

EVALUATION OF EFL STUDENTS' READING PROFICIENCY IN THE COLLEGE OF TECHNOLOGICAL STUDIES IN KUWAIT

Dr. Hussein Aldaihani¹

An associate Professor of English, Language Center, College of Technological Studies, The
Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, Kuwait

ABSTRACT: *The research is an evaluation of the English language program implemented in the College of Technological Studies (CTS) in Kuwait. It tried to measure the improvement of the students' reading proficiency upon completing the mandatory EFL courses (Eng. 101 and ESP course 170) which are mandatory courses offered by the program to all students joining the college. The research instrument consisted of three reading passages which move from the easier to the more difficult. A sample of 155 students (72 males and 83 females) was randomly chosen from the population of all the students in the CTS who successfully completed the two mandatory English courses offered by the English program. Participants were required to read the passages and answer the questions on each passage. Results showed that the participants' performance in all three passages was far below expectation as the number of participants who gave correct answers in all three passages is below fifty percent. These results suggest that the English program implemented in the CTS does not equip the students with the required reading skills that enable them to read and comprehend the simplest reading passages. With these results, the paper recommends that the English program needs to be subjected to rigorous evaluation in order to pinpoint the weaknesses. This evaluation should reconsider the curriculum implemented and the teaching methods used in teaching the reading skills.*

KEYWORDS: EFL, evaluation, college of technological studies

INTRODUCTION

Background & Research Questions

This research is based on a previous research conducted by the author on the evaluation of the English language program implemented in the College of Technological Studies (Al-Daihani). The study tried to measure the improvement of the students' reading proficiency upon completing the English courses (Eng. 101 and ESP course 170). This research was conducted in the second semester of the academic year 2017/2018. The research instrument consists of three reading passages which move from the easier to the more difficult. Students are required to read the passages and answer the questions on each passage. It is expected that the findings would comment on the students' reading proficiency and, therefore on the efficiency of the English program taught in the College of Technological Studies. Therefore, the study poses three main and interchangeable questions:

1. What is the students' level of reading proficiency upon successfully completing the two courses offered by the English program in the CTS?
2. Do the English courses offered by the English program at the CTS equip students with the necessary skills that enable them to decode reading of various difficulties?
3. What are the students' strengths and weaknesses in the reading skills?

Objectives

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To evaluate the students' progress and improvement in the reading skill.
2. To evaluate the English program taught at the College of Technological Studies.
3. To provide decision makers with informed data on the strengths and weaknesses of the program.

The Significance of the Study

This research is based on a previous study on the efficiency of the English program taught at the College of Technological Studies, which showed that there is a need to evaluate students' reading proficiency. This study, therefore, tried to measure the skills of reading acquired by students after successfully completing the two mandatory courses the program offers. It is hoped that the results would pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of the program when it comes to the reading level of the students. As such, the findings might help to improve the content and implementation of the English program.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature presents three main theories when explaining the nature of learning to read. First, the traditional theory, or bottom up processing, which has now been known as "phonics". This method, influenced by behaviorist psychology of the 1950s, claimed that learning was based upon "habit formation, brought about by the repeated association of a stimulus with a response" and language learning was characterized as a "response system that humans acquire through automatic conditioning processes," where "some patterns of language are reinforced and others are not," and "only those patterns reinforced by the community of language users will persist" (Omaggio 1993). The ESL and EFL textbooks influenced by this perspective include exercises that focus on literal comprehension and give little or no importance to the reader's critical thinking abilities. Criticizing the above method, psycholinguists came with the cognitive view, or top-down processing which enhanced the role of background knowledge in addition to what appeared on the printed page. This method had a remarkable bearing on the field of ESL/EFL as psycholinguists explained "how such internal representations of the foreign language develop within the learner's mind" (Omaggio, 1993: 57). Supporters of this theory held that reading is not merely eliciting meaning from a certain text but a process in which the reader connects content of the text with the prior knowledge of the reading during the process. As such, reading is an interaction between the reader and the text in the reader's prior knowledge plays a critical role in the formation of meaning (Tierney and Pearson, 1994). Another theory similar to this

process that involves top-down movement is the “schema” theory also greatly influenced the reading instruction. This theory hinges on the view that past experiences bring about the formation of mental frameworks that would aid a reader in creating new experiences. Smith (1994: 14) calls “schemes” the “extensive representations of more general patterns or regularities that occur in our experience”. Third, the theory of metacognition, which hinges on the idea that a reader can control and manipulate the comprehension of a text, and thus, this theory stresses the reader’s mental process in the act of reading. That is, readers do not merely hypothesize, accept or reject while reading the text. They also get engaged in many other activities in the act of reading. These activities can be divided into three stage: before reading, while reading, and after reading.

Critical thinking ability has been identified as one of the constructs which has been proven to be a good predictor of academic performance (Tsui, 1998; Giancarlo & Facione, 2001; Moore, 1995). Hence, it is important for relevant university authorities to be informed of the critical thinking ability level of their undergraduates (Rashid & Hashim, 2008). On the other hand, critical thinking is also claimed to be important in the acquisition of language skills particularly writing and reading (Shaharom Abdullah, 2004; Seung-Ryul Shin, 2002; Stapleton, 2001; Moore, 1995).

The relationship between critical thinking and reading is well established in the literature. Yu-hui et al. (2010) pointed out that reading involves thinking process which aims to create meaning. Beck (1989:677) points out that “there is no reading without reasoning, while Ruggiero (1984) remarks that reading is a reasoning process. Norris and Phillips (1987), on the other hand, hold that reading is not merely stating what the page says; it is also thinking. They also point out that critical thinking provides a tool which clarifies ambiguous texts by producing alternative explanations. In other words, according to them, critical thinking is the means that helps the reader comprehend the text.

Sanavi& Tarighat (2014) studied the influence of teaching critical thinking skills on the oral proficiency of Iranian EFL learners in Tehran. Two groups of female Iranian intermediate EFL learners were compared in terms of their speaking skills. One of the two groups was given enough training on critical thinking and the other was a control group. Both groups were subjected to tests before and after the experimental group was trained on critical thinking. In the analysis of the data more than one method was used. The results showed that critical thinking had an explicit positive significance on the speaking skills of female Iranian adult intermediate EFL learners. The qualitative approach gave a clear idea about the participants’ attitudes towards the fact that they received training on how to use critical thinking. As such, training on critical thinking in the English class can make a positive impact on language teaching.

Akkaya’s (2012) study is meant to understand the relationship between Turkish teacher candidates’ critical thinking skills and their use of reading strategies. Participants of the study were 420 students from Department of Turkish Language Teaching, Buca Faculty of Education, Dokuz Eylul University. A descriptive study method was used in the study. The data gathering tools used were the California Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory (CCTDI) and the Metacognitive Reading Strategies Questionnaire (MRSQ).

Data analysis revealed that there was a positive correlation ($B=.40$; $R^2=.168$; $F=84.127$; $p=.000$; $p<.01$) between teacher candidates' level of reading strategy use and their critical thinking disposition.

Tawalbeh and Aloqaili (2012) reviewed and studied the relationship between reading comprehension and critical thinking. The used theories, including the schema theory as a rationale for the relationship between reading comprehension and critical thinking. The results showed that: (1) there is a close connection between reading comprehension and critical thinking, (2) schema theory provides rationale for that connection, and (3) there is no unanimous agreement concerning the definition of critical thinking, which means that there is a lack of an unanimous framework for critical thinking.

Using Self-assessment items and an International English Language Testing System Academic Reading Module, Hellekjaer (2009) investigated, quantitatively, the academic English reading proficiency of 578 Norwegian university students. The study found that about 30% of the respondents had serious difficulties reading English, and 44% found it more difficult than reading in their first language. The main problems encountered were unfamiliar vocabulary and slow reading, while extracurricular readers and respondents who were able to guess word meanings from context had higher reading scores. Poor language proficiency was a problem for many, to the extent that they fell below the linguistic threshold level. The study showed that, contrary to expectations, Norwegian EFL instruction at upper-secondary schools fails to develop the academic English reading proficiency needed for higher education.

Rashid & Hashim (2008) examined the critical thinking ability of Malaysian undergraduates and its relationship to language proficiency. The Bahasa Malaysia version of the Cornell Critical Thinking Test (CCTT) Level X was administered to 280 undergraduates. Results indicated that the critical thinking ability of the undergraduates was much lower than that of their American counterparts. Nevertheless, significant correlations were found between their critical thinking ability and English language proficiency as measured by two national level tests.

Golkar and Yamini (2007) carried out an empirical study to determine the reliability and validity of the Vocabulary Levels Tests, both the passive and productive versions. They also investigated the nature of the students' vocabulary knowledge with regard to their passive and active knowledge of the L2 words as a whole and at different word frequency levels. Moreover, the relationships between these two types of vocabulary knowledge and the learners' proficiency level and reading comprehension ability were studied. And finally, it was scrutinized if there were any significant differences between the High and Low proficient learners and English majors and non-majors' passive and active vocabularies. Three tests were used, namely, the Vocabulary Levels Test, the Productive Version of the Vocabulary Levels Test, and a TOEFL test. Their population was made up of 76 Iranian undergraduate students majoring in Engineering and English Language and Literature. The results proved the Vocabulary Levels Tests to be reliable and valid tests of vocabulary size. The learners' passive and active vocabularies were also found to be highly correlated as a whole and at each separate word-frequency level. Passive vocabulary was always larger than active vocabulary at all levels; however, the gap between the two increased at lower word-frequency levels. In addition, there was a

high correlation between the learners' vocabulary knowledge on the one hand and proficiency and reading comprehension ability on the other hand. It was also found that there was a statistically significant difference between the vocabulary knowledge of High proficient and Low proficient groups and between the English majors and non-majors. The High proficient group and the English majors had greater passive and active vocabulary knowledge than their corresponding Low proficient group and then non-majors. Hijikata et al investigated how Japanese EFL students read English academic papers, focusing on the interactions among L2 proficiency, reading strategies, and the rhetorical features of the papers. Methods: video observation, the "think-aloud protocol," document analysis of notes taken by the participants while reading, and a post-reading interview were used. The reading strategies identified on the basis of the think-aloud protocol were categorized into local, global, and metacognitive strategies. They found out that the Japanese EFL readers had difficulty recognizing academic discourse. The students, rather, focused on understanding formulas and figures presented in the documents. Furthermore, although the students used local and global strategies frequently, their purposes in using these strategies varied depending on their L2 competence, their background knowledge about the topic of the paper, and their familiarity with the discipline-specific academic discourse.

Ali & Brendan's (2009) article reported a study in which text structure instruction was provided for student teachers, with the first author teaching a first-year university course in communication skills. Participants undertook a pre-intervention task at the first-class meeting and a post-intervention task in the final session. Course content included study strategy skills (specifically the metacognitive strategy, top-level structuring (TLS), and the use of visual organizers associated with TLS to organize and distil information from textbooks and course readers as a regular part of the teaching-learning curriculum. Students compiled and discussed journal entries about their practice with the newly acquired strategy to record their own developing procedural know-how and what this meant for their academic work. Comparison of pre- and post-intervention tasks indicated a shift in students' strategies used and their metalanguage about these strategies. This study confirms earlier findings that learning to identify the organizational structure of text and using that knowledge strategically enhances learners' metacognition, motivation, and self-confidence. The authors argue that the development of metacognitive skills is critically important and useful where universities espouse development of teacher education, students' own learning skills, and easily accomplished tasks as part of coursework.

Cogmen, S (2009) conducted a study to identify the frequency level of reading strategies that the college students use while they are reading the academic materials and to examine these strategies according to some variables. The sample consisted of 230 college students attending the Faculty of Education in Pamukkale University. Metacognitive Reading Strategies Questionnaire (MRSQ) was used as the data instrument of the research. Mean, standard deviation, correlation, the t-test, one-way ANOVA, Kruskal Wallis and Mann Whitney U tests for independent samples were used. According to the findings; the frequency level of the reading strategies that the students used was found "I often use" level.

Nassaji (2003) investigated the role of higher-level syntactic and semantic processes and lower-level word recognition and grapho-phonetic processes in adult English as a second language (ESL) reading comprehension. In particular, the study examined the extent to which these processes can discriminate skilled from less-skilled readers in a sample of fairly advanced ESL readers. Measures of reading comprehension, syntactic, semantic, word recognition, phonological, and orthographic processing skills were used. One-way discriminant function analysis revealed that lower-level component processes, such as word recognition and grapho-phonetic processes, in addition to higher-level syntactic and semantic processes, contributed significantly to the distinction between skilled and less-skilled ESL readers. These findings suggested that efficient lower-level word recognition processes were integral components of second language reading comprehension and that the role of these processes ought not to be neglected even in highly advanced ESL readers.

Negretti and Kuteeva (2011) combine two theories in their study: genre analysis and metacognition theory. They analyzed the data collected from a group of pre-service English teachers at a major Swedish university. They examine the process of building metacognitive genre awareness and show how it influences skills of L2 students in explaining and creating academic texts. The study concluded that participants developed the (what) and the (how) of the metacognitive knowledge of genre-relevant aspects of academic texts, but they developed only few processes of the “when” and “why” of the knowledge of the genre in the reading and writing analysis .

Al-Othman (2003) examined the relationship between online reading speed rates and performance on proficiency tests, given the proliferating use of the Internet. The study involved twenty-five post-graduate students enrolled in an ESL Course at the Private Center for Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Kuwait and who are also involved in postgraduate studies. Twelve were familiar with the computer while others were not. Tools used included a background questionnaire to tap into readers' online accessing of reading materials and their computer familiarity, the Online Speed-Reading Test, and a simulated TOEFL Reading Subtest. The main finding of this study is that high rates of reading speeds are positively correlated with good performance on the CBT TOEFL subtest of Reading Comprehension. A correlation co-efficient assessed between the statistics of high-speed readers and high-performance rates of subjects of the study reached 0.92. The results of this study suggest that designers of online information should consider that reading online is slower than on paper, which may affect performance on proficiency assessments.

Tsui, L. (1998) reviewed the research on critical thinking among college students. A total of 62 studies were identified and reviewed. About 62 percent of the studies were longitudinal in nature, and 13 of the 23 studies that attempted to measure student growth in critical thinking employed a cross-sectional design. While a large body of the findings suggested that students grow in critical thinking while in college, much inconsistency emerged as to the factors that affected this growth. Given that studies in this area tend to be homogenous to the extent that they pose the same research questions and employ similar research tools, a surprising amount of inconsistency emerged from the study results. A number of studies suggested that college students make the greatest

gains in critical thinking during their freshman year, while courses or programs specifically designed to improve critical thinking have demonstrated mixed results. In comparison to courses taught in a more traditional manner, greater gains in critical thinking scores were found for courses with an instructional paradigm emphasizing problem solving or critical thinking, class participation, and inquiry and higher-order thinking.

Methodology

Population and Sample

Three readings passages were prepared by the researcher to be used in order to assess the students' level in reading after completing the two English courses offered by the English program at the College of Technological studies in Kuwait. The questions on the three passages move from the easier to the more difficult. The population consisted of 420 students who successfully completed the two courses the program offers (Eng. 101 and ESP English Course 170). The sample of the study is 155 students (males and females) chosen randomly from the population. The students were asked to sit for a time-limited test in which they answer a group of questions. The data collected from the test is expected to provide the researcher with the students' level in the reading skill.

Description of the Reading Passages

The participants were asked to read three passages and answer four multiple-choice questions on each passage. The passages were carefully chosen so that they vary in level of difficulty (the first passage is the least difficult and the third is the most difficult). The passages were given to three instructors who have been teaching these courses for more than ten years and the three instructors agreed that the passages are appropriate to the level of students who successfully complete the mandatory courses of the English program. In the first passage, the vocabulary and the language structures presented are easy and appropriate to the level of students who have just joined the program. Furthermore, the topic of the passage is general (i.e. not a topic addressing a scientific issue). Last, the correct answers to the four questions are kept simple and direct which do not require the participants to read between the lines in order to elicit them. In the second passage, the level of difficulty is raised in terms of vocabulary and language structures and the correct answers to two of the four questions need to be inferred. However, the topic of the passage is kept general. The third passage is close to the level of difficulty of the second passage in terms of vocabulary and language structures. However, the correct answers to the four questions need to be inferred. In addition, the topic chosen is scientific (namely in the field of engineering) which goes with their field of study in the College of Technological Studies.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

An overall look at the results obtained, one can see that students have not improved in the reading skill. Level one is the easiest level as the level of vocabulary and structure of sentences is the easiest when it comes to first year college students. Nevertheless, the students, both males and females, scored very low. Apart from the third question in the passage, where 51.80% of the female participants and 58.33% of the male

participants gave the correct answer, the percentage of the participants (both males and females) who answered the remaining question correctly was far below 50%. As for the second-level passage, the percentages for all correct answers drop below 50%. The highest percentage of the participants who answered correctly can be seen with the first question in that level, where 44.44% of the male students gave the correct answer. The same holds true of the third-level passage which is the highest in difficulty. The highest percentage of the participants who answered correctly can be seen with the first question in that level, where 43.05% of the male students gave the correct answer.

Table 1: Results of the first passage

Item	Gender	Frequency		Percentage	
		Correct	Incorrect	Correct	Incorrect
1	Female	17	66	20.48	79.52
	Male	21	51	29.17	70.83
2	Female	17	66	20.48	79.52
	Male	22	50	30.55	69.44
3	Female	43	40	51.80	48.19
	Male	42	30	58.33	41.67
4	Female	31	52	37.35	65.65
	Male	40	32	55.55	44.44

Table 2: Results of the second passage

Item	Gender	Frequency		Percentage	
		Correct	Incorrect	Correct	Incorrect
1	Female	32	51	38.55	61.44
	Male	32	40	44.44	55.55
2	Female	25	58	30.12	69.88
	Male	25	47	34.72	65.23
3	Female	23	60	27.71	72.29
	Male	29	43	40.28	59.72
4	Female	21	62	25.30	74.69
	Male	20	52	27.78	72.22

Table 3: Results of the third passage

Item	Gender	Frequency		Percentage	
		Correct	Incorrect	Correct	Incorrect
1	Female	35	48	42.17	57.53
	Male	31	41	43.05	56.94
2	Female	24	59	28.96	71.08
	Male	22	50	30.55	69.44
3	Female	35	48	42.17	57.83
	Male	28	44	38.89	61.11
4	Female	31	52	37.55	62.65
	Male	23	49	31.94	68.05

Obviously, there were no statistically significant differences between males and females. Table 4 shows the percentages of female students who answered the questions correctly in all passages. As we can see, for the first passage, 32.53% of the female participants gave the correct answers in comparison to 67.46% who did not. As for the second passage, the percentage is still low as 30.42% answered the questions in the passages correctly. The percentage for the third passage shows a slight improvement but still far below 50%, as 37.65% of the participants answered the questions correctly. Neither is the case for male students. Table 5 shows the percentages of male students who answered correctly all the questions of the passages. For the first passage, 43.40% of the participants gave the correct answers in comparison to 56.59% who did not. The second and third passages, which are higher in terms of the level of difficulty, show worse results. Only 36.80% of the participants answered all the questions of the second passage correctly; and an almost similar percentage (36.11%) of participants gave the correct answers for the third passage.

Table 4: Results of the female participants' performance on the three passages

Item	Percentage	
	Correct	Incorrect
1	32.53	67.46
2	30.42	69.57
3	37.65	62.34

Table 5: Results of the male participants' performance on the three passages

Item	Percentage	
	Correct	Incorrect
1	43.40	56.59
2	36.80	63.19
3	36.11	63.88

Table 6 gives us an overall idea of the number of correct and incorrect answers and their percentages for both male and female students. For the first passage, 233 answers (37.58%) were correct; for the second 207 answers (33.38%); and for the third 229 (36.93%).

Table 6: Results of all participants' performance on the three passages

Item	Frequency		Percentage	
	Correct	Incorrect	Correct	Incorrect
1	233	387	37.58	62.41
2	207	413	33.38	66.61
3	229	391	36.93	63.06

These results suggest that the English program offered in the Language Center of the College of Technological Studied needs to be subjected to serious evaluation. As the results tell us, most of the students who successfully complete the mandatory English courses offered by the program are not in fact competent in the reading skill. When they graduate from college, the reading skills they acquire are far below the level required by the English program. This study is based on the hypothesis that students will score higher in the first-level passage, and as we go on in the level of difficulty of the other two passages, weakness will show. However, this purpose was defeated as we come to the conclusion that most of the students could not comprehend the simple structure of the first passage. This means that the English program offered by the

Language Unit of the College of Technological Studies seems to fail in equipping the students with the necessary reading skills that enables them to decode any reading passage of the simplest level. As such, these results call for an urgent need to subject the English program to rigorous evaluation in terms of curriculum and the current teaching methods used.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research is an evaluation of the English language program implemented in the College of Technological Studies. It tried to measure the improvement of the students' reading proficiency upon completing the English courses (Eng. 101 and ESP course 170) which are mandatory courses offered by the program to all students joining the college. The research instrument consisted of three groups of reading passages which move from the easier to the more difficult. Students were required to read the passages and answer the questions on each passage. Results showed the participants' performance in all three passages was far below expectation as the number of participants who gave correct answers is below fifty percent. That is, it seems that the students who successfully complete the mandatory courses offered by the English program graduate without possessing the minimum reading skills that would enable them to decode the simplest reading passages. With these results, the paper comes up with the following recommendations:

1. The English program offered by the English Unit of the College of Technological Studies needs to be subjected to evaluation in order to pinpoint the weaknesses and redress them.
2. In the process of evaluation, the curriculum offered should be reconsidered or updated in order to enhance the reading skills of the students joining the program.
3. There is a need to reconsider and update the teaching methods used in teaching the reading skills in order to graduate students who are equipped with the reading skills necessary to decode passages of any difficulty.

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