Using Dialogues to Support Critical Thinking: Implementing Collaborative Classrooms in Libya

استخدام الحوار لدعم التفكير النقدي: تطبيق الفصل التعاوني في ليبيا

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المستخلص:

لا يتعرض طلاب المستوى الجامعي في ليبيا إلى مواد قراءة مستقلة من مصادر أخرى كأجزاء من تعليمهم الجامعي. في مواد القراءة ، من المتوقع أن يطور المتعلمون الليبيون للغة الإنجليزية (كلغة أجنبية) عادات القراءة التي تمكنهم من استيعاب المعلومات. وللقيام بذلك ، يتعين عليهم تطوير مستوى لغوي مناسب لفهم النصوص. من جانب اخر، القراءة النقدية التي تتطلب التساؤل لمعالجة معنى النصوص لا تحظى بالأولوية في الفصول الدراسية الليبية. لهذه الأسباب ، فإن بناء قدرة متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية الليبيين على القراءة النقدية يمثل تحديًا حقيقيًا. لذلك فإن توجيه مواد القراءة للتركيز على القراءة النقدية جزء مطلوب في برامج اللغة الإنجليزية لطلاب الجامعات في ليبيا.

الغرض الرئيسي من هذه الورقة هو التحقيق في فعالية تنفيذ أنشطة القراءة التي يمكن تنفيذها في فصول القراءة بالجامعة الليبية لتشجيع المعلمين والمتعلمين الليبيين على تجاوز مهارات القراءة الأساسية التي تشمل فك المعنى الأساسي للنصوص ودمج التفكير النقدي أثناء قراءة. تضمنت الأنشطة قراءة المواد الأدبية لتشجيع متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية على مناقشة قراءتهم من خلال العمل بشكل تعاوني مع أقرانهم.

لتقديم خلفية عن منهجية البحث ، يعرض الجزء الأول من الورقة المشكلات الشائعة الموجودة في فصول اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بالمستوى الجامعي. ثم يركز الجزء الثاني على الأنشطة المبتكرة في فصول القراءة الأدبية للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. تعتبر الأنشطة المقترحة مبتكرة لأنها لم يتم تنفيذها في معظم أماكن تعلم اللغة الليبية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك ، استجاب المتعلمون الليبيون للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بشكل إيجابي تجاه الأنشطة. تختتم الورقة بمناقشة الآثار المترتبة على طرق التدريس التي يمكن تطبيقها على سياقات مماثلة لتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية.

Abstract

University level students in Libya are not exposed to independent reading materials from other resources as parts of their university level. In reading courses, Libyan English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners are expected to develop reading habits that enable them to absorb

information. To do so, they are required to develop adequate language level to comprehend texts. Critical reading that demands questioning to process the meaning of texts is not prioritized in Libyan tertiary classrooms. For these reasons building Libyan English language learners' ability to read critically is really challenging. Directing reading courses to focus on critical reading have been a demanded part of English language programs for university students in Libya.

The main purpose of this paper is to investigate the effectiveness of implementing reading activities that can be implemented in Libyan university reading classes to encourage Libyan teachers and learners to go beyond the basic reading skill that include decoding the basic meaning of texts and incorporate critical thinking while reading. The activities involved reading literary materials to encourage Libyan EFL learners to discuss their reading by working collaboratively with their peers. To provide background of the approach, the first part of the paper presents common problems found in the Libyan EFL tertiary classroom. Then the second part focuses on the innovative activities into Libyan EFL literary reading classes. The suggested activities are considered innovative because they have not been implemented in most Libyan language learning settings. Additionally, Libyan EFL learners responded positively towards the activities. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of the approach that can be applied to similar contexts of English language learning.

Introduction

Reading is a complex cognitive process to construct meaning. It requires more than decoding graphic symbols of texts. In all languages, the interaction between the reader and the text is shaped by the reader's prior knowledge and experiences which are influenced by cultural and social communities. When readers are dealing with texts not written in their first language, they may encounter a lack of familiarity with the cultural and social contexts of the foreign language (Pardo, 2004; Nassaji, 2003, Carrell, 1987).

Based on this perspective, meaning of language is determined by actual contexts. Such contexts include not only surrounding words but also purposes, values, and social interactions that are most related to understand the current contexts. In this case, reading comprehension needs to go beyond internal relations of words within the text. It must be rooted in the simulations of deeds and interactions of the real social worlds (Gee, 2001). Thus, the meaning of language forms involves intersubjective dialogic interactions. Intersubjectivity involves interaction with a more capable

peer to enable individuals to take a different perspective from that they already have through dialogic exchanges that guide criticality of the reading texts.

The suggested approach is inherited in the social constructivists' views of learning prioritizing the role of dialogic exchanges for critical reading of texts. It investigates how learners' schematic activation by the teacher through cooperation between the teacher and the learners and the interaction among the learners themselves supports the critical reading of short stories.

Literature review: Reading in EFL Contexts

Research has revealed that English language learners are often motivated to develop their oral language skills i.e. the ability to listen and speak. Mori (2002) conducted a research in Japan to investigate learners' motivation to read in English. He found that learners' motivation to read in English is not significantly different from their motivation to read in their first language. The findings of Yamashita are in line with the results of Mori. The researcher argues that learners' attitudes towards reading in their first language affect their attitudes towards the foreign language they are learning. In Libya, to the researcher's knowledge, no earlier research investigated Libyan EFL learners' attitudes and motivation towards reading. However, from the researcher's personal experience, these findings support the Libyan language learning situation in which learners intend to develop their listening and speaking skills. Many Libyan EFL learners stress that they aim to improve their speaking more than reading in English.

It can be argued that Libyan EFL learners are demotivated by the way reading literary texts are taught in the English classroom (Mohamed, 2017). In university learning settings, teaching reading is conducted in a traditional way in which teachers make an analysis of the text language to be memorized by the learners (El-Naili, 2006, Elbadri,2009). Moreover, Libyan learners are often asked to answer related questions with the teacher guidance involving low level of thinking. Teachers are considered the main source of knowledge to provide the complete correct answers. Such an activity is also a typical task that is regularly used in English literature tests to assess learners' understanding. Accordingly, it can be argued that Libyan learners at this educational level study literary texts to get grades to pass their official exams. It can be argued that this is because of the traditional teaching approach adopted in Libya in which learners are instructed to receive information and work individually therefore they are prepared more to pass their exams personally rather than to work collaboratively to discuss and think critically about the text content.

Moreover, many Libyan EFL learners do not read extensively in their Arabic first language (Mohamed, 2017, Abu-baker,2012). As a result, when they enter university and specialized in English, they feel overwhelmed when teachers place expectations on them to become independent readers. They also lack familiarity with the different genres of literary texts including poetry, drama and fiction because teachers rely heavily on textbooks as the source of their teaching (Elnaili, 2006, Elbadri. 2009, Mohamed, 2017). Consequently, learners are exposed only to traditional pedagogic approaches that prioritize responses to comprehension questions without thinking deeply about what they read to develop lower order thinking skills.

Teaching EFL reading

Learners' perceptions of reading at the university level are determined by the way reading is taught. Widodo (2009) stresses that reading teachers should use interesting reading texts and involving reading tasks that develop learners' thinking skills. Tasks involve pre, while and post activities In line with social constructivists' views that stress the role of social interaction for learning and development, Widodo also stresses group work to collaborate for reading with teachers' guidance and scaffolding. Anderson (2001) also argues that when learners read together they are combining their earlier knowledge and skill learning from each other and build mutual understanding of the content.

Using appropriate reading materials is one of the essential decision for reading teachers (Lindsay & Knight, 2006). For Anderson (2008), teachers need to select reading materials which are just above the learners' current level, where they should be capable to comprehend 75% of the text content. Nation (2007) similarly argues that meaningful reading of texts happens when some parts of the text language are unknown to the readers stressing extensive reading for language learners. The way reading is taught also requires teachers to present their reading lesson with carefully designed reading tasks that scaffold learners' reading ability and develop their thinking skills. The suggested approach for reading pedagogy by Lindsay and Knight (2006) and by Mohamed (2017) involves well planned activities for the three well known reading stages: pre-while and post reading stages which considered as an innovative development in the Libyan context. These stages include activities that should provide a step by step instructions to scaffold learners' meaningful critical reading.

Interactive collaborative approach for critical reading in Libya

Dialogic exchanges as used in the suggested activities emphasize the importance of providing learners with opportunities to talk and interact with others in the learning sessions for expressing their thinking and developing an understanding (Lantolf, 2005). Learners' dialogues are emphasized in all the three stages described below.

The pre-reading stages is based on activating learners' prior learning or background knowledge related to the information in the text. This is based on the psycholinguistic interactive reading process of schema theory. Schema theory conceptualizes the role of learners' existing learning for a successful comprehension of the new information in the text. Nassji (2002) emphasizes that pre reading stage is 'a process of mapping the information from the text onto these pre-existing knowledge structures, and that knowledge-based processes are predictive and reader-driven' (444). Activities usually include presenting new vocabulary, brainstorming related ideas and a questioning. These activities are maintained before reading with an intention of building relevant language and content knowledge related to the text (Lindsay & Knight, 2006, Mohamed, 2017).

The while-reading stage involves the learners to read the text in order to get the meaning of the new information. Mohamed (2017) emphasizes teacher and learner dialogic exchanges through questioning during this stage. Language exchanges can be used to guide learners' interaction towards development and understanding. However, Bellamy and Woolsey (1998) caution that not all conversations lead to learning. They propose that only exploratory talk in which learners can ask questions and articulate their understanding is effective. Palincsar (1998) adds that articulation of understanding involves communicating with others to create meaningful explanation and justifications of new knowledge.

Accordingly, dialogic exchanges are used as scaffolding procedure to engage the learners in discussions for negotiating the meaning with the help of their teacher to guide the learners to deeper levels of understanding and provide learning opportunities. Learners, therefore, are not 'the processors of input or producers of output' (Gibbons, 2003, p. 248). Rather, dialogues are used to create opportunities for thinking and for mediating learning in order to provide deeper understanding.

The post reading stage can include different activities to check learners understanding of the text. Teachers can have their learners answer related questions. Sunggingwati and Nguyen (2013)

emphasize the role of questioning in post reading stage by asserting cognitively challenging questions that involve learners' interpretations. They discourage the direct use of information from the text and encourage inferring, predicting and evaluating questions that promote dialogic exchanges and critical thinking (Widodo, 2009). Activities of post reading stage in the present investigation writing a different ending, sequencing the events in the text and conducting group discussions about information or events in the text (Lindsay & Knight, 2006; Widodo, 2009). Learners also provide feedback about their understanding of the text and skills they have developed. The post reading stage aims to extend the readers' understanding of the text.

Applying the new approach in the Libyan classroom

The participant sampling

Using the overall frameworks described above, in the Libyan university reading class, several activities were experimented aiming to develop students' critical thinking through collaborative work. Using the overall approach described above in reading classroom in Libya involved the use of several activities that aim to develop the learners critical thinking through dialogic exchanges. The class consisted of 20 volunteered participants enrolled in the fifth semester in the program of English language in Benghazi University. They studied English in their primary, preparatory and secondary school. Additionally, they specialized in English and studied English literary texts. The purpose of selecting semester 5 Libyan EFL learners is to avoid beginners of reading English short fiction in semesters 2 and 4 or very advanced learners of semesters 6 and 7. The participants range in age from 20 to 22. They are all Libyans and Arabic is their mother tongue. The students involved in the study have not experienced a dialogic interactive approach to learning due to the more traditional Libyan teaching approach, which is primarily lecture-based. Thus, the participants fit the purpose of the present study because they are all learners of EFL and have been exposed to English literary materials. The class met weekly but not all the reading stages and their involved activities were implemented every meeting.

Pre-reading Stage

At the beginning of the session, prior to beginning of the reading text, as indicated above, it was essential to help students understand the key vocabulary presented. Several activities were used at this stage to increase vocabulary development.

Word Dictation

We instructed our students to read several paragraphs of the assigned story, '*The Masque of the red death'* by Edgar Allan Poe and informed them that there would be a word dictation activity in the following meeting. The words dictated were all taken from the assigned reading pages, and for each one the students were asked to write them down.

The selected activity aims to encourage the learners to pay attention to the spelling and, importantly, to emphasize the orthographic/ sound relationship. We read each target word twice, then read the sentence from the book in which the word was located, after which we again pronounced the word. Reading the sentence in which the word was located helped our students to deal with homophones (i.e. words that sound the same but have different meanings and spellings e.g. their, there, and they're).

Students were then asked to choose a word and volunteer to take turns to write it on the board to make sure that every student knew the correct spelling of each word. We then discussed the words to see if they wanted to know more about the meaning. We also discussed the parts of speech of each word so that students understood when to use them within a sentence. This activity is based on the advice of Nation (2009) who emphasizes the importance of spelling in reading, stating that while it is difficult, spelling is one of the most important aspects in developing EFL reading and writing.

This activity provided the learners with opportunities to interact with each other to decide the parts of speech of various words. Students reported that they found this activity very valuable. At the end of the semester, when they were asked them to write a personal reflection on the reading class activities, most of them wrote that they looked forward to this particular activity. Some stated that word dictation prompted them to read aloud more often on their own time. It also increased their awareness of the spelling of a word and its sound. Others also stated that they had to listen to the whole sentence, so they could decide which word and spelling were intended, which encouraged them to think about meaning. This activity is in line with Welcome and Alton (2015) who argue for the ability of skilled readers to build connections between the phonological and orthographic systems.

Finding Synonyms or Definitions

This activity provided the Libyan learners with opportunities to develop their understanding of the meanings of important keywords for better comprehension when reading the texts. For this activity,

some definitions/synonyms of key vocabulary from the text were written on the board. Students were also instructed to work in small groups to match the synonyms/definitions with the words. The activity also enabled the students to move around and communicate with their classmates. Most students appeared to be motivated to collaborate with other group members. This activity boosted students' engagement with the lesson.

Guessing the Words

Guessing activities usually require individual performance through teacher to- student interaction. However, a guessing-in-context activity can be used to encourage interaction among students and create excitement and motivation. In applying the adopted approach, 'guess' the words was an activity designed to follow the earlier two activities stated above. For this activity, some sentences contained keywords from the text and were written on separate cards for each sentence. The keywords in each sentence were underlined and students were arranged into groups, giving one set of cards to each group. Sentences were read aloud by a member of the group to the rest. The rest of the group would guess the word. If no one could guess the guess word, the student would read it out.

Prediction

Another vocabulary activity used was getting students to predict what they are going to read which is essential during the pre-reading stage (Widodo 2009). Besides getting students to speculate on what the reading text will be about, prediction encourages learners to think critically. It is essential for teachers to elicit students' ideas and encourage them to predict. Prediction often involves the title of the text, visual images, videos, quotes of the text itself. Teachers can also encourage the students to collaborate in groups to brainstorm ideas.

This activity involved the division of the students into groups. Each group was provided with different tools to predict the text. Group 1, for instance, were provided with the title. Group 2 were given pictures related to the content of the text. Group 3 read some quotes taken from different parts of the text. Group work was followed by whole classroom discussion that enabled the learners to share their predictions with other groups.

While-reading Stage

To support learners' engagement during while reading stage, the following activities were used:

Jigsaw Reading

This while reading activity involved dividing the students into groups, as in the prediction stage. Each group had some parts of the text and were asked to read it then they discuss the part of the text within their group. They were also encouraged to share the information with the other members of the other groups therefor the next stage was to share their ideas about the content of the original texts with the new groups. Learners made notes of the main ideas about different parts of the text. Following this step, learners were asked to go back to their original group and discuss the new information they had received from the other groups they interacted with.

Some comprehension questions that cover the text were distributed. Questions were assigned to one particular member of each group as the members were given numbers in each group. Therefore, only students number 1 were allowed to answer the first question and so on. Since the participants were only asked to read a small, manageable part of the text, they were more motivated and seemed to be less pressured. Providing them with chances to share the text content using their own words improved their awareness to the extent where they did not necessarily need to recognize every single word to get an overall understanding of the text. Additionally, as they discussed the content of their part of the text, students thought critically to know what was necessarily to share. This collaborative activity benefited the learners for both angles comprehension and class engagement.

Alternative Reading

Alternative reading activity provided high level learners with opportunities to help out their counterparts. This activity involved providing the learners with two jumbled reading texts asking the students to work in small groups, each of which received one set of the jumbled text parts then asked them to put the separated text in the correct order. Some comprehension questions were distributed among the students to test out their understanding of the text and asked them to answer comprehension questions in their groups. Students also discussed the meanings of new words with each other before asking their teacher. Students used Arabic as their first language for this part of the activity to facilitate their collaboration and understand some cultural references in the text with each other.

Post-reading Stage

Activities used for the post-reading stage is designed to extend the students' understanding of the text from the pre-reading and while-reading stages into other learning activities (Widodo, 2009). This stage involved productive skills: speaking and writing, and also the use of students developed vocabulary and grammar (Lindsay and Knight, 2006). This stage is used purposively to encourage the

students to think beyond the reading texts and to give reflections to the reading text. Some provoking questions were provided to the learners to encourage them to think critically and deeply at this stage. This activity gave the students opportunities to share their personal views and responses. Below are some of the questions used to elicit students' personal reactions towards the text they had read:

- Do you agree with what the main character in the text did? Why/why not?
- If you were the main character in the text, would you do things the way he did? Why/Why not?
- Which option do you think gives more benefits? Please state your reasons.
- Do you think the ending of the story makes sense? If you could change the ending, how would you change it?

Pedagogical Implications

The suggested teaching approach provides some pedagogical implications for other similar contexts where the teaching of reading may still be teacher-centered. First, it is important for teachers to gauge the level of learners' language proficiency in order to select texts that are appropriate and accessible to their students. Texts should be slightly higher than students' current proficiency level to motivate, challenge and develop their learning. Additionally, teachers need to find out topics that interest their students. Also, teachers need to think beyond the textbooks. It is necessary to provide the materials with more creative and engaging activities to encourage students to collaborate and develop their own critical thinking and creativity. Finally, having good relationships with the students is also essential so that students can become more open to teachers in responding to the reading activities. Formal relationships with the students make meaningful discussions more challenging.

Conclusion

Teaching reading in the Libyan context, especially at university level, presents its own challenges because most high school graduates are not used to think critically about their meaning. We presented various reading activities that have been used successfully with our students. These can be helpful in addressing similar issues in other EFL contexts, which use teacher-centered methods for the teaching of reading. The pre-, while-, and post-reading activities used in the suggested approach engaged our students at various stages of reading and motivated them more than the standard methods. Despite the fact that we implemented the activities for students at university level, we believe that the suggested activities can also be adopted for high school students or even younger students, with some modification to suit students' level of cognitive development, language proficiency, and interests.

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