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Relative Effectiveness Of Reading Activities In The Pakistani ESL Context

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Abstract

The quality of reading determines the quality of both content and language learning. Reading plays a key role in developing advanced grammatical skill and academic vocabulary necessary for creating written discourse and thus raising learners' level of language proficiency. However, a substantial body of ESL college learners in Pakistan are reported to be struggling for attaining a satisfactory level in reading proficiency. Notably, the scrutiny of underachievement reveals that indiscriminate insistence on GTM and consequent failure to actively engage learners for cognitive development are included in major issues. For addressing these problems, a promising alternative is suggested in Task-Based Learning (activities-based learning). A 40-minute task-based class, 3 days a week, was run for four weeks. The sample comprised 111 students of Intermediate Level. The researcher-created videos on reading activities uploaded on his YouTube channel were watched by the learners.[1] Listening to the recorded lecture was followed by a set of activities in which the participants were engaged before they showed their work in the physical classroom. Subsequently, relative effectiveness of ten prevalent reading activities was studied through written tests. Quantitative data analysis was made by SPSS. Furthermore, qualitative data collected through interviews were analyzed by inductive approach thematic analysis. Mathematical nature of activities, such as Main Idea Formula, Students Created Quizzes & Tests and Cause & Effect Grid made them relatively more effective.

***Keywords**: Task-Based Learning, Flipped Method, Reading Activities, Pakistani ESL Context*

Introduction

Learners' proficiency in any language largely depends on their efficient reading skill, so formal language teaching and learning has always focused on creating lifelong learners through instilling a love of reading at an early age. Several applied linguists have confirmed that reading skill enhances learners' capacities to attain distinguished academic success because it has a variety of cognitive benefits. Furthermore, learners' active engagement in reading tasks also enhances their memory retention as exposure of the brain to several different characters involved in a variety of relationships and different settings as they become more cognitively involved in the story. Some other benefits of engagement in active reading activity include young people' greater exposure to lexical items used in a variety of contexts and promotion of

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their critical thinking constitutive of predictive storylines and new connections between events represented in narratives. Furthermore, MRI scans have also validated that reading motivates learners' engagement in developing a complex network of circuits with the excitement of a multitude of signals in their brain. With heightened involvement in reading, learners' brain networks gain more depth and greater sophistication which subsequently enhances learners' creative and cognitive power.

A recent study by Solangi, Bango, & Abbasi (2024) found that majority of ESL learners have serious limitation in positively benefitting from their reading experiences in the texts written in English because of participants' infrequent engagement with books containing quality language and content.

In Pakistan, English has been enjoying a privileged position in widely different domains of life, such as business and commerce, administration and bureaucracy, military and judiciary, print and electronic media. Despite that there has been seen a visible rise in its already extensive use, not a greatly satisfactory condition of teaching and learning English language for learners' overall proficiency is found. It has been reported that even their long experience of studying and learning English at school, college, and university level, large number of Pakistani learners remain deficient in their communicative power during conversation and discussion in English (Khatoon, Muhammad, & Shah, 2022).

Aftab (2011, as cited in Rehman, Fareed, & Khan, 2022) also reiterated that majority of ESL learners in Pakistani fail to gain proficiency in the two major academic skills: reading and writing. Moreover, the failure to improve literacy skills has been closely associated with English language pedagogy characterized by inadequate teaching techniques and increased dependence on only prescribed textbooks for teaching language (Rehman, Fareed, & Khan, 2022).

Bhatti's (2021) observation about the secondary level learners of Bahawalpur becomes more relevant when we consider his claim that ESL learners face challenges and difficulties in developing their reading skills. Whenever, they interact with any text written in English, they can neither understand immediately its surface meanings nor gain access to implicit and deep meanings (Bhatti, 2021).

English's standing as a lingua franca and the language of research, education, communication, and the internet has grown significantly in recent years. So, the English language instructors carry a mandatory obligation to offer learners appropriate opportunity to acquire and use the English language.

One of the most complicating factors that hamper reading of students is ELT teachers' aversion to Task-Based Learning and insistence on the use of traditional lecture-delivery method which fares badly due to its characteristic teacher- centered approach and failure to offer autonomy to learners to experiment with their learning materials (Ahmad & Arif, 2020; Khan, 2020; Shahid & Irfan, 2021). In the developed countries across the globe, Task-Based Learning (activities-based learning) enjoys wide popularity in the contemporary landscape of language teaching, for it generously subscribes to the centrality of learners and encourages integration of technology. It puts the needs of the students first, facilitates more meaningful communication, and frequently offers opportunities to develop useful extralinguistic skills. Reading activities given in (Bouchard, 2005, Zwiers, 2010) were employed to teach different elements of reading.

Problem Statement

College learners' reading, crucially important for language learning, is alarmingly low (Bhatti, 2021; Rehman, Fareed, & Khan, 2022; Solangi, Bango, & Abbasi, 2024).

Research Question

How do reading activities vary in their relative effectiveness to teach reading and why?

Review of Literature

Like several other outer-circle countries, Pakistan also follows the scheme of teaching English primarily as a compulsory academic subject; thus, it is taught as a language in few public educational institutes. Apart from rather unsatisfactory arrangements for a systematic and well-designed English language teaching and learning programs, another serious problem inhibiting learners' language development can be associated with limited importance given to reading in public academic settings. Instead of designing activities and tasks that scaffold learners' reading skill development leading subsequently to advanced English language proficiency, ELT instructors and heads of educational centers have been consistently overlooking learners' underachievement in this fundamental skill of language development. A closer look at the findings of a substantial body of literature reveals that not only for overall language development crucial for professional success in a global world but also for facilitating students in their journey of academic development, no scheme can prove fruitful unless innovative approaches in reading instruction are introduced (Khatoon, Muhammad, & Shah, 2022).

Brief Description of Reading Activities

Main Idea Formula: The activity named "Main Idea Formula" was selected for teaching students how they could discover the topic and the main idea in a given sentence. There are three constituents of the activity: the first is topic, the second refers to accumulation of information about the topic, and the third corresponds to the writer's purpose. Mathematically, it is shown as: Topic + What is said about the topic + Purpose = Main Idea. The activity starts with the division of the sentence into subject and predicate. The first part, the subject, contains the topic of the sentence; and the second part, the predicate, provides target information about the topic. For the discovery of the third part, the writer's purpose, the students are asked to ponder on why the writer is giving you this information about the topic. The combination of the three elements generates the main idea. For the discovery of the main idea in a paragraph, the activity named "Main Idea Formula" was again used, though there were minor adjustments. No change was introduced in the constituents of the activity. However, there was expansion in the scope of every element. The topic which previously referred to the subject of the sentence now referred to the topic sentence. Similarly, the information was not contained in the predicate. Rather, it lay scattered in the entire paragraph. There was little change in the third element which still corresponded to the writer's purpose. Mathematically, it is shown as: Topic + What is said about the topic + Purpose = Main Idea. The activity starts with the identification of the topic sentence which defines what the writer aims to discuss, and thus shows the topic. The accumulation of information about the topic is the second step which is followed by the critical inquiry targeting at the detection of writer's purpose. Similar to the earlier activity, the combination of the three elements leads to the generation of the main idea (Zwiers, 2010).

Prediction Chart: For teaching students how as successful readers they can rely on prediction of what they might find in the texts, the researcher selected the activity called "Prediction Chart". In this activity, the students were informed about the topic of the first few lines of the paragraph. After this, they were asked to collect clues that could be combined for acquiring the main idea of the target text. For this purpose, they were provided with the Prediction Chart that consisted of three columns. In the first column, the students wrote their prediction; in the second column, they entered relevant clues to show that their prediction was situated in the text; and in the last column, they confirmed whether their prediction proved true, or the conflicting results appeared. The paragraph was broken into three or four constituent parts; students were trained through the video how they could complete the chart for each part and

later combine main ideas collected separately to construct the theme of the whole passage (Zwiers, 2010).

Question Starters: This activity was used to answer questions by gathering information explicitly stated in the text. The activity was applied on a paragraph. The first step was the creation of the beginnings of questions called question stems for the given paragraph. Guidance to students about the use of these stems to create meaningful questions was provided in the video. Asking students to work independently or in pairs, the researcher encourages them to become active learners through not only providing the answer for the question but also describing their inability to answer it. The last stage of this activity is students' loud reading of their questions and answers first to their partners and finally to the class (Zwiers, 2010).

Question Sea: The researcher introduced the learners to a variety of questions and asked them to constrain themselves to only "on-the-surface questions". These questions ask the reader to find facts or evidence for the items contained in the question; they usually require no in-depth reflection, no deep probe, no guessing; most of them entail paraphrasing, summarizing or literal retelling; they generally start with Who, What, Where, or When but sometimes they may begin with How, Why, Would, Should or Could (Zwiers, 2010).

Know-Want to know- Learned (K-W-L): This activity was used to teach inference. K stands for what the readers **K**now about the topic either from the text (as explicit information) and/or from their background knowledge of the topic. W stands for what they **W**ant to know (why the writer is giving the information which is there in the text), and L stands for what they have Learned by combining the stated facts with the background knowledge (thus, creating a new meaning). The students were shown how they can start with the creation of three columns and provide the following headings: "What we know," in the first, "What we want to know" in the second and "What we learned" in the third column. They were asked to read a few lines from the target texts and write the explicit information along with their background knowledge in the first column. Now they were asked to access the writer's purpose for giving the information which was there in the text. Filling in the second column with such questions that aim at knowing the writer's attitude towards the stated facts, the students moved further. By reading the text and their peers' answers provided in the second column in groups, they added key information that they learned in the third column (Zwiers, 2010).

It Says, I Say, And So: This activity was used for teaching of inference. There was created a four-column table in which the first column contained a question to answer which, the students required inference. The section of the text on which the inference can be made is copied in the second column titled 'It Says'. After this, students interpret the text and making inference write it in the third column named 'I Say'. In the last column, they write the answer to the question by combining the information recorded in the second and the third column (Zwiers, 2010).

Matrices: For teaching of prediction of meaning of the text with the help of discourse markers, the researcher selected this activity. Students were asked to create a grid on their own sheets of paper similar to the sample shown in the video. In the first column, they were to write the question to answer which required the prediction based on the signal word. The writing of question was followed by the entry of the signal word in the second column. Writing the function of the signal word in the third column, they were asked to predict answer to the question written in the first column and write it in the final column (Zwiers, 2010).

Cause-Effect Grid: To teach students how their understanding of cause and effect can be helpful to them in their access to writer's purpose, the researcher used this activity. A three-columned grid was used. Students were asked to write an event from the text in the first column. They were told that the second column was meant for writing the cause of the previous event

written in the column one. The effect of the event was entered in the third column (Zwiers, 2010).

Text Structure Graphic Organizers: The researcher selected this activity to teach learners how comparison and contrast are helpful in understand meaning of the text. First students were shown reading samples that have the text structure based on similarities and differences. For further facilitation, the researcher circled the cued words and phrases that signal to similarities or differences. Modelling how cued words are helpful in understanding comparison and contrast, students were trained to experiment with this technique while they read the text assigned to them (Zwiers, 2010).

Anticipation-Reaction Guide: With this activity, the researcher taught students how they discover writer's purpose hidden in the text. Students were asked to read a statement which contained a clear idea about the textual information provided by the writer. Before reading the text from which the idea is gathered, they marked their response in their copy of the Anticipation-Reaction Guide. After this, they read the text, and again they marked their reaction in the copy. They were free to decide whether they wanted to change their view or stick to their earlier view. With three to four repetitions of this activity, students could learn how to discover writer's purpose in the text (Bouchard, 2005).

Methodology

Constructivist paradigm offers the study a coherent theoretical framework with its claim that learners' active interaction with the environment leads to more productive learning (Ning, 2015). The study is delimited to public sector Rawalpindi Board affiliated Boys' intermediate colleges in the city of Rawalpindi. The students and teachers at intermediate level in these colleges are the population of the study. Using Microsoft Excel's RANDBETWEEN function random sampling has been done in the selection of the college and sample population. Using intact class as the sample, the study employed quasi-experimental research design. The study made use of Mixed-Methods approach. A 40-minute task-based class, 3 days a week, was run for four weeks. 111 students of Intermediate Level participated in the study. The researcher created videos on reading activities and the learners watched it through YouTube (Links given in Annexure-A). Learners practised these activities in class in the guidance of a participant teacher. Different elements of reading were taught through different reading activities and test was taken after every lesson. Each test comprised ten MCQs and its reliability was calculated by Cronbach's alpha. 0.890 is a respectable alpha.

Table 1 Reliability Statistics Reading Test

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.890	.893	52

Scores on these tests provided quantitative data to measure relative effectiveness of ten prevalent reading activities. Quantitative data analysis was made by SPSS. Two students were interviewed. Interview guide was checked by an expert and it was found suitable. Interviews were video-recorded carefully. Interviews were analyzed by inductive approach thematic analysis. There were two coders and several exact statements were quoted from interviews. The issue of reflexivity in validity of qualitative data was addressed by acquiring the services of externals with high level of expertise who transcribed, translated and subsequently coded the interviews. The transcribed and coded qualitative data was presented to the respondents for validation. Qualitative data was also subjected to constant comparison during coding for identification of similar themes. It was also found that there were no deviant cases.

Data Analysis

Using SPSS, mean, median and mode were calculated and it was found that three activities Idea Formula, Students Created Quizzes & Tests and Cause & Effect Grid had scored comparatively higher means. Pairwise Comparisons were run and the analysis revealed that the means of the above mentioned three activities are significantly higher than the rest of the activities. The means of the above mentioned three activities do not differ from one another significantly.

From the analysis of interviews serving as primary qualitative data, the study found that the rate of effectiveness of reading activities was closely linked to their mathematical nature: the higher an activity had mathematical elements, the more effective it proved for enhancing learners' reading. The mathematical elements in more effective activities facilitated learning by breaking the task into easily conceivable constituents. In other words, the success of activities was due to learners' movement from every guided step that led to the subsequent stage. Second, the tasks and activities with greater mathematical elements proved more effective in exciting learners' imagination which in turn resulted in their more active participation in the target task. Instead of one-way traffic often observable in the language classes dominated by GTM, every lesson was highly interactive. From the details provided in Table 1 showing the means, median and modes of different activities used in the study, the readers can see that Idea Formula, Students Created Quizzes & Tests and Cause & Effect Grid proved significantly more effective in improving learners' reading proficiency. Moreover, Table 2, displaying the post hoc test and the pairwise comparisons, also demonstrate the greater effectiveness of the three activities. Another important finding is about visible interrelationship of the three activities: Their closely similar means show scant difference among themselves, demonstrating the equivalence of their effectiveness.

Table 1 Relative Effectiveness of Reading Activities

	Main Idea Formula	Prediction Chart	Matrices	Students Created Quizzes & Tests	Question Sea and Question Tree	K-W-L	It Says, I Say And So	Cause & Effect Grid	Text Structure Graphic Organizers	Anticipation Reaction Guide
Mean	8.5856	6.5676	6.955	8.3333	6.7838	6.47	6.4144	8.2793	6.6036	6.9640
Std. Error of Mean	.07065	.10208	.0682	.07820	.07397	.066	.09092	.07030	.06925	.06517
Median	8.0000	7.0000	7.000	8.0000	7.0000	6.00	7.0000	8.0000	7.0000	7.0000
Mode	8.00	7.00	7.00	8.00	7.00	6.00	7.00	8.00	7.00	7.00
Std. Deviation	.74429	1.0755	.7184	.82389	.77934	.698	.95792	.74065	.72962	.68660
Variance	.554	1.157	.516	.679	.607	.488	.918	.549	.532	.471
Range	2.00	3.00	2.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	2.00

Table 2 Reading Activities Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Scores on Reading Activities

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	728.812[a]	9	80.979	125.149	.001	.506
Intercept	57470.423	1	57470.423	88817.793	.001	.988
Reading Activities	728.812	9	80.979	125.149	.001	.506
Error	711.766	1100	.647			
Total	58911.000	1110				
Corrected Total	1440.577	1109				

a. R Squared = .506 (Adjusted R Squared = .502)

Table 3 Reading Activities Pairwise Comparisons
Dependent Variable: Scores on Activities

(I) Reading Activities	(J) Reading Activities	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.[b]	95% Confidence Interval for Difference[b]	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Main Idea Formula	Prediction Chart	2.018*	.108	.001	1.665	2.371
	Matrices	1.631*	.108	.001	1.278	1.984
	Students Created Quizzes & Tests	.252	.108	.885	-.101	.605
	Question Sea & Question Tree	1.802*	.108	.001	1.449	2.155
	K-W-L	2.117*	.108	.001	1.764	2.470
	It Says, I Say, And So	2.171*	.108	.001	1.818	2.524
	Cause & Effect Grid	.306	.108	.209	-.047	.659
	Text Structure Graphic Organizers	1.982*	.108	.001	1.629	2.335
	Anticipation Reaction Guide	1.622*	.108	.001	1.269	1.975

Based on estimated marginal means
*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.
b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni.

Conclusion

Convergence in findings from both the data collection tools, post-tests and interviews, on greater effectiveness of certain activities named Idea Formula, Students Created Quizzes & Tests and Cause & Effect Grid clearly demonstrates that tasks of mathematical nature are more conducive to reading improvement and better content learning.

Annexure –A- Links of Videos on Youtube

Main Idea of a Sentence

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_75lCN5E7Rg

Main Idea of a Paragraph

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CMiYNAxQ7Y&t=49s

Understanding Sentence Structure

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBxFb0CIPEo&t=805s

Expanding Sentences

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7mK01CU-E0&t=199s

Making Prediction

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ko6LiX62IlA&t=276s8

Guessing Meaning of Unknown Words/Phrases

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5J5SLhc53I&t=702s

Phrases and Clauses

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZLK-Lu5b4o&t=966s

Asking and answering short Questions

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfadFgukAto&t=948s

Asking and answering short Questions 2

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odKFfMMhuTw&t=273s

Understanding Verbs

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_EQJqFCg4g&t=446s

Understanding Helping Verbs

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BB73mr3ogtc&t=37s

Transitive and Intranistive Verbs

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8LlApo2gP4&t=34s

Making Inferences

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaY0Q9-X4G4&t=446s

Making Inferences 2

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBHarLu_ZHM&t=244s

Predicting Meaning Using Discourse Markers

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5wlGoVhNv9w&t=299s

Predicting Meaning Using Discourse Markers 2

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