



The Impact of Innovative Reading Comprehension Strategies on Reading Literacy of Slovak EFL Learners

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The importance of reading skills is undeniable since this skill is regarded as one of the vital ones in both academic sphere and personal lives of learners. However, relevant research and practice reveals that learners' reading comprehension is often at a low level, exhibiting a declining tendency as regards reading literacy. This article, therefore, attempts to contribute towards what is already known in this area by exploring the effects of the selected innovative reading strategies and techniques on the development of reading literacy of Slovak EFL learners. A quasi-experiment was conducted, testing being the primary research method. The research sample was formed by altogether 24 ninth grade learners who were divided into the control and experimental groups. Although the calculated p-value (0.14), which compared the pre-test and post-test reading scores of learners in the experimental group that was taught by means of the selected reading strategies and techniques does not demonstrate a statistically significant difference, the achieved scores after the intervention can be regarded as promising and encouraging. This may be because only after one month intervention, participants' literacy level increased by 9%, indicating that regularity of improving reading comprehension can possibly result in achieving higher level of reading literacy. Finally, it is also suggested that Teachers can better plan lessons which involve active reading, discussions, and critical thinking, thus developing overall reading skills of EFL learners.

Keywords: EFL learner, reading skill, reading comprehension, reading literacy, reading strategy, EFL

INTRODUCTION

EFL (English as a foreign language) learning is considered to be a highly complex process of mastering the four language skills, listening, reading, speaking, and writing (Alzubi et al., 2019; Mohammed, 2018; Tuncel & Çobanoğlu, 2018). All four skills occupy a substantial role in one's journey towards foreign language acquisition since, according to Korkmaz and Güneşli (2017) and Mikulecky (2008), it is not possible to

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acquire the productive skills (speaking and writing) without gaining the receptive skills (listening and reading). Therefore, both receptive and productive skills ought to form a necessary part of foreign language instruction (Metruk, 2018) so that EFL learners achieve communicative competence.

In this day and age, the importance of reading literacy is much more prominent than ever before. Literacy is an inseparable part of peoples' lives, their careers as well as their academic achievements (Kim et al., 2020). It is necessary to develop reading literacy from childhood (Wigfield et al., 2016). However, it should be emphasized that literacy is no longer regarded as an ability acquired only in childhood (Lahnwong, 2019). The basis is to establish a positive relationship to reading – reading should not be a necessity but a pleasure. In this case, it is possible to achieve a maximum understanding of the text and draw a conclusion based on it that can be further utilized. The development of students' reading literacy in English language classes is one of the key objectives in the contemporary educational environment (Ardhian, 2020; Par, 2020) as literacy is not only the ability to read and understand texts, but it is also one of the fundamental tools for achieving success in all areas of life (Artpasa & Dounwilai, 2024).

However, due to the fact that the traditional teaching, which is based on grammar-based approaches, is still prevalent to varying degrees in many countries (e.g., Nassaji, 2015; Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Williams, 2017), and because the reading literacy of many EFL learners is on the decrease, this article attempts to contribute towards the existing knowledge on this matter by exploring the effects of the selected methods on the development of reading literacy of Slovak EFL learners.

Literature Review

Reading literacy and reading skills

Literacy is not only the ability to read words, sentences, and entire texts but also to understand what has been read and to work with the content and information one has obtained. In relation to this, Gondová (2013, p. 50) states that "reading comprehension means understanding written language in use and understanding messages communicated in a written way". Reading can also be defined as a systematic and practical activity, during which texts are analysed so as to attain a deep understanding (Tantillo, 2012). However, according to Frankel et al. (2016) and Purcell-Gates et al. (2016), the definition of reading needs to go further by devoting attention to the processes as these occur within context. On the basis of this extended definition, there is a shift from reading to literacy.

Pearson & Cervetti (2013) explain that reading literacy represents the ability to read to learn, which comprises a set of skill that equip readers to cope with problems in relation to text understanding. Context becomes progressively problematic since teaching reading as such does not provide readers with the ability to deal with textual and contextual demands. The constant development and improvement of reading literacy is a necessity for studying, so that students have the ability to select what is essential from the text. It is not only about the capabilities and skills of reading itself, but also about

being able to work with the text. All educational processes are based on the basic competence – reading literacy (Borovská, 2015; Damaianti et al., 2020).

Reading literacy involves processes and products, the processes involving word recognition, comprehension, fluency, and motivation (Alderson, 2001; Zaim et al., 2021). In order to facilitate the reading comprehension processes, learners use various strategies (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008), and instructing EFL learners within reading strategies helps them develop their reading ability (Krashen & Mason, 2017; Valizadeh, 2021). There are the so-called cognitive reading strategies, which aid readers in resolving problems in constructing the meaning of a text. On the other hand, the metacognitive strategies enable learners to monitor and appraise reading processes (Schallert & Martin, 2003). Research suggests that there exists a strong relationship between the usage of EFL reading strategies and EFL reading self-efficacy (e.g., Ahmadian & Gholami-Pasand, 2017; Li & Wang, 2010; Zarei, 2018).

The processes represent cognitive approach towards text processing, which predominantly requires mastering the fluent reading technique. Three fundamental aspects can be identified in this regard. First, it is about finding information, after that it is a case of comprehension and, finally, it is about considering the text and its evaluation (Miklovičová & Valovič, 2019).

The effectiveness of working with the text is preconditioned by the acquisition of reading skills. Readers who possess reading competences based on which they work with different types of texts used for different purposes is the goal of developing reading literacy. Since instructors play a major role in successful development of foreign language skills (Metruk, 2021), it is very hard to acquire the competence of reading literacy at schools if it is neglected by teachers themselves. Consequently, it is often a case of teaching reading comprehension through the means of traditional methods and approaches – frequently through translation where one student reads aloud a paragraph, and the other student translates it. Practicing reading comprehension, students need to read text silently. Furthermore, they ought to be able to provide evidence from the text to demonstrate the successful task completion. After all, silent reading was proved to be faster than oral reading (e.g., Ciuffo et al., 2017; McCallum et al., 2004; Schimmel & Ness, 2017; Zhao et al., 2017). Gondová (2013, p. 55) adds that “in no way should learners be asked or encouraged to translate the text designed for reading comprehension and then answer the comprehension questions. If this happens, it’s not reading comprehension any more”. Thus, instructors need to stick to the principles of communicative teaching and learning to teach and develop the skill of reading effectively and appropriately. Teaching reading through translation, as mentioned above, is regarded as one of the major challenges within teaching reading comprehension. Both teachers and learners often operate under the assumption that reading skills of students are developed, but in fact, they are not.

Other challenges lie in poor vocabulary, grammar, or slow reading pace (Khan et al., 2020). All of these challenges can be overcome by sticking to the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT) and learning as well as employing adequate reading literacy strategies and techniques.

The result of the State School Inspection conducted during the 2022/2023 school year on approximately 6,500 teaching hours supports the notion of inappropriate development of reading literacy. According to the report, the vast majority of classroom activities concentrated on memorization and understanding. The development of analytical thinking was not present within a quarter of the lessons, in almost two thirds of the lessons of evaluative thinking, and in three quarters of the lessons of creative thinking (Dianovská Štofková, 2023).

Specifically, the most important reading competencies are as follows: reading technique, understanding the text, identifying information in the text, evaluating what has been read, remembering the ideas of the text, reproducing and deducing based on the text, forming a judgment, logically connecting contexts, deducing main ideas, lessons, conclusions, constructing ideas beyond the scope of the text, and connecting them in context with previous knowledge and experience. The basis of reading literacy is not only the reading technique itself, but especially the processing of information from the text and its subsequent use in everyday life (Halászová, 2010).

It should be also noted reading skills are not merely about reading and understanding. These skills require not only the ability to read and comprehend the text, but also to go beyond and above the text: the ability to gather (deduce, anticipate, decode) a great deal of information and metainformation about the text and its discourse, identification of assumed authors (if not stated) and their more or less direct intentions (e.g., to inform, persuade, compare, synthesize) (Javorčíková et al., 2021, p. 23). Therefore, reading comprehension is also concerned with the reader, the text, and the relationship between the reader and the text (Lustyantie & Kasan, 2021).

Another important aspect lies in the meaningfulness, which can be regarded as highly important for students to appropriately comprehend written texts. “Unfortunately, many EFL learners do not understand how to read and consequently have difficulty comprehending texts, which leads to a lack of interest in reading and thus produces a significant challenge for the educational system” (AlManafi, 2023, p. 704). It is, therefore, important that instructors prepare and develop adequate and relevant assignments which aid EFL learners in strengthening this competence, whether inside or outside the classroom (Asadipiran et al., 2022).

METHOD

Research background

This research concentrated on the impact of the selected methods on the development of reading literacy of Slovak EFL learners. The effect was examined by performing a quasi-experiment, which was based on the pretest and post-test containing reading literacy questions. The intervention in the experimental group, which lasted for the period one month, was done by implementing selected reading strategies intended for the development of reading literacy among Slovak EFL learners at a lower-secondary education school level in Slovakia.

Sampling

The research participants were formed by two 9th grade classes – class A – the experimental group, Class B – the control group in the ninth grade (convenience sampling). Number of respondents taking part in the research – in the pretest and post-test was altogether 24, having equal representation (12 students were in the experimental group and 12 students were in the control group). The average age of the learners was 15 years, 50% of them being males and the other half females.

Research instrument and data analysis

The research instrument chosen in order to obtain the relevant data was the experimental test, consisting of the pre-test and post-test. The tests contained 20 questions concerning reading literacy, which were divided into three types. The first one was matching headings and parts of texts, the second one was multiple choice questions, and the last one involved true or false tasks. Using the help of authors' peers, the test has been modified before it has been administered in order to increase the reliability of the research instrument. The quasi-experiment was carried out in accordance with individual stages. The preparatory stage, the content of which was to adopt individual procedures and principles of reading literacy, lasted from the beginning of December 2023 to the end of January 2024. Based on the processing of the theoretical starting points, the tasks and objectives of the action research were assigned. Empirical data were collected during the implementation stage which started at the beginning of February 2024, when students took the pretest. This stage lasted one month, when it was finished with the post-test on a sample of 24 students. The research tool was the experimental test dealing with reading literacy. When the tests have been completed, learners' scores were calculated. The processing of empirical data and their interpretation took place after the collection of post-tests which occurred at the end of February 2024. This part lasted 14 days. The obtained research material was evaluated and subsequently processed on the basis of quantity and quality.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The impact of strategies on reading literacy

The aim of pretest is to determine the reading literacy level of individual classes at the beginning of the quasi-experiment. Post-test 2 is implemented at the end of the quasi-experiment as an exit test. Its purpose was to find out whether the difference between the teaching of individual classes has an impact on the level of reading literacy.

The comparison of the results in both tests was the final stage before achieving the main goal, which was to compare the teaching of two groups; while the control group was taught in accordance with the principles of CLT, i.e. in a "standard" way, and innovative reading strategies, methods and procedures for the development of reading literacy were applied to the instruction of the experimental group. Illustration of these results can be found in Figure 1 below.

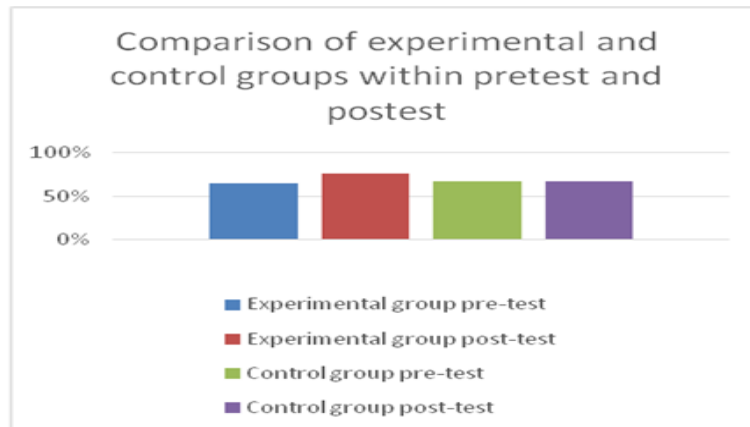


Figure 1
Experimental and control groups results

The data in Figure 1 reveal that the pre-test results of both groups were approximately the same, meaning that learners from both groups – control and experimental, were at the same level as far as their reading literacy skills were concerned.

After one month of teaching these classes in different ways, the success rates changed. A comparison of the results of the control group in pre-test and post-test indicates that the success of these students in reading literacy remained at the same level after the intervention. Looking at Table 1 below with the results of the t-test, which was performed using MS Excel, it is evident that the p-value, which is 1, revealed that the difference between pre-test and post-test of the control group is not statistically significant.

Table 1
Differences between the pre-test and post-test of the control group

T Test:		
Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances	Variable 1	Variable 2
	17	18
Mean	13	13
Variance	11,8	5,6
Observations	11	11
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	17	
t Stat	0	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0,5	
t Critical one-tail	1,739607	
P(T<=t) two-tail	1	
t Critical two-tail	2,109816	

On the other hand, when comparing the results of the pre-test and post-test of the experimental group, there are some evident differences, because the learners achieved higher scores after the implementation of innovative reading strategies, methods and techniques. The experimental group thus attained a higher level of reading literacy since the difference between the two tests is 9%. In order to determine whether the improvement is statistically significant, another t-test was performed. However, the calculated p-value (0.14) indicates that there is no statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental groups.

Table 2
Differences of pre-test and post-test of the experimental group

T Test:		
Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances	Variable 1	Variable 2
	16	16
Mean	12,72727	15,09091
Variance	14,81818	11,29091
Observations	11	11
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	19	
t Stat	-1,5342	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0,070733	
t Critical one-tail	1,729133	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0,141465	
t Critical two-tail	2,093024	

The negative result of the statistical significance of this quasi-experiment may be due to its implementation on a small sample of students, which could have affected the reliability of this quasi-experiment. Furthermore, it may also be due to a lower number of lessons during which the selected methods were applied. However, on the basis of the research outcomes, it can be concluded that the experimental group, which was taught according to the methods and principles for developing reading literacy, achieved more favourable results than the group taught in a “standard manner”. Although this quasi-experiment is not statistically significant, some improvement in the experimental group did take place. Therefore, it can be recommended that more activities intended for the development of reading literacy in English language classes are introduced and implemented within EFL classes. The activities should be created in various ways and based on different principles so as to tailor the needs of EFL students. Instructors ought to regularly introduce tasks which would concentrate on developing reading literacy and to engage their learners more actively within the teaching and learning process.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

High level of literacy allows students to deepen their understanding of texts in English and develop their language skills. In the current globalized world, knowledge of the English language is increasingly important, not only for communication, but also for access to information and opportunities for education and successful employment. The

ability to understand and interpret texts in English appropriately is rather essential for students so that they experience success in academic field as well in their future professional careers.

The selected methods intended for developing reading literacy were examined through a means of a quasi-experiment. The basis of this type of experiment was five lessons in the experimental group according to lesson plans prepared in advance over a period of one month. The calculated p-value of the t-test within the experimental group reveals that the quasi-experiment was not statistically significant since the differences between the pre-test and post-test of both groups are insignificant.

However, the results cannot be generalized for the entire population, because the quasi-experiment was conducted on a relatively small-sized sample of research participants. Therefore, for the future (quasi)experiments, it is recommended to employ a larger sample of homogeneous respondents and higher amount of age groups. Moreover, involving a more considerable amount of schools with a longer intervention period (for instance, one whole semester), would also prove useful. Finally, a greater number of innovative reading strategies, methods, and procedures can be applied in future experiments in order to better verify statistically significant differences.

Despite the fact that the quasi-experiment was not statistically significant, the research results can be, to a certain extent, regarded as encouraging and promising. It was found that the use of the appropriate and suitable methods has some effect on increasing the level of reading literacy among students. Since this quasi-experiment lasted only one month, the increase in the reading literacy level of students by 9% can be deemed successful to a certain degree, suggesting that the regularity within the development of reading comprehension in English language classes can really lead to a higher level of reading literacy of EFL students. The results of this study appear to be in line with those of Harnseithanon (2002), Marzuki, et al. (2018), Su (2001), or Sua (2021).

Another basis for such development of reading literacy is instructors themselves and their effective preparation for lessons. Being adequately prepared, teachers have a chance to create a stimulating and relevant learning environment, which increases students' interest and engagement. Lesson preparation provides teachers with the opportunity to gather and create a variety of materials and resources that support students' diverse reading experiences and interests. Teachers can better plan and implement lessons that include active reading, discussions, and critical thinking, which contribute to the development of complex reading skills in students. It also enables them to provide constructive feedback and individual support to their students, which leads to their continuous improvement. All in all, more appropriate preparation of teachers for their lessons leads to higher quality and more efficient teaching, which has a positive effect on the development of reading literacy among learners.

Further exploration in this area is strictly necessary, not only because of the importance of reading skills of EFL learners, but also because the development of learners' reading literacy is on a decrease.

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