



Challenges Faced by Some Foundation Students at Bahrain Teachers College in Acquiring Reading and Writing Skills

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Abstract: This action research aims to shed light on the common difficulties encountered by some Foundation Program students at Bahrain Teachers College in acquiring reading and writing skills. It also suggests some remedial actions that could facilitate the process of acquiring such skills. Classroom observation and error analysis of the students written tasks were utilized. The findings of the study revealed that insufficient linguistic knowledge and lack of reading strategies are the most striking problems in reading, whereas, mechanics of writing and lack of organization and outlining of their ideas were among their weaknesses in paragraph writing. Some remedial activities were used and then evaluated which were found to be helpful.

Keywords: Foundation Program (FND), challenges in reading & writing, remedial actions.

1. Introduction

To students, reading and writing both are essential skills for their academic journey. Through reading, they can learn new vocabularies, expressions, and sentence structure. They can understand instructions and approach new information. Reading can play a fundamental role in developing the learners' linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge which are important in developing other language skills (Noorizah, 2011). Writing is also a highly recommended skill especially for academic purposes. Students are required to carry out different written tasks, assignments and take notes. They also need to conduct written exams and research. As a result, reading and writing are always part of any educational program as is the case in B.ED program run by Bahrain Teachers College (BTC).

According to the Bahrain Teachers College (BTC) program, reading and writing is a core

course introduced in the Foundation Program. It is a two-semester, year-long course that prepares Foundation Program Students for academic English reading and writing tasks required of teacher candidates in BTC's Bachelor of Education Program (BTC, 2011). The primary learning outcomes of this course are: using a variety of reading strategies effectively, and writing different types of academic assignments and short reflections. Although, the objectives of the course seem to be specific and straightforward, there are some students who encounter serious challenges in acquiring the above predetermined learning outcomes. They are incapable of recognizing words and extracting meaning from a text written in English, they are unable to use clues that might appear in the text, and they also have some problems with the basic mechanics of writing.

Therefore, this paper aims to provide an insight into the nature of challenges experienced



by FND students in acquiring reading and writing skills. It also aims to suggest some remedial actions that could help in facilitating the process of acquiring the course learning outcomes.

Research questions

1. What is the nature of the challenges faced by FND students in acquiring reading and writing skills?
2. What are the remedial tasks that could help in facilitating the process of acquiring the course learning outcomes?

Significance of the study

Although the sample of the study is relatively small and the time allocated is fairly short, the researcher expects that this study provides useful information about the nature of difficulties that FND students face in acquiring reading & writing skills. It is also hoped that instructors of FND students can use such information in preparing materials and tasks in advance to minimize the influence of those problems. In addition, this information could be valuable for curriculum designers to come up with a more effective curriculum that meets the student needs and interests.

2. Literature Review

Research has shown evidence from various contexts about the serious challenges that students face in reading and writing and to what extent such challenges hindered their progress in their educational career (Younes & Albalawi, 2015; Hoover & Gough 2013). One of the most common challenges is «the ability to recognize both types of relationships between written and spoken words» (Hoover & Gough 2013). In many cases, students fail to decode words they never encountered before in written form, as a result they fail to deduce the meaning of what they read. Some students tend to focus on form rather than meaning while reading, therefore, they spend a relatively long time trying to pronounce and understand the meaning of each word in the text (Selhaouis, 2001). Similarly, Rahman (2004:5) stated that lack of vocabulary is the most noticeable cause of the students' failure in reading comprehension. «In

every sentence, they come across new words which create a constant barrier for them to understand the meaning». Other researchers stated that there are consistent data confirming that reading comprehension difficulties arise when students are unable to employ top-down reading comprehension strategies including recalling their prior knowledge about the topic to predict the meaning, and using any clues that might appear in the text instead of relying on finding out the meaning of each word (Abdat, 2013; Shehadeh, 2015).

However, the effect of the lack of reading comprehension skills is not limited to extracting meaning from a written text, it goes actually beyond that to delay the process of acquiring other skills like writing. According to (Alomrani, 2014) reading and writing are strongly interrelated. Through reading, students can acquire more background information about the topic of writing, come up with new ideas, learn new vocabularies, and recognize the importance of cohesion and coherence which makes their writing more professional

Although «student academic writing continues to be at the center of teaching and learning in higher education» (Coffin et al, 2003), it was obvious that having a good ability to write effectively is a difficult task, especially for non-English speakers. One of the main sources of difficulty for Arab learners in acquiring the writing skill comes from the students' mother tongue interference (Gomaa, 2010). According to Lado, 1964, interference is the negative influence of the mother language (L1) on the performance of the target language (L2). Research has also demonstrated that, limited vocabulary and lack of background knowledge about the topic are proved to be common sources of difficulty in writing (Adas and Bakir, 2013). In a study conducted by Alhdad (2013) in which he analyzed the errors made by some Libyan university students in writing descriptive essays, found out that most of the participants were thinking in Arabic and then transferring their ideas into English, as result their writing sounds Arabic mainly in terms of structure and meaning. He believes that

the reason behind such a problem could be due to the learners' mother tongue interference and the «literal translation» strategy used by those students. Other difficulties such as mechanics of writing, over generalization, grammatical errors are also common among Arab students. Younes & Albalawi (2015) investigated the most common types of writing problems among English language and translation major students at Tabuk University. The findings of the study indicated that most language problems occurred in the students' writing assignments were grammatical errors such as tenses, prepositions, subject – verb agreement and miss use of articles. The study also revealed that punctuation, spelling and word order were also common errors. They speculated that the possible reasons behind the students' writing weaknesses contributed to the explicit way of teaching grammar, using Arabic by both teachers and students in class to simplify the rules and much focus on form over meaning.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that there is a solid interrelation between reading and writing. Recent research shows that “the structures and strategies that readers and writers use to organize, remember and present their ideas are generally the same in reading and writing” (Langer & Flihan, 2000). This complementary relationship encourages many curriculum designers to integrate the reading and writing skills as the case in the B.ED program at the BTC.

3. Research Methodology

This study is an action research study which took place during a reading and writing course taught to Foundation Program students (section 5) at the BTC during the academic year 2015/2016, first semester. As illustrated in figure 1 below, action research usually involves questioning one's own practice through a process of self-monitoring which includes identifying, planning, acting, evaluating and reflecting on an issue or a problem to ease the process of learning (Thomas and Farrel, 2007). This study involves systematic collection of information about the students' performance in reading and writing classes through classroom observation and error analysis of their written tasks. The Classroom

observation was used to find out the learners' common challenges in reading comprehension, whereas, the error analysis of the students' written work was implemented to discover the written mistakes made by the participants. Then, the most common challenges were classified and categorized into different types and given appropriate titles. Once the data was collected, the researcher then analyzed and reflected on it to decide what type of action should be taken. Accordingly, remedial follow-up actions such as, providing students with supplementary reading tasks based on their interests, encouraging reading in chunks instead of word by word, stimulating guessing and prediction strategies were performed. Moreover, monitoring and evaluating the impact of such actions on the students' performance were carried out.

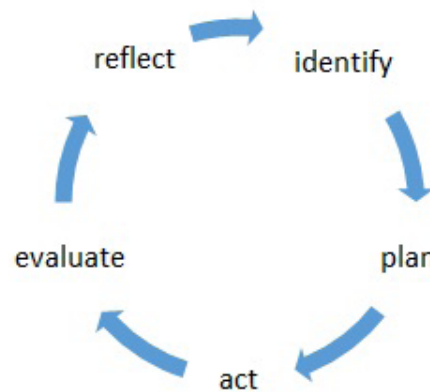


Fig. 1: Research procedures

3.1 Participants

Twenty-two students in the Foundation Program at the (BTC), during the academic year 2015/2016, first term took part in this study. The participants are of a different level of achievement and had almost the same background. That is, they spent a similar several years learning English in primary and secondary schools. In spite of this long period of learning the English language, their level of reading and writing seem to be below the required standard to fulfill the course learning outcomes.



4. Data Analysis

This section presented and analyzed the data derived from the classroom observation and error analysis of the participant's reading and written tasks. The data are classified and then organized into various categories, as follows.

4.1 Nature of reading difficulties

The following are the main challenges encountered by FND students in reading classes:

4.1.1 Lack of decoding skills

It was noticed that some students were incapable of decoding words written in English rapidly and accurately. For instance, words that contain (gh) letters like although, straight, thoughtful are of the main source of difficulty. Although, they know the meaning of those words when used orally, they can't recognize the meaning when they come across those words in a written text because they can't decode them easily. This is in line with what has been stated by Hoover & Gough (2013), that the ability to decode words was the main challenge among the participants of their study. Spelling/sound inconsistency is another noticeable problem, as in "great, weak, regions, cuisine, delicious, sign". In these examples, there are similar letters that representing different sounds as in great and weak, church and character or maybe different letters represent similar sounds as in, right and write, weight and wait. This is considered to be another major source of challenges because some students rely on guessing strategies to pronounce the word or over generalize their earlier experience which very often leads to wrong pronunciation and difficulty in getting the meaning of the written word.

4.1.3 Insufficient linguistic knowledge

The findings of the study revealed that some students were not aware of the importance of punctuation marks. That is, they don't pause when they come across a comma or make a stop when there is a full stop. Consequently, they couldn't make sense of what they read. The result is consistent with the findings discovered by Younes & Albalawi (2015) which indicated

that misuse of punctuation marks is among the list of the problems faced by English language and translation major students at Tabuk University. Another common challenge is that they do not have enough morphological knowledge. For instance, they know the meaning of fashion, accomplish, select, but not fashionable, accomplishment, selectively, respectively. This issue may be related to the method of teaching implemented by their previous teachers who did n't expand the students' amount of vocabulary by mentioning the variations derived from the word being taught.

4.1.5 Lack of reading strategies

The findings demonstrated that lack of using effective reading strategies is one of the students' major weaknesses. Whenever they were asked to read they would start reading the text from the first word up to the last word neglecting any clues that might appear in the text like pictures, titles, and subtitles or activating their prior knowledge to predict the meaning. This could be due to the lack of training and practice in using reading comprehension strategies. However, this particular issue seems to be global as it has been highlighted by many researchers in different contexts (Sehlaoui, 2001; Abdat, 2013 and Shehadeh, 2015).

4.1.2 Negative reading habits

It was also observed that some students would point to each word while reading which makes reading slow, the result of which is that they can't connect the meaning of previous ideas with the following ones. By the time they reach the end of the paragraph they forget what they read in the beginning. This could be due to the poor reading culture among the students, and the reliance on literary translation regardless the context which usually leads to misunderstanding of the intended meaning.

4.1.4 Possible reasons

Lack of reading habits could be one of the main reasons behind their poor reading comprehension skill. An informal chat with the students indicated that reading is not



popular among them either in their L1 or in the target language. Insufficient practice, lack of awareness of reading strategies in addition to the low motivation are all possible reasons. Differences between the learners' L1 and the target language plays a significant role in hindering the acquisition of the necessary reading skills. Furthermore, some of the topics are boring and don't meet the students' preferences.

4.1.6 Remedial actions

In order to decrease the effect of the above-mentioned reasons on the students' reading skills, the following remedial actions were implemented:

- Familiarizing students with various strategies of reading and encouraging their use.
- Using pre-reading activities such as guiding questions, prediction, a short discussion about the topic to activate their prior knowledge.
- Increasing their vocabulary knowledge by giving them supplementary materials to read based on their interests and present the theme of what they read in class with special focus on new vocabularies existed in the text, for the benefit of the class.
- Illustrating the role and importance of punctuation marks in reading comprehension through different examples.
- Giving them reading tasks with limited time to accelerate their reading speed such as showing a sentence on the board very fast and ask them to catch the meaning.
- Dividing the text into paragraphs and ask each group to read one paragraph looking for specific or general information within a limited time.

4.1.7 Evaluation of the remedial actions

Ongoing evaluation of the students' reading comprehension skills took place throughout the semester. The findings showed that the students' reading comprehension skills have noticeably developed after introducing the remedial

activities. For instance, some students became aware of the importance of using different reading strategies like skimming & scanning. It was also noticed that the students became aware of the role of punctuation marks. BUT some of them still have decoding difficulties, their reading is rate still slow and still look for the meaning of every word and rely on literary translation.

4.1.8 Suggestions for improvement

- Students' needs and interests should be taken into account in choosing the material to be used in the course (a survey could be carried out at the beginning of the course).
- Word recognition exercises are highly recommended.
- Phonological awareness tasks which deal specifically with sound and improve spelling-sound correspondence.
- Stimulating the students' habit of reading.

4.2 Nature of writing difficulties

This section presents the common challenges met by the students under investigation in writing a paragraph. The challenges were classified as follows:

4.2.1 Lack of organization and outlining

The findings of the study showed that a considerable number of students lacked the ability to organize their ideas before starting their writing. They didn't use brainstorming or mind maps strategies to generate and organize their thoughts. Consequently, irrelevant and endless sentences were written by those students, where the main idea becomes vague and difficult to be followed by the reader.

4.2.2 Linguistic difficulties

The omission of verb "to be" and subject-verb agreement are the most striking weaknesses of the participants, as illustrated in the following real examples: instead of writing "pizza is one of my favorite foods" they write «pizza one of my favorite foods»; "it have a nice view" instead of « it has a nice view». In addition,



there are some students who encountered some challenges in using adjectives correctly as in the following example “beautifuls girls instead of beautiful girls». This could be due to the impact of grammar rules in Arabic which say that the adjective should match the noun in number. That is, if the noun is plural then the adjective must be plural as well. They also have problems in putting adjectives in the right order as in: «Esra bought small blue expensive handbag», instead of “Esra bought an expensive small blue handbag”.

The finding also indicated that using prepositions in English properly seems to be another area of challenge. The examples below clearly illustrate the area of difficulty, “pizza consists from flour, vegetable and butter» instead of “pizza consists of flour, vegetable and butter». «She is ready to the exam» instead of “she is ready for the exam». However, using prepositions correctly is a quite challenging area in their L1 as well. Wrong use of articles such as the omission of the indefinite article a & an was common. As in, «this is book» instead of «this is a book» or using the definite article ‘the where it is not applicable, as in “the food is necessary» instead of «food is necessary». Repetition of the subject appears often as indicated in the following example, “this is the book which I bought it yesterday» instead of «this is the book which I bought yesterday».

4.2.3 Mechanics of writing

Punctuation marks, capitalization, and spelling are the next challenges faced by a vast number of students. The findings of the study indicated that the majority of students either didn’t use punctuation marks at all or used them when are not necessary. In addition, they rarely start a new sentence with a capital letter and write many words as they pronounce them regardless of the spelling rules of the English language. This could be due to the fact that they haven’t had enough practice in the mechanics of writing.

4.2.4 Possible reasons

Although the reasons behind the above-

mentioned challenges were not investigated in depth, some possible reasons can be identified.

- L1 interference (different writing direction, no capitalization, different sentence structure, different adjective order, different spelling system and different use of articles) appeared to have a great impact on the students writing skills in English;
- Time for learning and practicing writing in class is insufficient;
- Different language items have very similar functions as in prepositions and articles;
- Some students are not aware of their weaknesses and the importance of the writing skill.

4.2.5 Remedial actions

Based on the findings of the study and the possible reasons, some remedial activities were designed to facilitate the process of acquiring the writing skills for FND students, as follows:

- Discussing the common errors made by the students in front of the class;
- Self-correction (asking students to work in pairs and correct each other’s work); or correcting one mistake by the instructor and then asking students to find similar mistakes.
- Showing good examples of students’ work to be used as a model;
- Familiarizing students with various strategies of writing and encouraging their use.
- Creating this abbreviation “Q SASH COMP» to help the students memorizing the adjective order. (quality, size, age, shape, color, origin, material, purpose)
- Students are asked to read their work in front of the class to make them more a serious when conducting a writing task.
- Applying question-based learning strategy to encourage students to generate the necessary information and language to be used in their writing, as illustrated in figure 2 below:

My Family	
How many people are there in your family?	There three people in may family
Who are they?	Father , mother and sister.
What are their ages and jobs?	My father is 50 year old. He is a teacher. My mother is 45, and works as a nurse. My sister is 20, and studies English at Bahrain University.
How do you like them?	I feel so happy to have such a family

Figur2: question based learning

4.2.6 Evaluation of the remedial actions

At the end of the course, a noticeable improvement on mechanics of writing, in general, was accomplished, however, some students still commit grammatical errors particularly subject-verb agreement, and suffering from vocabulary limitation.

5. Conclusion

The findings presented here emphasize the need to find solutions in order to ease the challenges the learners face in acquiring the skills of reading and writing. This paper presents evidence that demonstrate the most remarkable challenges experienced by FND students in learning reading and writing course. Some of them experienced serious difficulties in decoding words written in English which is considered as an essential part in the mastery of reading (Spencer and Hay, 1998). Others lack the reading habits and were unable to carry out effective reading strategies, as a result, they did not succeed in extracting meaning from a written text. On the other hand, the participants also encounter serious difficulties in writing. The study revealed that some students have a limited vocabulary which restricted their writing abilities. In addition, mechanics of writing and organization of thoughts were striking challenges for the participants of this study.

In trying to reduce these problems and facilitate the process of acquiring reading and writing strategies, several remedial activities were applied, as illustrated above. However, remarkable improvement on the students reading and writing skills was observed, especially in using reading comprehension strategies and mechanics of writing, however, some students still have word recognition difficulties, grammatical errors mainly subject-verb agreement, and lack of vocabularies.

Based on my experience with FND students and the findings of the study, the researcher would suggest the following procedures for better improvement:

- More time should be devoted to reading and writing class;
- Providing students with effective ways and strategies of learning and using vocabularies;
- Topics related to the students' preferences should be considered in class;
- Teachers should think of more effective and enjoyable activities;
- Creating more writing opportunities like class newspaper;
- Finding out the reasons behind such challenges through more depth investigation;



- Helping and encouraging students to be aware of their weaknesses;
- Involving the students to think of effective solutions;
- Encouraging peer & self-evaluation because students can learn a lot from each other.

5.1. Recommendations

Although the overall results of this study provided valuable information and enabled the researcher to identify specific areas of concern regarding students' reading and writing skills, it may be more efficient to compare the performance of students' under investigation with those taught by other instructors. Therefore, the researcher would recommend:

Further research of the same area should be conducted by instructors of other sections to increase the validity of the current study and arrive at more comprehensive and precise conclusion.

A correlation between students' high school specialization and their current skills in reading and writing should also be investigated.

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