

Investigating the Role of Short-Stories in Overcoming the Problems Faced by the Libyan EFL Learners in Reading Comprehension Skill

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Abstract:

Reading comprehension skill forms the central place in any foreign language teaching and learning processes. It is considered to be a very important channel for getting the required exposure of the target language and also helps the foreign language learners in understanding the intricacies and nuances of the target language. However, this important language skill does not go well with the foreign language learners, who often dislike it, due to various reasons. This is the case with the Libyan EFL learners who face many difficulties and problems in reading comprehension skill and have negative attitude towards this important foreign language skill. In this respect, the present paper discusses the major problems faced by the Libyan EFL learners, in reading comprehension skill, and investigates the role of short-stories, as remedial material, in overcoming these problems.

1. Introduction:

Reading, being one of the most important language skills, has been the focus of attention for ages for the foreign language professionals, pedagogues, researchers, teachers and teacher-trainers. It plays a very crucial role in learning and mastering of foreign language like English. It is the channel through which a learner gets the exposure of the target language which is a must in foreign language teaching and learning context like Libya. Reading helps the foreign language learners to master its nuances. It is also important in EFL classroom to provide the learners with the essential exposure of varied intricacies of the target language. However, in foreign language teaching and learning context like Libya, English poses many difficulties for its learners while learning and mastering the major language skills, in general, and reading comprehension skill, in particular. Most of the students, learning English as major of their study in B.A., regard reading comprehension as the most difficult and highly boring activity. This thinking leads them to develop negative attitude towards the learning of English language in general as most of them go to an extent of saying that reading comprehension skill should not be taught at all in their course. This negative attitude of the EFL learners, then, often also becomes the main cause of their failure in mastering foreign language skills. Therefore, the present paper attempts to investigate the factors underlying such negative attitudes of the Libyan EFL learners, focusing on the major problems faced by them in reading, and the role of short-stories, as remedial, alternative teaching and learning material, in overcoming these problems.

2. Overview of Problems faced by Libyan EFL Learners in reading comprehension skill and the reasons underlying them:

2.1 General Background to the Study:

Learning of any foreign language is not always a pleasurable experience in the sense that the whole process of foreign language teaching and learning is often considered to be very difficult and uninteresting. In such situation, the teaching methodology, adopted by the foreign language teacher, the material, selected for teaching and learning the language skills, and various motivational and learning strategies play a very crucial role in deciding the success or failure of foreign language teaching and learning. Libya, being the third world country, faces many challenges in providing ideal environment and much needed resources for the effective teaching and learning of EFL. Though a lot of efforts are done by the government to provide all the required resources, needed for the effective teaching and learning, their implementations at the school level often result in failure due to various reasons. This often becomes the main cause of unsatisfactory and poor teaching of English as a foreign language, particularly at the school level, which affects the performance of EFL learners who opt for university education as they lack in required mastery over the important language skills.

2.2 Participants and Methodology:

The Data for this study, to investigate the major problems faced by the Libyan EFL learners in reading comprehension skill and to test the possibility of short-stories, as remedial teaching and learning material, to overcome these problems, was collected, through questionnaires from 100 Libyan EFL learners, studying in the first semester at the English language departments in Sebha, Sha'ti, Obari and Tragan campuses of the University of Sebha. The aim, behind offering the questionnaires, was to get the initial, essential insight into the learners' perception towards the reading comprehension skill, the major problems faced by them while reading, the kind of material used by their teachers while teaching this skill and their perceptions towards the use of short-stories as an alternative material to develop their reading comprehension skill.

2.3 Major problem faced by the Libyan EFL learners in Reading comprehension skill:

After analyzing and discussing the collected data, following various research criteria, the following insights were obtained into the major problems faced by the Libyan EFL learners in reading and the reasons underlying them. Most of the students, 75% of the participants, failed to communicate effectively, both in oral and written form. When focused, specifically, on their reading comprehension skill, it was observed that they face many difficulties and problems due to inadequate training and practice in reading from their school level.

Another major problem, which contributed to their problem in reading and in establishing successful communication, was the deficiency of vocabulary. Most of the participants faced the problem of insufficient essential vocabulary that made communication very difficult for them and often erroneous. It was reported that there were no conscious efforts from their teachers to encourage the students to learn and master new words and use them in daily practice as often as they could. Nor was the material provided such that offered them opportunities for developing and expanding their vocabulary.

Some 80% of the participants also faced the problem of pronunciation while reading. Sometimes, they did not know how to pronounce certain words and sometimes they pronounced them in wrong way following the spelling as the basis for their pronunciation. Even the most commonly used words were also marred with wrong pronunciation. The underlying causes for this problem were varied. Some believed that certain sound of English were not present in the sound system of their first language Arabic which made their pronunciation either like their mother-tongue near-sound or too difficult and sometimes

wrong. Others replied that they had learned to pronounce the word as it is spelled. But in English, sometimes words are not pronounced as they are spelled, so they got deceived by the spelling and pronounced the word in wrong way. Nor had they been taught by their teachers any rules regarding pronunciation so effectively that could help them in overcoming this problem easily. Another reason given was that of the absence of the native speakers. As they could not get the required exposure of native speakers, English being foreign language in Libya and teachers being non-native speakers of English, they could not learn how native speakers pronounce these words.

Another major problem faced by the Libyan EFL learners in reading was that of not following the punctuation norms while reading in English. While asked to read a passage, they neglected the punctuation norms as they either did not take a pause, where they were required to due to the punctuation marks, or took a pause, where they were not required to. Thus, their reading was marred with various errors related to the norms about the use of punctuation marks like - comma, stop, semi-colon etc. Upon asked about reasons for these errors, they were quick in blaming their course teachers in the school saying that they had not received any specific training or teaching about these things. These errors, thus, become the basis of weak foundation in English for the students opting for the university education, where university teachers have to revise everything starting from the very basics in English. And due to the limitations of the time and lack of interest, on the parts of many university teachers, this also results in ignoring these aspects at the university level as well, which makes the EFL learners to develop negative attitude towards English in general and reading in particular.

Another major, and the main, problem faced by the Libyan EFL learners was that of comprehension, as most of the students did not understand what they read. Almost 75% of the participants were unable to convey the meaning of what they were asked to read. Comprehension, being the central aspect of teaching and learning of reading comprehension skill, needs special attention while teaching this skill. However, this very crucial aspect often gets neglected, as reported by the participants, in the Libyan EFL classrooms. Not much attention is paid by the course teachers to develop this skill of the students while teaching reading. Inadequate vocabulary, complexity of the material, the one that often does not suit their level, and the nature of the material presented, which the participants regarded as 'out-of-context, difficult, uninteresting and boring' etc. were some of the causes reported by the participants for the problem in comprehension.

Focusing on this aspect, they were further asked about the types of teaching material their teachers used with them for developing reading comprehension skill which the participants considered as 'out-of-context, difficult, uninteresting and boring'. They replied that their reading comprehension skill teachers used varied texts such as newspaper articles, essays and other informative passages from various sources, as the Libyan EFL teachers have the freedom of material selection. Such material, according to the participants of the study, neither helped them in motivating to read, nor in guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words from the context and was difficult and boring. Even the activities and exercises given were also limited to the comprehension of the passage only and a very little attempt was made to integrate reading comprehension skill with other productive skills like speaking and writing.

After understanding these problems, they were asked about their views regarding the short-stories as an alternative teaching and learning material in the reading comprehension skill class, instead of newspaper articles, essays and other informative passages. To this, almost 90% of the participants gave positive answers. This implies the need for the revival of teaching and learning material, used in the Libyan EFL reading comprehension skill classrooms, as well as adoption of proper methodology and effective strategies for developing this crucial skill using the selected material. Therefore, the following section of

the paper looks at the short-stories as potential alternative, remedial recourse material that can be used to overcome the above discussed major problems, faced by the Libyan EFL learners in reading, and to develop this skill in effective and interesting way.

3. The Role of Short-stories in Developing Reading comprehension skill in EFL context:

The role of short stories in EFL classrooms, to develop reading comprehension skill, has always been acknowledged by many pedagogues and professionals due to numerous pedagogical benefits this use of stories can offer for the EFL teachers and learners. In the following section, some of the major benefits of using short-stories in EFL classrooms for developing reading comprehension skill are discussed, focusing on their implications for the Libyan EFL teachers and learners.

3.1 Benefits of using short-stories for developing reading comprehension skill and their implications in Libyan context:

The use of short stories in developing reading comprehension skill in EFL classroom has many benefits. Many intellectuals like Brumfit, C. and Carter, S. (1986); Lazar, G. (1993); Collie, J. and Slater, S. (1991); Murdoch, G. (2002); and Mourão, S. (2009) etc., to mention a very few, strongly recommend the use of short-stories for effective teaching of foreign language skills. Some of the benefits of the use of short-stories, for developing reading comprehension skill, and their implications for the Libyan EFL teachers and learners are listed below.

1] Short stories are considered as highly useful resource material in EFL classrooms as they provide rich linguistic input, effective stimuli, for students to express themselves in other languages, and a potential source of learner motivation.

2] They can be the main teaching and learning material in reading comprehension class as well as can supplement the main course materials for the in-class and out of class activities of foreign language teaching, learning, and practice. The Libyan EFL teachers can exploit this aspect for the same purpose in their class.

3] Stories can be more beneficial than any other informational materials, in stimulating the acquisition process, as they provide authentic contexts for processing new language. So, they should form an important place in the teaching material, selected by the Libyan EFL teachers, to teach reading comprehension skill.

4] The real examples of grammatical structures in stories, presented in a very simple form, and the essential vocabulary items, presented in context and in use, can help the Libyan EFL in learning these aspects and using them in real life conversations.

5] As stories increase foreign language learners' insight into the country and the people whose language is being learnt, by providing cultural information about the target language, Libyan EFL learners can also benefit from them. Also such use of stories will help them in fostering their ability to interpret discourse in different social and cultural target language contexts.

6] As stories expose students to a wide variety of styles and language functions, they can help the Libyan EFL learners to enhance their thinking and language abilities, as well as other study skills such as learning vocabulary, discovering questions, evaluating evidence etc.

7] According to Collie and Slater (1991: 196), stories are 'practical for the English language teachers' to use as their length is long enough to cover, entirely, in one or two class sessions and they are not complicated for students to work with on their own which can be helpful for developing EFL learners' self-dependency while learning foreign language. Being the product of creative writers, who have better command over language, stories are rich in language and can be ideal material for reading comprehension skill class. Therefore, the

Libyan EFL teachers should take the advantage of these benefits for developing the reading skill of their students in effective way.

8] According to Brumfit and Carter (1986:194), stories are easy to finish, definite to understand and 'attract the students' attention more than any other normal passage' which can be considered as another benefit for the Libyan EFL teachers to attract their students towards reading in English.

9] As Murdoch, G. (2002: 09), believes, the proper use of short-stories can offer opportunities for EFL teachers to integrate reading comprehension skill with other productive skills, like speaking and writing, and if selected and exploited appropriately, this use 'allows instructors to teach the four language skills to all levels of language proficiency and can enhance ELT courses for the learners'. This pedagogical aspect, embedded in the use of short stories, can be very helpful in developing the Libyan EFL learners' language skills, by integrating them, wisely and creatively, with one other and in interesting way.

10] The use of the authentic, natural dialogues, in the short-stories, can also be helpful for the Libyan EFL learners to get familiarized with actual, functional language use. They can also be helpful for the teachers to maintain high interest and attention levels of their students, which is quite crucial while developing reading comprehension skill in EFL classroom.

11] Stories command the reader's attention more effectively making him/her react emotionally with the events and leading to his/her personal involvement. This can be exploited to sustain the Libyan EFL learners' attention in the class as well to motivate and promote reading among them, as most of them have negative attitude towards reading. Stories thus, can help arouse liking and love for reading in English among them.

12] As stories are contextual, they can help EFL learners to develop various learning strategies such as predicting and guessing meaning of the difficult words from the context etc. This aspect of the use of short stories can help a lot to the Libyan EFL teachers not only in overcoming the vocabulary related problems of their students but also in effective fostering of their other target language skills.

13] Stories, according to Bretz (1990), can help in improving communicative competence of EFL learners and in developing critical thinking and aesthetic appreciation. They also help in developing EFL learners' interpretive abilities and expand their language awareness. So, they should be used in the Libyan EFL classrooms for the stated reasons.

14] According to Lazar, G. (1993:18), stories provide the teaching and learning material 'which is motivating, authentic and has great educational value'. Therefore, the Libyan EFL teachers should opt for them, instead of the informative materials which they use in reading comprehension skill class.

15] The controlled length, with the concise writing and with carefully selected vocabulary and lexis, is another linguistic benefit of the use of short-stories for EFL teachers and learners for developing reading comprehension skill which can also be taken into consideration by the Libyan EFL teachers and learners.

16] As stories are very enjoyable to read, provide examples of different styles of writing, and represent various authentic uses of the target language, they can be a good basis for vocabulary expansion and for effective foster of reading comprehension skill of the Libyan EFL learners.

17] Stories can expose the Libyan EFL learners to rich, authentic language, which they otherwise would not encounter in foreign language learning context like Libya and listening to them, in the form of films, would help them in becoming aware of the rhythm, intonation and pronunciation of the target language.

18] According to Mourão, S. (2009), stories help develop EFL learners' personal creative powers and other higher level thinking skills and can contribute in developing emotional intelligence as well.

19] Stories can also contribute in the personal growth of the Libyan EFL learners and can be used by their teachers, as the best tool, for inculcating various moral and cultural values, which is very important for the future of any civilized society.

3.2 Criteria for selecting the stories:

While using short-stories in the Libyan EFL classrooms for developing reading comprehension skill, it is essential to follow certain criteria, keeping in mind the status of English language in Libyan education system, differences in the levels of the learners, purpose of the study, cultural considerations, and other related aspects.

In the Libyan EFL classrooms, where the students aim to develop reading comprehension skill in order to master English language that would cater for their various academic and practical purposes, the following criteria should be observed by the Libyan EFL teachers while selected short-stories for developing reading comprehension skill:

- 1] The stories selected should be simple one for the beginners, and not so complex, that would suit their level and would not discourage them while attempting to read.
- 2] They should be rich in language, providing maximum examples of various grammatical structures and useful vocabulary.
- 3] They should be in line with the norms of the Libyan traditions, culture and faith.
- 4] The stories selected, preferably, should be the one that are made into films to provide the EFL learners visual representation of them as well as to give the Libyan EFL learners much required foreign language exposure that would help them in overcoming pronunciation related problems.
- 5] The stories selected should be linguistically ideal that would guarantee opportunities for integrating the four language skills in effective way not only for developing reading comprehension skill but all other related skills such as- listening, speaking and writing as well.
- 6] The stories selected should be such that would motive the Libyan EFL learners to read and arouse love and liking for reading in them, thus, inculcating the habit of reading in English.

3.3 Kind of activities and exercises to be given:

It is not only the selection of text which is important in overcoming the problems, of the Libyan EFL learners, related to reading comprehension skill but also the kind of activities and exercises given in the class. Therefore, this selection offers a perspective on the kind of activities and exercises to be given on the texts selected for teaching reading comprehension skill in the Libyan EFL classrooms.

An ideal EFL reading comprehension skill class should begin with stimulating pre-reading activities, to arouse the interest of the learners in the text; as such activities would help in preparing them for what would follow after. The EFL teachers can use various activities for this purpose such as- showing the pictures of great people, writers, places, structures and can ask the learners if they knew anything about these things etc. The teacher can also show a video clip related to the story and ask the students about what would follow. The EFL teacher can also give information about the author's life or the historical and cultural background to the story. In pre-reading activities, the EFL teacher can also give meanings of difficult words as well as can also give certain clues to the story to arouse the learners' interest in the story.

The Pre-reading activities should follow with the while-reading activities. In the while-reading activities, s/he can ask various questions to the learners such as – looking for specific information in the text, or specific type of structure, or a word/phrase etc. by skimming the passage fast. Skimming should follow with the scanning and in-depth

reading of the text. This reading can be silent or load. The EFL teacher should encourage the learners to read in the class and should correct the learners if they go wrong [but not by discouraging them]. During this stage, teacher should demonstrate first and then ask the students to read. It is preferred that the teacher asks the learners to read silently first and then loudly in the class. This gives the learners opportunity to practice reading, while correcting themselves.

After reading the text, teacher can give various post-reading or after-reading activities. These can be asking simple factual questions, to test learners' general comprehension, followed by advanced questions where learners would be required to think critically for answering. This can follow with discussions about the conflicts, characters, situations etc. in the story, where attempt should be made to integrate the reading comprehension skill with other productive language skills such as speaking and writing. Group discussions, debates, story narration, from different characters' points of view, guessing-games can also be encouraged for this purpose as well as for making the class interactive and interesting.

The EFL learners can also be asked to enact any specific scene in the story, using the dialogues in the story, which would give them chance of practicing language in their real life. Also, they can be asked to find synonyms and/or antonyms of specific words that would help them in expanding their vocabulary. They can also be asked to find out examples of different grammatical structures such as questions, commands, requests, exclamations etc, from the text, and can be asked to either change them into other structures or use them in their own sentences in similar situations etc. This would help them not only in better understanding of such grammatical structures but also in using them for various functions in their real life communication.

4. Conclusion:

To conclude, the importance of reading comprehension skill in foreign language teaching and learning has been acknowledged for various reasons and a lot of attention is given to this specific skill in this process of foreign language teaching. As this skill prepares the foundation for effective foreign language competence among the learners, all the aspects related to its teaching and learning need to be very carefully and skillfully designed and implemented. As reading in foreign language like English poses difficulties and develops disliking among the learners, for it and for the target language in general, the methodology, material and strategies selected to teach this skill should be interesting and effective. Short-stories, being the product of creative writers, who have better command over language, are rich not only in linguistic aspects but also in motivational and other required pedagogical aspects. They have the potentials of not only making the reading comprehension class interesting and enjoyable but also of preparing solid foundation in foreign language skills by offering opportunities to integrate reading comprehension skill with other major language skills in effective and creative ways. With numerous linguistic and other pedagogical advantages, with practical and feasible implications for the EFL contexts like Libya, short-stories surely can be a wonderful boon not only for overcoming problems of the EFL learners related to reading comprehension skill but also for the effective fostering of all the major language skills in creative and enjoyable way.

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