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Is Teacher's Reading Aloud an Effective Strategy or not?

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Abstract

This study briefly states the nature of reading comprehension, and the characteristics and usage of the reading aloud (RA) strategy in EFL. RA is a traditionally neglected but a useful strategy not only in primary schools but also in high schools especially in EFL contexts. This study aims to investigate the effect of teacher's RA on the comprehension of grade 6, low elementary level EFL learners. 24 students participated in the study. Two short stories with comprehension questions were used to collect data. Interviews were conducted with 5 volunteers. Data showed mixed results. The quantitative data indicated no significant difference between the performances of learners in the SR task and the teacher's RA task, however, the qualitative data revealed learners' opinions in favour of the teacher's RA task.

Keywords: *English language teaching, reading aloud, reading strategies, teaching young learners*

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Reading Aloud in L2

Although it is considered as one of the reading strategies, teacher's reading aloud (RA) has not been investigated in detail in EFL/ESL context so far. Even, this strategy in general is perceived as a neglected traditional practice by EFL/ESL teachers and those dealing with EFL/ESL methodology. On the other hand, 'silent reading has the lion's share of the teaching/ learning time' (Kailani 1998: 281).

Besides getting little attention from the EFL/ESL teachers and methodologists, it is also criticised by some researchers. For example, Hill and Dobbyn (1979, cited by Amer 1997) see RA as a time filler activity with as little trouble for the teacher which is of no use to learners. In that sense, Gardner (1986, cited by Kailani *ibid.*) supports the idea that in the foreign language classroom RA activity is time-consuming, artificial and does not provide scaffolding during the reading process. Gabrielatos (2002) also argues that RA is not an efficient way of improving reading comprehension, instead it promotes learners' pronunciation skills, and the reading speed of learners will be affected negatively since it mostly focuses on the correct pronunciation of words or sounds rather than reading for comprehension.

On the other hand, researchers such as Fisher, Flood, Lapp and Frey (2004) and Jacobs, Morrison and Swinyard (2000) state that especially at the early stages of reading instruction teacher's RA can be a very useful strategy. When learning a new language is taken into consideration, RA by the teacher may also guide learners through this adventure of learning a second or foreign language. Naturally, these readers, when reading by themselves, tend to read word by word and break sentences into meaningful parts while trying to understand each word. At this point RA by the teacher may be of great assistance if given a chance.

Reading aloud by the teacher helps EFL readers discover units of meaning that should be read as phrases rather than word by word. It also helps readers to see reading as a continuous, meaningful process of building larger semantic units rather than focusing on graphic cues. With appropriate practice readers gradually realize that they can achieve a higher level of comprehension by reading larger meaningful units of texts rather than focusing on individual units. The proper production by the teacher of punctuation signals, stress, and intonation, may play an important role in this process (Amer *op.cit.*: 44).

Furthermore, Jacobs and Hannah (2004) listed the benefits of teacher's RA to students at any level of reading proficiency. Some of which are learning new language items while reinforcing the previously learnt ones, listening practice, building a mutual communication channel between the reader and the listeners, building/increasing learners' general world knowledge via discussions and so on.

RA is also important in terms of the variety it brings to the classroom as an alternative form of exposure to the target language.

To sum up, RA is a dual engaging activity in which both teachers and learners interact with each other. Teacher's RA can be a powerful tool to promote students' reading comprehension provided that it is integrated into the ELT curriculum.

Research on Teacher's Reading Aloud in L2

So far, reading research has dealt with the issue of the difference in the approaches of the successful and less successful readers towards comprehending a text and what strategies they use. There are some studies suggesting that overall RA in ELT is an efficient method in terms of improving reading comprehension (Miyasako 2006; Takeuchi, Ikeda and Mizumoto, 2012)

With regards to the RA research, Amer (op. cit.) conducted a study investigating the effect of teacher's RA on the reading comprehension of 75 6th grade EFL students. The results indicate that learners perform better in the teacher RA situation than in the silent reading (SR) situation.

Similarly, in his study which he carried out with Arabic-speaking university students, Dhaif (1990) also concluded that learners with a basic level of English benefit more while they function in a RA situation rather than in the SR situation.

In her study conducted with 27 teachers and 7 adult EFL learners, Gibson (op. cit.) aimed to find out how and why RA is being used currently in language learning. As a result of the study, she stated some of the main reasons language teachers prefer to use the RA method in their classes. Some of these are pronunciation and intonation practice, speaking practice, improving fluency and practising reading skills, learning vocabulary and so on.

Method

This study was set up to explore the questions:

- 1 What is the effect of the teacher's use of the RA on the reading comprehension of grade 6 EFL students?
- 2 Is there a significant difference between the use of the teacher's RA and SR strategies on the reading comprehension of grade 6 level EFL learners?

Participants

In total, 24 students in a state secondary school in Turkey participated in the study. They were 12 years old, 6th grade students in the same class. They were elementary level students who had been learning English as a foreign language in a traditional teaching context for 3 years. At the onset of the study, they had 4 hours of English lessons in a week and were enrolled in the second semester of the 2011-2012 academic year.

Materials

The short stories used in the study were called "Kimau's Paper Bag" and "Len's Parrot" from Start Reading Series (Derek 1992). Although the levels of the stories were in parallel with the English level of the participants, they were still edited by the researcher to be more easily understood. This editing took the form of adjusting sentence length, simplifying vocabulary and strengthening some connections in the text by making them explicit. Some detail which seemed irrelevant was also removed. The first text was composed of 214 words, whereas the second text was composed of 229 words. 8 words in each text were glossed. The

words were selected according to two considerations. The first was degree of difficulty and the second was the degree of importance.

4 comprehension, 6 true-false and 5 sentence ordering questions were given to the participants after each text. Questions were designed in order to assess all parts of the passage so that the test could check for overall understanding of the story.

Procedure

The class was experimented in two different sessions (40 min. each), within one week. In each session, as a pre-reading activity, the key vocabulary in the part to be read was introduced briefly. Next, the participants silently read their texts in the first session and answered the comprehension, true-false and sentence ordering type of questions. The same procedure was carried out in the second session, except teacher read the text aloud this time. Approximately 20 minutes were given to students in order to read and complete the questions in each session. After the application of tests, interviews were carried out with the volunteer 5 participants in order to make them compare SR versus teacher's RA procedures, learn their ideas on whether they had any difficulty, the questions were comprehensible or not etc. In terms of scoring, one mark was given for each correct answer.

I, as both the researcher and the conductor of this study collected the data. The qualitative data were collected in the form of videotaped interviews and observation notes. The participants voluntarily attended the study and they were told that their recordings would not be shown or their voices would not be listened by anyone but their teacher who conducted the study. The recordings took place in their classes in front of their classmates during school hours. As a means of processing the quantitative data, paired samples t-test was carried out in order to determine and compare whether there were any significant differences between the comprehension levels of students in the first test and the second test.

Results

Quantitative analysis of the study was conducted using the SPSS Version 15. As the distribution of the data was normal, paired-samples t-test was conducted in order to compare the means of the reading tests. Qualitative analysis was carried out on the interview data and observation notes. The total possible score on the reading comprehension test was 15 points. Each correct answer was awarded one point. Descriptive statistics are presented in table 1.

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics of Reading Test 1 and Reading Test 2

	N	Min	Max	M	SD
R1	24	5	14	8.50	2.71
R2	24	4	13	7.42	2.37

As seen in table 1, in the first reading test the minimum point is 5 and the maximum point is 14, whereas the minimum point is 4 and the maximum point is 13 in the second

reading test. At the same time, these values show the number of questions that were answered correctly. The table also demonstrate that the mean score for the SR condition is higher (8.50) than the one for the RA condition (7.42). The standard deviation values are 2.71 in the reading test 1 and 2.37 in the reading test 2.

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the means of the reading tests in SR and RA conditions in detail. Table 2 reveals the results of the paired samples t-test.

Table 2.

The results of the paired samples t-test.

Groups	n	SD	Mean	Std. Error Mean	Sh _x Test		
					<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>
R1	24	2.71	8.50	0.55	1.47	23	0.15
R2	24	2.37	7.42	0.48			

As seen in table 2, the results of the t- test which was conducted in order to see whether there is a significant difference between the arithmetic means of reading test 1 and 2 reveal that the difference between the arithmetic means are not found to be significant ($t=1.47$; $p>0.05$).

The Sig. (2-Tailed) value in our study is 0.15. Since the significance value is greater than 0.05, there is no significant difference. Thus, it can be concluded that there is no statistically significant difference between the conditions of SR and RA strategies. So, the tests did not differ much in effecting the reading comprehension level of students.

After the application of tests, interviews were carried out with the volunteer 5 participants in their classroom context by the conductor and the researcher of the study. These interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed. The interviews were conducted in L1 and the comments below are translated from Turkish. They are asked to comment on and compare the first reading task which was accomplished by the SR strategy and the second task which was accomplished by the teacher's RA strategy.

This is how they answered the questions of

- 1 which of the stories they liked more and why,
- 2 whether they had any difficulty in understanding the stories and answering the questions:

Burcu: I liked the 1st story, it was understandable. The questions were familiar to me. I could answer them easily. I liked the 2nd story more, it was more enjoyable. There were more understandable parts. There were less unknown words. I could answer the questions easily. In fact, the two stories were very similar in terms of the questions and vocabulary but I found the 2nd story easier.

Mert: I liked the first story. It was easy for me. I didn't have any difficulty. I could understand the story easily and the questions were comprehensible enough. However, I liked the second story more. I couldn't understand the second paragraph but I didn't have any difficulty in answering the questions.

Banu: 2nd story was easier. The 1st one was difficult because there were more unknown words. 2nd story took less time to finish.

Mine: I liked the 2nd story more because you read it and I could understand it better. The question types were familiar to me but the reason why I have difficulty is that I don't know all the words in the text.

Kerem: I liked both stories but the first one was longer. However, the 1st story was easier. The 2nd story was difficult but it took less time to finish because the unknown words were less.

As it can be inferred from the excerpts that, all of the interviewees, except one who said that he liked both of them, stated they liked the second story more. They all agreed on the idea that the second story was easier and more comprehensible; on the contrary, the first story was more difficult because there were more unknown words. Just one participant (Kerem) commented as opposed to the other interviewees by saying that the first story was easier than the second, however, it took more time to complete.

During the following phases of the interviews participants were asked to compare the texts in terms of the strategies of teacher's RA versus SR. Their comments are as follows:

Burcu: Teacher's reading aloud helped me in the second story because the words were pronounced in a more correct way so it became more meaningful.

Mert: When the teacher read aloud, she just helped me understand the text generally but when I read silently I understood all the details in the text. I understood the 2nd story better. The teacher's reading aloud helped me find main ideas.

Banu: I prefer teacher's reading aloud because I might pronounce some words wrong by myself, some words alike each other but you read beautifully and naturally so I prefer teacher's reading aloud.

Mine: I confuse the writing and spelling of some words but when you read, it became easier for me to remember and understand them correctly. So, I prefer teacher's reading aloud.

Kerem: I prefer reading alone many times than your reading once although your reading helped me understand the text better.

These excerpts reveal that all the interviewees, except one (Kerem) believe in the importance and benefits of the RA strategy. However, it is important to note that some of them take this benefit in terms of the assistance RA brings in spelling or pronouncing words correctly rather than the assistance in comprehending the meaning.

The researcher's observation notes supports the information in the interviews that the second task which was based on the teacher's RA strategy took less time (about 3 minutes) to finish than the first task which was based on the SR strategy (about 7 minutes). The notes also reveal that in the SR task, after 15 minutes passed, participants' attention span became shorter so they had difficulty in paying attention to answering the questions, distraction occurred.

Discussion

How to improve reading comprehension has been an issue of debate among the researchers dealing with especially the field of EFL. To this end, a lot of research has been conducted on the strategies used in second and foreign language reading in order to improve reading comprehension levels of the learners.

In order to achieve success, reading strategies are to be exploited selectively. "The utilization of strategies functions positively only when the readers use them on specific occasions in reading a particular text. Otherwise, the readers may still fail to comprehend the texts even though they apply some reading strategies" (Zhang, Gu and Hu 2008: 267).

Luke and Freebody (1997) suggest that as high proficiency learners have better knowledge of English, this might also lead to their better understanding of both the linguistic tasks, the variables related to learning, and the conditions in which learning took place. They are more focused on summarising, inferring meaning and monitoring their comprehension process. On the other hand, low-proficiency readers tend to focus on the linguistic aspects, they want to give up if they do not understand the message (cited by Zhang, Gu and Hu *ibid.*). However, here this might not be the case. As in this study the assessing criteria (RA and SR) are not highly mentally demanding linguistic tasks, it may not be possible to reveal the learners' actual linguistic proficiency.

Comparing the two strategies in this study, the SR and teacher's RA, the data showed mixed results. The results of the analysis of the quantitative data indicate that learners did not differ significantly in understanding of what they were reading in the SR than in the teacher's RA.

In the present study, one of the reasons of the insignificant results in the both tasks may be due to the learners' lack of sufficient knowledge and other knowledge such as background/ schema knowledge. This possible difference in the learners' language proficiency level may cause some obstructions in getting the main ideas of the two different texts which they were required to comprehend and answer some questions accordingly. Nevertheless, it is not very clear that whether they were able to gain a clear awareness of their use of such reading strategies.

However, the qualitative data gathered from the videotaped interviews are in favour of the RA task. Four out of five volunteer participants with whom the interviews were conducted state that they prefer the teacher's RA because it helps them understand the text generally and as they confuse the writing and spelling of some words, it becomes easier to remember and understand them correctly when reading aloud. Additionally, they all believe in the importance and benefits of the RA strategy. However, most of them perceive this benefit from the aspect of pronunciation rather than meaning construction.

Conclusion

In recent years, the ELT research on the reading skill have focused on 'the nature of reading, reading strategies, learners' strategic behaviours and the impacts of strategy instruction on their comprehension performances' (Kantarci 2006: 32).

This study attempted to compare the effect of teacher's RA and SR on the reading comprehension of grade 6, elementary level EFL learners. Although the interview results were mostly in favour of the RA task, the findings from the present study showed that the learners did not differ in demonstrating better comprehension when they accomplished the task by the mediation of SR in comparison to the task accomplished by the mediation of teacher's RA.

To conclude, in order to maintain an effective teaching/ learning atmosphere teachers should adopt balanced instruction approaches considering the advantages of both SR and RA tasks. One of the most important advantages of teacher's RA or RA in general is its ability to engage students interactively in the learning process. This strategy helps learners discover that reading is a pleasant, meaningful process and that it is enjoyable to exchange ideas with others. Students discover that reading involves listening, discussion, argument, and decision making. Moreover, they also discover that reading is not an isolated activity. In order to achieve a full comprehension of a text, they should be aware that they have to integrate all kinds of skills besides reading and use them in harmony. Teachers and administrators must also realize its vital importance in terms of maintaining the literacy development.

Further research is needed to determine how L2 language learners' reading comprehension is influenced by the level of learner proficiency or the effects of RA and SR strategy.

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