

ADAPTING PRESCRIBED TERTIARY LEVEL ELT TEXTBOOKS IN PAKISTANI CLASSROOMS

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21

Abstract

This study aims to investigate how Prescribed ELT Textbooks can be exploited to enhance students' reading comprehension of intermediates first year class in an educational institute. This research brings broader understanding of strategies to use ELT textbooks more effectively for teaching English Reading Comprehension skills to students. The rationale of the study stems from the need that teaching strategies for reading comprehension lead to increased awareness and use of the strategies which helps improve performance on commonly used comprehension measures. The methodology adopted will be Action Research which lies within the paradigms of Qualitative research and the results will be reflected through the analysis of class observations, field-notes, students' answer scripts, reflective journal and feedback through group interviews from the students. So, the teaching methods and practices are aimed to be improved through this research.

Introduction

English language instruction has many important components but the essential parts to many ESL/EFL classrooms and programs are the textbooks and instruction materials that are often used by language instructors. Especially in the ESL/EFL context where textbooks are prescribed for different levels and the syllabus is built on them and the teachers cannot do away with them. It is observed that many teachers do not take much help from these textbooks to be more effective. They just use these textbooks as a compulsion and either read the chapters in the textbooks themselves or ask different students to read them and then dictate the answers to the questions given on the comprehension passages in the textbooks. They complete their course in this mechanical way and do not really care if the students understanding or learning ability of reading comprehensions skills are enhancing or not. Therefore, it becomes important on part of teachers that they should exploit the textbooks and design such activities on them that help students improve their reading comprehension skills.

Reading is a complex and purposeful process, in which a reader simultaneously uses his/her knowledge of various skills and strategies in order to construct meaning. Grabe (1991) proposes the following six elements in the process of fluent reading. These are automatic recognition skills, vocabulary and structural knowledge, content/word background knowledge, synthesis and evaluation skills, and metacognitive knowledge.

Recent accounts of reading process tend to emphasize that it is rapid, purposeful, motivating, interactive, comprehensible, flexible and develops gradually (it is a product of long-term effort and gradual improvement). (Alderson: 2002, p.14)

So, reading is not simply reading words on the pages and then answering questions on the given passage by putting parenthesis within the passage and copy pasting answers which are common practices in many Pakistani

ELT classrooms. It is rather an intricate process and should be given due attention and time.

Purpose of the Study

The motivation for investigating how textbook exploitation can enhance students' reading comprehension is derived from my past experience as a teacher at the intermediate level. I have frequently observed that although reading comprehension skills occupy an important position in the syllabus, they never receive a serious apprehension from the pedagogical point of view, and simple grammar translation method is used to teach them, which deprives the students from taking benefit from these important language skills. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to improve the teaching practices/strategies used at this level so that the prescribed ELT Textbooks could be used more effectively in the Pakistani context to enhance students' reading comprehension. Another purpose of this study is to see the effectiveness of the activities used in English classes.

Research Questions

The primary question that this study focused on was;

How can the prescribed ELT Textbooks be exploited in Pakistani ELT classrooms to enhance students reading comprehension skill?

The secondary questions were;

- What strategies can be used to improve students' reading comprehension skills?
- Can textbooks be used in different ways to facilitate students' improve their comprehension skills?

In the classroom settings where English is used as a second language, it is observed that a textbook is the major tool employed by teachers and the course developers for the teaching of English as a second language. Teachers use textbooks in their classes to enhance students' understanding of the language and to improve their reading comprehension. One of the

most essential constituents to many ESL/EFL classrooms and programs are the textbooks and instruction materials that are often used by language instructors. As Hutchinson and Torres (1994) suggest, "The textbook is an almost universal element of [English language] teaching. Millions of copies are sold every year, and numerous aid projects have been set up to produce them in [various] countries...No teaching-learning situation, it seems, is complete until it has its relevant textbook." (P.315)

Sheldon (1988) suggests that textbooks not only "represent the visible heart of any ELT program" (p.237) but also offer considerable advantages - for both the student and the teacher - when they are being used in the ESL/EFL classroom. Haycroft (1998), for example, suggests that one of the primary advantages of using textbooks is that they are psychologically essential for students since their progress and achievement can be measured concretely when we use them. Cunningsworth (1995) identifies the potential which textbooks have for serving several additional roles in the ELT curriculum. He argues that they are an effective resource for self-directed learning, an effective resource for presentation material, a source of ideas and activities, and a reference source for students, a syllabus where they reflect pre-determined learning objectives, and support for less experienced teachers who have yet to gain in confidence. Where many theorists believe that using ESL/EFL textbooks offer extensive benefits, there are many other researchers and practitioners who do not necessarily accept this view and retain some well-founded reservations on the subject. Allwright (1982), for instance, has written a scathing commentary on the use of textbooks in the ELT classroom. He suggests that textbooks are too inflexible and generally reflect the pedagogic, psychological, and linguistic preferences and biases of their authors.

Textbooks can act as a de-motivational force for students, at the same time it can be exploited by teachers to motivate the students, to enhance their self-confidence and to enable even those students to

take active part in class work and discussions who lack self-confidence and are reluctant to become an active member of the class.

It then becomes very important on part of teachers to exploit textbooks to motivate students to read the work assigned to them and gain better understanding of the text. A number of researchers have identified a connection between student performance and the nature of a textbook; these experts have suggested ways to help students negotiate the textbook and improve comprehension.

Methodology

This section presents Qualitative Action Research design, data collection method and data analysis procedure. Further it provides ethical considerations, time limitations for the study.

Qualitative Action Research Design

This study was conducted in Qualitative Paradigm adopting Action Research which enabled me to examine the core problems in the area of using ELT textbooks to enhance students reading comprehension skills and thus facilitated me to bring about some improvements in the on hand-practices. In Strauss and Corbin (1998) view, a qualitative research can be defined as,

By the term 'Qualitative Research we mean any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification. It can refer to research about persons' lives, lived experiences, behaviours, emotions, and feelings as well as about organizational functioning, social movements, cultural phenomenon and interactions between nations. (p.17)

Thus in qualitative paradigm findings are arrived at not by any statistical data but by reasons behind various aspects of behaviour.

Action Research as Methodology

The ground for adopting action research for this study was that, it would aid me by providing an opportunity for the practical execution of the designed plan thereby giving me a chance for improving the conventional practices by actually positioning my own research into action. Kemmis and McTaggart (1998) maintain that action research aims at facilitating people in investigating the reality for changing it and by reflecting self critically on their practices they can learn more about these practices. The research question which inquires about the 'how to' of teaching, makes it clear why action research is chosen for carrying out this study. The underlying assumptions that one holds about one's teaching can be examined by action research in the best possible way. To what extent personal theories are valid and workable can only be checked when they are put into operation and Action Research with its cyclical processes provides appropriate opportunity in this regard.

Action Research is commonly but incompletely described as a sequence of steps, typically represented as a spiral. The spiral involves self-reflective cycles of,

- planning a change,
- acting and observing the process and consequences of the change,
- reflecting on these processes and consequences, then
- re-planning,
- acting and observing,
- reflecting and so on ...

In reality, the process may not be as neat as this spiral suggests. The different cycles of activity usually overlap, and the initial plans quickly become obsolete in the light of learning from experience.

Burns (1990) favouring Action Research puts forward an argument that the data collection method in Action Research involves 'triangulation' that involves 'gathering data from various sources so that the research findings or insights can be tested out against each other. This

increases the reliability and validity of the research. So for this reason, the data was collected through various sources. These included field notes, reflective journal, students' work samples, and written feedback on the classes conducted during this study. These sources facilitated data collection in the intervention phase. The description of all the three phases of action research is discussed below.

Pre-intervention phase was the planning stage of my research in which I made a smooth ground to conduct this research which included selection and criteria of sampling, and entry negotiations which did not prove to be difficult as I conducted this research in the institution where I teach presently.

Intervention phase was the main phase of the study in which the focus was on finding the answer to the research question stated earlier as to how can prescribed ELT textbooks be exploited in Pakistani ELT classrooms to enhance students reading comprehension skills? Different techniques were employed in the ELT classroom to exploit prescribed ELT textbooks to enhance students' reading comprehension skills using the following tools to collect data.

Field notes were points which I noted down when students were engaged with the activities. They facilitated me to get immediate reflection on my practices.

Reflective journal contained the reflective reports of each class in which I critically commented on my actions implemented in each class. It proved to be an excellent tool for my self-improvement. In addition to that, it greatly helped me in the analysis of the data.

Students' work samples served as another tool to collect data. It helped me to judge students' performance and thereby to prepare lesson plans for the next classes.

In the Post-intervention phase, students' final feedback on my teaching practice was taken. In order to collect

more data and judge the overall effect of my implementation phase a discussion with students was organized. The final written and verbal feedback provided me an opportunity to reflect on the entire study critically.

In the pre-intervention phase, I focused on my teaching strategy and the use of the given prescribed ELT textbook in my ELT classroom for the improvement of students' reading comprehension. I realized that the grammar translation method that I was using earlier restricted students' learning potential and made them passive receivers with very little to contribute and participate in the class. I simply translated each paragraph at its completion and students understood the idea presented in the text but it really handicapped students' thinking ability and they were unable to read any given text on their own. This realization encouraged me to exploit the given prescribed ELT textbook to try new and different methods for the improvement of students' reading comprehension skills.

Action Plan Implemented

In the intervention phase, different reading comprehension strategies as pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading were employed in a span of two classes built upon each other which were based upon different themes, symbolism, present in the selected text, students' schematic knowledge, etc. the intervention stage comprises planning, action, observation and reflection. A designed lesson plan was implemented which was then critically evaluated with the help of students' work samples, reflective journal and class observation. On the basis of this critical evaluation, the next lesson plan was planned and implemented.

Cycle I & II

Action plan

In the very first class the research topic was briefly introduced and students' perspectives and reactions

towards reading comprehension were discussed. They were told how these few classes will be different from the previous classes that they had had with me through grammar translation method. Before going into the selected text 'London Road' taken from English for Undergraduates students' schematic knowledge was activated. Different themes from the chapter which were the themes of going abroad, home, family, feelings were discussed. In addition to these themes, the given picture in the chapter was discussed in terms of its symbolism that evoked the themes of life, hardships and success.

Concept maps were used to help students to see the mentioned themes in multiple ways and perspectives which helped their understanding of the text. Students were asked to provide the most relevant words and along with their reasons of why they selected those words. After selecting and categorizing words, the word map had automatically turned into a concept map. The students were then asked to make concept maps of various themes mentioned earlier that were then discussed on board.

AIMS

The aims of this lesson plan were to enable students to:

- Relate words with concept.
- Gain better understanding and multiple possibilities of the themes in the text.
- Make concept word maps to gain deeper understanding of the text.
- To monitor their own conceptual development and assess their understanding and knowledge.

Rationale

The above activities were designed to activate students' schematic knowledge and thus encourage them to take active part in the class discussion and look into the text with multiple possibilities and meanings. The concept maps were used because they facilitate students to learn new words and refresh their memory of the ideas they already possess.

Discussion

The aims of this lesson plan were achieved to a large extent as students showed their interest in the discussion of the text and shared their understanding of various themes. It not only improved their role or behaviour in the class but also created a better learning environment. Almost all the students participated when concept map was being drawn on the board.

Students' participation and interest were also reflected in their worksheets. Everyone made an effort to do the work assigned to them and to a great extent succeeded in their attempts. I observed that students took more interest when they were taught with a different approach which required them to think of their own experiences and their background knowledge activated in the pre-reading activities.

Cycle III

Action plan

At the start of the third cycle students were asked to use their mind maps made in the earlier class to write a brief paragraph on how they would feel when they would have to go abroad, for any reason among the ones discussed in the mind maps, leaving their family behind? After they had written this paragraph, the text was read half way through understanding the difficult words with the help of context and various cues, they were asked to compare their feelings that they had written towards the start of the class with the feelings of the character in the text Laurie Lee when he was leaving his home and family behind. They were then asked to predict the ending part of the text and what was to happen next to Laurie Lee after he had left his home.

AIMS

The aims of these activities were to enable students to:

- Infer meaning of the difficult words from context

- Learn how to compare and contrast things, information or feelings
- Enhance their anticipation and predictive skills based on textual evidence

Rationale

The above activities were designed to assist students to cope up with difficult and new vocabulary words with the help of various cues and contextual aids which hinder their understanding of the text and prevent them from taking interest in the text.

Discussion

The aims of this lesson plan were achieved to a large extent as students very nicely coped up with the difficulties of unknown or new words. They were able to relate their feelings with the feelings of the character in the text as they had already discussed all the themes in the pre-reading activities in the first and second phase and had written an account of their personal feelings at the start of the third cycle.

Students' participation and interest were again also reflected in their worksheets too. Everyone made an effort to do the work assigned and to a great extent succeeded in their attempt too.

Cycle IV

Action plan

A general discussion was arranged with the students in the third class in which students were asked about the new method of reading comprehension skills in comparison to the old grammar translation method. They had to give reasons for their choices as well and were required to discuss at least one best thing that they had liked about the reading comprehension strategy.

AIMS

The aims of these activities were to find out:

- If exploiting ELT textbooks in a number of ways really helped students' reading comprehension or not?
- What were students reason for their choice of the method opted for?

Rationale

The fourth cycle was designed to get students' feedback both verbally and in writing as to whether this study supports the research question,

'Can Prescribed ELT Textbooks be exploited to enhance students reading comprehension skills or not?'

The verbal interaction offered me an opportunity to ask questions and reasons for students' choices and to what extent and how their reading comprehension skills were enhanced.

Discussion

The aims of this lesson plan were achieved to a large extent as students shared their responses in details giving justifications for their choices. They liked for various reasons the new method for enhancing reading comprehension skills as compared to grammar translation method. Some of the students said;

- Because of the pre-reading activities *hamare liye easy hogaya tha* to compare our feeling with Laurie Lee's feeling. *Hum* actually feel *kar rhe thay* how difficult it must have been for him to leave his home and go out in the world to make his name.
- Discussing the picture in the chapter helped a lot to understand how difficult a life Laurie Lee had chosen for himself. *Jaisa hum ne discuss kiya tha ke* road is not straight *aur us mein bohat saare bends hein*, road *mein bohat sare ups and downs bhi hein aur ye* theme of life *ko evoke kar rhe hai ke* life is not easy and you will have to bear many hardships if you want success in your life and Lauree Lee did the same.
- It gave us a chance *ke hum soch saken ke kiya kiya* different possibilities *ho sakte hein* about anything. In this method we had to decide many things ourselves

because unlike other chapters you were not simply translating the chapter for us and we were passively receiving it but taking equal part with you to understand the chapter.

- *Is mein hamari jo* background knowledge activate *hui* about different themes of family, home, life, going abroad *aur apne experience se bhi hum ne use compare kiya us sey* chapter *ko samajh ne mein bohat madad mile aur bohat sare words jis ke hamain meaning nahi pata thay us ko bhi hum guess ker paye is liye* it helped a lot.

Brief Discussion on Action Plans Implemented

In each class it was observed that students were motivated through the use of different techniques and methods employed for enhancing students' reading comprehension skills. They took interest in almost all the activities and performed well both in class discussions and in their written work samples. Their participation in class was indicative that they were learning and improving their understanding and reading comprehension. Thus, in the lights of various data collection tools employed and data analyzed it can be affirmed that prescribed ELT textbooks can be exploited in better and multiple ways to enhance students' reading comprehension.

In addition to this, students' perspectives written in the final feedback and class discussion also reflected their deep interest to use these various reading strategies employed to improve reading comprehension. They said that it was an altogether new and different experience of using textbooks which helped them in comprehending the text.

Thus, prescribed ELT textbooks can be exploited effectively to enhance students' reading comprehension. The different techniques employed in this study and many more which could not have been used because of the time constraint facilitate teachers to use the prescribed textbooks in different ways and help to motivate students by giving them a variety of ways and perspectives to try and comprehend different texts.

The next section discusses conclusions and recommendations.

Ethical Considerations

All the ethical principles were kept in mind for conducting this study. The permission was taken from the principle of the sample institution which did not prove to be difficult as I presently teach in this institution. The class lecture was recorded with the consent of the institution and students were informed about it. The name of the institution is kept anonymous.

28

Time limitations

For this study I had one semester. Research planning was completed at the beginning of the semester with the collaboration of the research supervisor and the field work was done from 13th June to 11th July, 2010.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This section discusses conclusions and recommendations in the lights of my reflections and students' feedback taken through class discussions, classroom practice and written work.

In this research I realized that it is the job of a teacher to use prescribed textbooks in different ways and with such strategies which make the learning of a text as meaningful and interesting as possible. It is essential to create a positive and productive learning environment for the students in which they could actually learn and communicate with both the teacher and other students through the provision of their responses. Action research gave me the opportunity to create such learning environment through a variety of strategies employed in pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading stages.

As a researcher I was happy about the fact that my actions to make the students confident about taking interest in the class discussion and to participate in all the activities were successful. I found that although my students were not of the same proficiency level,

yet they participated and gave responses to my questions and vice versa.

Most teachers in the Pakistani ELT classrooms do not try to use the given textbooks in different ways and rather use grammar translation method which keeps students' passive participants of classrooms and really do not improve their skills to comprehend any text on their own in the absence of the teacher. The reasons probably are lack of training and lack of knowledge of various techniques and strategies that can be used to enhance students reading comprehension that can enable them to comprehend texts independently.

Many challenges remain, therefore using textbooks more purposely and implementing high-quality reading comprehension instructions in Pakistani ELT classrooms. There is a need for greater emphasis in teacher education of reading comprehension.

So, in conclusion two major recommendations need to be made.

One is the need to take teachers into confidence and motivate them to study and know different strategies and techniques that they can apply on a textbook and also know the recent developments made in Reading comprehension instructions. There is a need to guide them to take courses and attend workshops, which will aid them in improving their teaching methods. Such courses/workshops need to focus on changing their beliefs and methods rather than on simply transmitting a set of research or theory based knowledge about teaching Reading comprehensions.

Secondly, for further progress to be made in regards to exploit prescribed ELT textbooks to improve students' reading comprehension in Pakistani ELT classrooms, further research needs to be done that focuses on ways to teach strategies within the setting of the classroom. This can be achieved with the collaboration of researchers with Pakistani educational institutes where they work together to motivate teachers to improve their teaching methods.

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Appendix

1. *hamaare liye easy hogaya tha* (it became easy for us)
2. *ham* (we)
3. *Kar rabe thay* (were feeling)
4. *Jaisa ham ne discuss kiya tha ke* (like we discussed that)
5. *aur us me~ bobat saare bends he~* (and that has many bends)
6. *bobat saare* (many)
7. *aur* (and)
8. *aur ye theme of life ko evoke kar raha he ke* (and it is evoking the theme of life)
9. *ke ham soch sake~ ke kya kya possibilities ho sakti he~* (that we could think what could be the different possibilities possible)
10. *is me~ hamari jo* (in it our)
11. *aur apne experience se bhi ham ne use compare kiya us se chapter ko samajh ne me~ bobat madad mili aur bobat saare words jis ke hame~ meaning nah~ pata thay us ko bhi ham guess kar paae is liye it helped a lot.* (and we compared that with our experience as well, that helped a lot to comprehend the chapter, and many words, who's meaning were unknown to us, we were able to guess, that is why it helped a lot.)