

A Suggested Programme for Teaching Reading Comprehension to EFL Learners at a Secondary School Stage in Iraq

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Abstract

Reading Comprehension is challenging for the majority of EFL learners due to their poor reading ability, limited vocabulary, and lack of the language competence.

Moreover, the modern trends of teaching English which give priority to spoken language at the sacrifice of the written language weaken learners' ability in writing.

Consequently, the learners either neglect answering the questions on the reading passages which appear as the first question in every school and ministerial examination or answer them carelessly.

The study proposes a training programme for those learners, It was built on the above- mentioned situation which necessitates adopting a simplified way for teaching this activity and using learners' native language in some occasions to overcome the difficulties they face and clarify some difficult points, they suffer from. The learners have incomplete knowledge or faulty knowledge of the target language.

The programme was applied on a sample of (46) students at Al-Shareef Al-Radhi Preparatory School for Boys in Dayala

Governorate. The students were exposed to pre- and post-tests during the academic year (2022-2023). The Findings revealed that there was a significant difference in the performance of the students in the post tests. The mean score of the students in the pre-test is (3.173), whereas the mean score in the post-test is (5.086) which is obviously higher than the pre-test and the calculated t- value is (9.91) higher than the scheduled t- value (1.96) .

Key words: Reading , Reading Comprehension , training programme

برنامج مقترح لتدريس استيعاب القراءة لمتعلمي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية في المرحلة الثانوية في العراق

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الملخص

برنامج مقترح لتدريس استيعاب القراءة لمتعلمي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية في المرحلة الثانوية في العراق
استيعاب وفهم القراءة يعد تحدياً للغالبية من متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية بمقتضى قدراتهم البسيطة على القراءة، ومحدودية مفرداتهم اللغوية، وضعف مقدرتهم اللغوية. فضلا عن ذلك فإن الاتجاهات الحديثة لتدريس هذه اللغة تركز على اللغة المنطوقة (الكلام) على حساب اللغة المكتوبة مما كان لها اثر سلبي على المتعلمين في اضعاف ادائهم في الكتابة.

وبناء على ذلك، فإن المتعلمين اما ان يهملوا الإجابة عن الاسئلة المتعلقة بنصوص القراءة الاستيعابية والتي تأتي في مقدمة الأسئلة المدرسية والوزارية ، أو ان يتم الإجابة عنها بإهمال و بذلك يخسروا الدرجات المخصصة لهذه الفعالية اللغوية . هذه الدراسة تقترح برنامجاً تدريبياً لهؤلاء المتعلمين مبني على اساس الحالة المشار اليها والتي تحتم تبني طريقه مبسطة لتعليم هذه الفعالية اللغوية واستخدام اللغة الوطنية للمتعلمين في بعض المناسبات للتغلب على الصعوبات التي تواجههم وتوضيح بعض النقاط الصعبة التي يعانون منها ، فالمتعلمين ليسوا اغبياء بل انهم لا يملكون المعلومة اللغوية الكاملة أو يمتلكوها بشكل خاطئ . طبق البرنامج على عينة من (46) طالباً من طلبة اعدادية الشريف الرضي للبنين في محافظة ديالى . تم اختبار الطلبة بوساطة امتحانين : قبلي وبعدي خلال السنة الدراسية (2022-2023). وقد كشفت نتائج الدراسة ان هناك فروقا ذات دلالة احصائية في اداء الطلبة في الامتحان البعدي إذ كانت القيمة التائية المحسوبة اعلى من القيمة التائية الجدولية و المتوسط الحسابي للامتحان البعدي اعلى من المتوسط الحسابي للامتحان القبلي .
الكلمات المفتاحية : القراءة، الاستيعاب القرائي ، برنامج تدريبي.

1. Introduction

Reading Comprehension is a cognitive process of understanding written texts. It shows the ability of EFL learners to read, comprehend, interpret, and decode written texts or deduce the implicit meanings, messages, or the moral lessons of the texts. It is a basic building block for learning which plays a vital role in expanding learners' vocabulary and extending language knowledge (Carter 2002 as cited in Rahimi and Shojaee: 2008: 4).

Rivers (1981: 259) also states that reading is a most important activity in any language class , not as source of information , but also as a means of consolidating and extending one's knowledge of the language .

It is worth mentioning here the difference between reading and reading comprehension: Reading is a skill in which learners translate written texts or passages into spoken, whereas reading comprehension is the ability to understand texts and know or decode the writers' messages or purposes of the texts (Brown 2000 : 22- 49).

The majority of EFL students think that the questions on the reading comprehension passages (unseen passages) which they see in every school and ministerial examination are beyond the horizon of their knowledge of language; therefore, they either leave them or do them carelessly. (Personal Communication), Additionally, the pandemic outbreak of Covid-19 during the academic years (2019-2020) and (2020-2021) played a negative role and contributed to learners' weakness in this aspect of language since they did not attend face-to-face with their teachers.

During the COVID – 19 pandemic, the examination were administered remotely and consisted predominantly of true / false statements and multiple-choice questions .

Reading Comprehension is a multi-dimension skill which develops learners' academic abilities in the field of writing, spelling and meaning . Learners can compete in the target language and show their abilities in academic writing, spelling, punctuation and understanding as well as rational inferences of the texts. In this field, learners can practise what they have been taught In English. This is what Harmer (2007: 99) mentions when he states that reading has positive effects on learners' spelling, writing and vocabulary knowledge.

Vocabulary and language knowledge are the two pillars which enable learners to work on the texts confidently. (Hedge 2000: 192–193).

As a sequence of what had been mentioned before, EFL teachers must act as facilitators to enable their learners to do well in the target language.

1.1 The Problem of the Study

From the researcher's long experience in teaching English to EFL learners (49 years), he found out that the majority of the learners face a problem not only in comprehending the reading passages , but also in answering the questions on them. Many

learners declare that this activity is beyond their knowledge (personal communication).

Consequently, many EFL teachers resort to prepare some questions on the reading passages and ask their learners to memorize them as a solution of this problem. So, when the learners face unseen passages in examinations, they are unable to comprehend them and answer the questions on them confidently. Therefore, most of them copy the whole sentences in the reading passages which contain the words the questions have and some of them write down the answers without paying attention to the structures of the sentences . This issue has been identified through my extensive experience in English Language teaching at both secondary and university levels, and through continuous engagement with students .

1.2 The Aim of the Study

This study aims at developing EFL learners' capacity to comprehend the reading passages and answer the questions on them acceptably on the examinations or in the classroom discussion.

Consequently, the study offers a simplified graded training programme to help them in this activity

1.3 The Hypothesis of the Study

There is not a significant difference between the learners' performances in the pre-and post – tests

1.4 The limit of the Study

This study is limited to :

1.Teaching reading comprehension at the secondary schools in Iraq .

2. The students of the fourth-year scientific branch at Al-Shareef Al-Radhi Preparatory

School for Boys, Directorate General of Education in Dayla Governorate (2023 -2024)constitute the target population of the study

1.5 Significance of the Study

The study provides an invaluable resource for EFL teachers, especially for beginners who do not have enough experience or those who graduate from Colleges of Arts and they do not have pre-service training in the field of teaching.

2. Literature Review

Kirby J.R. (2007) states that reading comprehension is a complex process. It depends on other important lower-level processes: prior knowledge, vocabulary, orthographic knowledge, morphological awareness, Cognitive speed, etc. To improve the reading comprehension skills of learners, one should understand that there is no secret weapon that can quickly improve reading competencies for the learners. Therefore, careful assessment is needed to specify learners' strengths and weaknesses as well as continued support and good programmes need to be designed to help them.

The study concluded that the root of the problem lies in the early elementary years.

Thus, efforts should be directed to this problem before the secondary stage.

Agnese et al., (2020) studied the effects of cloze tests designed on online platform for children who have weaknesses in written texts comprehension due to their poor skills in lexical and semantic inferential processes. Reading Comprehension was assessed with two texts: narrative and Informative taken from Italian batteries for the reading.

A significant difference between pre- and post-tests was found for both comprehension texts. (See Online Sites)

3. Methods

In order to achieve the aim of the study, pre – and post-tests were administered. The reading passages of both tests were taken from the official ministerial examinations .

3.1 Sample of the Study

The sample was 46 students. It was taken randomly from the fourth-year Scientific branch, at Al-Shareef Al-Radhi

Preparatory School for Boys (Baquba Al-Jididah).The population which comprises three sections: A,B and C was 130 students. The training programme was applied on section C' (The time _ table of this section suited the researcher's time).

3.2 Data Collection Instruments

For statistical purposes , the t-test for paired samples was used to verify whether there were statistically significant differences between the students ' performance in the pre-test and post – test .

4. The Procedures

To investigate the effectiveness of applying the training programme on improving students' reading comprehension, the following procedures were taken:

- 1-The students were exposed to the pre-test on 8/2/2023 (Wednesday) (See appendix-2).
- 2.Then, they were exposed to the post-test on 10/4/2023 (Monday). (See appendix 3)
3. Between the two above-mentioned dates, they were exposed to eight hours of practice on several samples of unseen passages (an hour every Wednesday). All the samples were borrowed from the ministerial examinations.

5. The Role of EFL Teachers:

Reading comprehension represents a real challenge to the vast majority of EFL learners who always express their frustration concerning this activity due to their limited knowledge of the target language.

The pandemic of Covid-19 had negative effects on the teaching learning _ process. Learners were deprived of face-to-face interaction with their teachers for two academic years. They were mainly required to sit the English examinations which were designed as True/False and multiple-choice questions.

Consequently, EFL teachers must do their utmost to bridge the gap and build a self-confidence in the learners, they have to

identify the weaknesses and think of an appropriate remedial work in order to turn their weaknesses into strengths. They should avoid verbal abuses, instead, they can use some words of encouragement to give them a boost and increase their motivation and confidence . They can even turn a blind eye to some minor errors in writing in order to encourage them to deal with this activity eagerly.

Many learners cannot completely understand what their teachers explain in English, especially those who have very limited knowledge and vocabulary in English; therefore, learners' native language can be used in some occasions to explain certain difficult aspects and facilitate understanding.

6. Training Programme

Teaching English as a foreign language in non-native countries is different from teaching it as a second language. Teaching it as a foreign language requires a simple and an easy method .

6.1 Preliminary Stage

To overcome the difficulties confronted by EFL learners concerning answering the questions on unseen passages which are routinely the first question in every examination, EFL teachers, first of all, have to set a positive situation for learning to reduce learners' anxiety . Axiomatically, most learners are unable to understand what their teachers explain completely in English, especially those who have very limited knowledge in English. Therefore, teachers can resort to learners' native language (Ma Caro (1977) as cited in Cook 2008: 182).

Teachers can provide their learners with a simplified list of the most common Irregular verbs in which the verbs are grouped in an easy way to be memorized (See appendix-1). Then, they can provide them with brief explanations about -ed, -s, and -ing suffixes which they need when dealing with this activity before diving into the details .

As for learners, they have to read the given passage for several times in order to get an overview . They will certainly

face some words which they do not know their meanings . They can guess their meanings from the contexts . They also have to know how to find the information needed in the question. Most question deal with specific information in the passage (Scanning , like the name of a place , a person , time, etc. In this case , learners do not have to read every word in the text . Some questions ask about the content (Skimming) . In this case , learners have to read the whole passage carefully to find the general information , like choosing a suitable title to the passage or finding the moral lesson behind the text or asking the reader about his / her opinion about a certain point in the passage . (Lee, linda and Erik Gurdersen : 2011pp18 and 28)

6. 2 The Details of the Programme:

Later on, the teachers can use the following graded steps which assume that EFL learners will make progress towards mastering the skill of answering the questions on reading comprehension passages.

A) Providing learners with a list of the question words that W/h questions begin, with their meanings and usage and informing them that these words must be omitted when answering the questions, but they should be substituted by the information they ask about when answering the questions.

The list of the W/h question words:

- 1 -How (a) (used for asking about health)
 - How does your father feel now?
 - He feels better .
 - (b) (in what way or manner or by what means.)
 - How do you come to school?
 - I come by bus.
- 2 -Who (what or which person or persons)
 - (a) Subjective case
 - Who discovered the New World?
 - Christopher Columbus discovered the New World.
 - (b) Objective case.
 - Who did you meet at the party?

-I met Ali at the party.

3 -Whom (Objective case of "who")

- Whom did you discuss the matter with?

-I discussed the matter with my father.

4 -What (which thing, concept or what job)

-What is your name?

-My name is Ahmed.

-What is your father?

-My father is a teacher.

- What is the tool used for cutting meat called?

-It is called a knife.

5 -Which (used to ask for an individual person or thing among several of a class).

- Which car is yours?

-The red one is mine.

6 -Whose (used for asking about possession)

-Whose handbag is this ?

- It is Sara's.

7 -When (at what time)

- When do you usually go to school?

-I usually go to school at 7:30.

8 -Where (at what place or position).

- Where were you born?

-I was born in Baghdad.

9 -Why (for what reason or purpose)

-Why did he stay up late?

-He stayed up late because he had headache .

-Why did he take a taxi?

-He took a taxi in order to arrive on time.

10 -How far (asking about a distance)

- How far is Baghdad from Baquba?
- It is about 45 kilometers

11 -How long (asking about average duration or passage of time).

- How long did it take from Baghdad to Amman by plane?
- It took more than an hour.

12 -How many (asking about countable nouns)

- How many stars are there in the Iraqi Flag ?
- There are three stars in the Iraqi Flag.

13 -How much (asking about quantities or mass nouns or uncountable nouns).

- How much water is there in the jug?
- There is a little water in the jug.

14 -How old (asking about someone's age or the age of something).

- How old are you?
- I am twenty years old.

15 -How often (used to ask about actions or events which frequently happen)

- How often do you brush your teeth?
- I brush my teeth three times a day.

[B] Omitting the question mark, and using the full-stop instead.

[C] Omitting the following verbs if they are found In the questions:

(a)- happened ~~to~~ The learner must find a suitable verb to use in answering the question .

- What happened to the Titanic?
- It sank.

(b)=>do no change in the main verb.

- What do they grow?

-They grow wheat.

(c)- ~~do~~ **does** adding the third singular person(-s) to the main verb.

- Where does Egypt lie ?

-It lies in Africa.

(d)- ~~do~~ **did** the main verb should be changed into the past simple tense.

- How long did the examination last?

-It lasted three hours.

[D] If there is none of the auxiliary verbs: (do, does, did) in the questions, in this case, the subject should be put before the verb ,for example:

-Why was he absent?

-He was absent because he was sick.

- When had they brushed their teeth?

-They had brushed their teeth before they went to school.

[E]Some questions begin with auxiliary verbs such as : Do, Have, Will, Is, Can, May, etc., in this case, the answers should be short

Note: The same auxiliary verbs that the questions begin, should be used in the answers, for example:

1- Can you speak French?

-Yes, I can. Or - No, I can't

2. Does Egypt lie in Africa?

- Yes, it does.

3- Is Kadim Al-Sahir an Iraqi singer?

-Yes, he is.

[F] if the questions which begin with auxiliary verbs have the word (or) in the middle, we should omit the word (or) and choose either the information before (or) or after it according to the information in the passage, for example:

- Is Iraq in Asia or in Africa?

- Iraq is in Asia

(G) Sometimes, learners are asked to choose a suitable title to the passage. In this case, they have to read the passage carefully for several times in order to get the general meaning of that passage, for example

- Give a suitable title to the passage.

- The suitable (good) title to the passage is " _____ "

[H]- Teachers can practise with the learners some more questions to expand their knowledge in language and at the same time to make the lesson more interesting and to attract them to this activity. There are a variety of questions they can use concerning this point such as:

1- I wonder if I should look for a new job, but it is not easy to find one these days.

- What does the word "one" mean?

- The word "one" means "a new job"

2. I took my parents' advice. Later, I found this was useful.

- What does the word "this" mean?

- The word "this" means, "advice".

3. Noor was a college student. Before going to college, his mother made him breakfast.

- Was Noor a boy or a girl?

- Noor was a boy.

4- China is not the only country that imports oil from Iraq. Most countries do.

- What does the verb "do" mean?

- The verb "do" means "imports".

5. Vegetarians are healthier than meat-eaters. They live up to two years than the latter.

- What does the pronoun "they" refer to?

- It refers to vegetarians.

6- Some countries utilize the energies of the sun, others depend on oil only.

- What does the word "others" mean?

- The word "others" means "other countries"

7-Last year , Mohammad went to Egypt . He stayed there for two weeks .

-What does the word " there" mean ?

-It means " Egypt ".

[I] Teachers can also ask the learners to give the meaning of some words in their native language , to give their synonyms , antonyms in English or to decide which parts of speech they are and then ask them to use them in meaningful sentences .The purpose is to activate and encourage them to speak and participate in class activities because most EFL learners hesitate to speak and take part in class activities.

If teachers realize that the learners do not understand some points they explain, they can use learners' native language to clarify those points.

All the aforementioned points are motivational procedures EFL teachers can use to attract the learners' attention and make them stuck with the activity.

Table (1)
The participants' Marks in pre – and post – Tests

No.	Pre – test	Post - test	No.	Pre – test	Post - test
1.	8	10	24	3	7
2.	4	5	25	3	4
3.	2	2	26	4	8
4.	3	4	27	2	4
5.	3	4	28	5	8
6.	3	2	29	2	4
7.	5	8	30	0	4
8.	0	10	31	4	2
9.	2	4	32	5	4
10.	5	4	33	3	7
11.	5	8	34	4	6
12.	5	8	35	5	4
13.	7	4	36	4	4
14.	0	8	37	0	3

15.	4	4	38	5	8
16.	7	10	39	1	3
17.	4	8	40	2	6
18.	3	4	41	4	7
19.	0	2	42	4	6
20.	4	7	43	0	5
21.	0	8	44	0	5
22.	2	6	45	4	4
23.	0	4	46	6	4

Table (2)
The statistics of the Pre_ and Post - tests

	Sample	Mean	SD	Calculated T-value	Scheduled T-value
pretest	46	3.173	2.03	9.91	1.96
Post test	46	5.086	7.04		

As shown in the table-2- above, there is a significant difference at the level (0.05) in the performance of the students in the post-test. The calculated t-value is higher than the scheduled t-value and the mean of the post – test is higher than the mean of the pre- test . Thus , The null hypothesis is rejected .

7. Conclusions

The results of this study prove that adopting the proposed training programme, which aims to develop the performance of EFL learners in reading comprehension, is effective and encouraging. The application of the programme created a comfortable atmosphere which reduced the learners' anxiety and encouraged them to involve in this activity.

8. Recommendations

1. It is preferable to practise this programme in Intermediate and preparatory stages.
2. It is advisable for EFL teachers to trace the steps of this programme in order to help their learners overcome the

difficulties they confront in this activity and deepen their linguistic knowledge.

3. Constant practice is the determining factor in improving learners' performance in this activity

Thus, reading comprehension passages should not be included only in mid-year and final - year examinations. Monthly examinations should also cover this activity in order that learners will be familiar with it .

4. Teachers can begin with easy reading passages and gradually move to more difficult ones.

5-EFL teachers have to use some positive words, turn a blind eye to some of the learners' minor errors to boost their morale.

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Appendices

Appendix(1)

Irregular Verbs

To overcome the difficulties the learners face , the irregular verbs are grouped in an easy way to be memorized :

Present	Past	P.P	Present	Past	P.P
cost	Cost	Cost	sleep	slept	Slept
cut	Cut	Cut	keep	kept	Kept
put	Put	Put	come	came	Come
hurt	Hurt	Hurt	become	became	Become
set	Set	Set	tell	told	Told
let	Let	Let	Sell	sold	Sold
hit	Hit	Hit	drive	drove	Driven
read	Read	Read	write	wrote	Written
spread	spread	Spread	Ride	rode	Ridden
shed	Shed	Shed	Steal	stole	Stolen
build	Built	Built	Speak	spoke	Spoken
spend	Spent	Spent	Break	broke	Broken
send	Sent	Sent	Beat	beat	Beaten
lend	Lent	Lent	Give	gave	Given
mean	meant	Meant	Hide	hid	Hidden
deal	Dealt	Dealt	Bite	bit	Bitten
learn	Learnt	Learnt	Fall	fell	Fallen
dream	dreamt	Dreamt	Take	took	Taken
leap	Leapt	Leapt	Choose	chose	Chosen
spell	Spelt	Spelt	leave	left	Left
spill	Spilt	Spilt	Feel	felt	Felt
say	Said	Said	Hold	held	held
pay	Paid	Paid	Lose	lost	lost
buy	bought	Bought	Win	won	won
bring	brought	Brought	Do	did	done

think	thought	Thought	Make	made	made
fight	fought	Fought	See	saw	seen
seek	sought	Sought	Go	went	gone
catch	caught	Caught	Sit	sat	sat
teach	taught	Taught	Run	ran	run
meet	Met	Met	Begin	began	begun
shoot	Shot	Shot	Know	knew	known
feed	Fed	Fed	Find	found	found
lead	Led	Led	Hear	heard	heard
bleed	Bled	Bled	Fly	flew	flown
wear	Wore	Wore	Drink	drank	drunk
bear	Bore	Bore	Get	got	got *
tear	Tore	Tore	sing	sang	sung

*Oxford Word Power Dictionary (2006 :329) British English . In American English : get , got , gotten.

Appendix (2) The Pre-Test

Q1 /Read the following text carefully and then answer (5) of the questions that follow :

A lady, who owned a large and beautiful cat, received a present of a canary from a friend. The cage of the canary was hung in her bedroom. When the cat was not there, the cage was opened and the canary was allowed to fly about the room. One day, when the cage was opened, the cat somehow got into the room without being noticed. When the lady came in, she was surprised to find her cat and the bird became best friends; and after this they passed hours playing together. One day, while they were playing, the cat seized the canary in its teeth, jumped upon the bed with it and looked as if it was going to eat the bird. The lady thought that her bird was lost, but while she was looking round with surprise, she saw a strange cat in the room.

This explained why her cat seized her canary. It was to protect the bird from the strange cat.

- 1.What did the lady receive?
- 2.Why did the lady think that she lost the bird?
- 3.Did the strange cat eat the bird?
- 4.When was the bird allowed to fly?
- 5.The cage was hung in the kitchen. (True/False).
- 6.Give the passage a suitable title.

Appendix(3)

The Post – Test

Q1/ Read the following text carefully and then answer (5) of the questions that follow:

One day, a barber was busy cutting a man's hair in his shop when a handsome young man with a small boy in his hand came in. They sat down and waited until the barber finished. Then, the young man asked the barber to cut his hair first and then cut the small boy's hair because he wanted to have a cup of tea while he was cutting the boy's hair. After having his hair cut, the man said he would have tea at the café nearby. The barber asked him not to be late. The barber soon finished and waited for the man. At the end of an hour, the barber said to the boy. "Your father's taking such a long time. Where has he gone? "I can't guess ", answered the boy" And that man wasn't my father. I've never seen him before in my life. I was playing in the street when he came and asked me whether I'd like to have my hair cut without having to pay money".

1. What was the barber doing when the young man came into the shop?
2. Why did the boy agree to go with the man to the barber's shop?

3. The barber waited for..... for the young man to come. (2 hours / 60 minutes)
4. The barber was paid by..... (the young man / the boy / neither the man nor the boy).
5. The boy was the young man's son. (True/False).
6. Give the passage a suitable title.