extensive reading program composed of 90 simplified supplementary materials (each student should finish at least 10 of these by the end of the program). A list of performance standards in reading is developed and a standard-based test in reading is administered to measure the effectiveness of the proposed program in extensive reading. Students ($n = 100$) were treated as a control and an experimental group, both registered at the reading course in Taibah University. The control group studied the normal reading course without submission to any experimental treatment, while the experimental group was treated by the proposed program. Results showed that reading extensively (mostly fiction) had a positive effect on students' skills in other nonfiction readings. Students' scores after the experimentation reflected their motivation for reading and raised their performance toward meeting the set reading standards.

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1. Introduction

Research into reading in English as a second or a foreign language (Grant 1984, Hayes, 1987; Norris, 1988; Lewkowicz, 1987; Simons, 1989; Anderson, 1990; Carver, 1992; Cornish, 1992) has shown that reading is not the step by step process of building up letters into words, relating written words to their spoken equivalents, or joining words to form sentences. On the contrary, reading is a highly complex interaction between a reader and a text, in which the reader makes sense

of the text using both textual and non-textual clues. Reading is, in Goodman's words, "a psychological guessing game. It involves an interaction between thought and language" Goodman (1967, p. 127).

The overall purpose for teaching reading is to develop in the reader attitudes, abilities, and skills needed for obtaining information and reacting to ideas, developing interests and, finally, deriving pleasure by reading through understanding. In Nuttall's view one reason for reading is that we want to understand other people's ideas. The understanding may not be total, but the fact that for not doing our best to understand what he is trying to say (Nuttall, 1982).

The reading process is hindered by the reader's imperfect knowledge of the language being read. As a result the reader is often unable to make the necessary guesses or predictions; s/he will use the wrong clues, or make the wrong associations. It will be therefore the function of the reading program to

E-mail address: solhyabdallah99@gmail.com

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make explicit the intrinsic linguistic knowledge as well as the strategies and techniques implicit in the reading skill.

2. The Saudi context

English was introduced as a school subject early in the life of the Kingdom (Al-Seghayer, 2005). King Abdul Aziz established the new state in 1932 and the first language course was introduced in 1933. "The basic way to English" was the big wave at the time initiated by Charles Ogden's Basic English model.

During the 1950s and 1960s, *Living English for the Arab World* was the course adopted and adapted in most Arab countries with slight differences to suit the nature of each country. *Progressive Living English for the Arab World* was introduced in the 1970s as an improvement to the old *living English* course. *Progressive Living English for the Arab World* was introduced by the late presidency for female education; so it was not taught to male students who rather had a course called *Longman English* developed by the Longman publishing house. In the early 1980s, *Saudi Arabian Schools English* was introduced as the first course that reflected the character of the Saudi Kingdom. In the 1990s, a new upgraded course came into being; *English for Saudi Arabia* is the course currently in use from the sixth grade primary to the third grade secondary. In the 2000s, the intermediate course was replaced by another course named *Say it in English* and the presidency for female education was canceled to make the Ministry of Education cover both male and female education. The ministry is currently experimenting a number of new language courses to replace the existing ones.

It is noticed from tracing this history that all language courses consisted of a main textbook for the student, a workbook, and sometimes a teacher's guide. Only two courses included supplementary readers; *Longman* course used the Longman Simplified English Readers' series, and *Saudi Arabian Schools English* used a set of selected readings grouped in one booklet called the *Reader*. Both courses were introduced in the 1970s and 1980s respectively, while the courses that came after these did not include any supplementary reading material¹. We have also to remember that the *Longman* course was taught to male students only. Although private education may include some simplified books for extensive reading, this type of education is not common and is favored by the majority of non Saudi residents in the Kingdom.

The main intensive reading textbook (entitled *English for Saudi Arabia* in the 6th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grades, and *Say it in English* in the 7th, 8th and 9th grades) is meant to address main skills as scanning, skimming, identifying the main idea, identifying the details and locating key words. Although these skills need to be consolidated within the language program through additional readings, no supplementary materials are offered for free reading. Furthermore, teachers of English as a foreign language in the kingdom always complain about the low level of students in reading achievement. Thus they rarely advise their students to do extra readings outside the curriculum, believing that students need to focus on the

¹ *English For Saudi Arabia*, however, started with a series of reading materials similar to those of the previous course *Saudi Arabian Schools English*. But the ministry stopped publishing these readers and replaced them with a *writing book!* in 1425 (2004).

required reading course more than on any type of extra readings other than – may be – reading emails.

3. Problem of the study

The problem is manifested when secondary stage graduates join the English department in colleges of Education or Humanities. Now they are required to go through lengthy readings in literature (drama, poetry, novel, and criticism), Linguistics (grammar, phonetics, history of language, essay and readings), and education (methods of teaching, curriculum analysis and error analysis). With little command of the required skills for fast and extensive reading, they tend to attack these lengthy texts as they used to do with the short selected texts in the secondary stage. Consequently, they resort to translations (mostly machine translations) of the texts to facilitate comprehension.

It is assumed that if they go through an extensive reading program, by reading big numbers of simplified text, their reading achievement may be raised.

4. Questions of the study

The main question of the study is "How effective will an extensive reading program be on developing selected intensive reading skills for English majors at the college of Education?"

Branching from this question are the following sub questions:

1. What is the effect of the suggested program on developing the skills of reading comprehension?
2. What is the effect of the suggested program on developing the skills of evaluative reading?
3. What is the effect of the suggested program on developing the skills of critical reading?

5. Hypotheses of the study

1. There are no statistically significant mean differences between the achievement of students in the experimental group and that of the control group in the post test with regard to the first standard "reading comprehension".
2. There are no statistically significant mean differences between the achievement of students in the experimental group and that of the control group in the post test with regard to the second standard "evaluative reading".
3. There are no statistically significant mean differences between the achievement of students in the experimental group and that of the control group in the post test with regard to the third standard "critical reading".

6. Substantial contribution of the study

The study presents the opportunity to English majors to read lengthy simplified pieces of literature that will be an assistance to them in their study in the English department.

The skills developed in the present study are expected to be transferred unto other domains of experience during and after the students' study at college.

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