

Title of Project:

Teaching and Learning English Reading in
Gaza Prep Schools: A Descriptive Study

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Summary of the Study

Introduction

Little attention has been given to investigating EFL reading instruction in the Palestinian EFL context. For English reading learning and teaching practices to be developed in Palestine, there was a crucial need for conducting studies addressing some neglected issues such as reading teachers' practices, learners' reading performance, and teachers' and learners' views on English reading materials. Thus, this study tried to address those research gaps by investigating the teaching and learning of reading in two different Palestinian EFL settings: public and private preparatory schools in Gaza.

Questions of the Study

The present study attempted to explore the following research questions: 1) How do Gaza public and private preparatory school teachers view the materials used in English reading classes? 2) How do Gaza public and private preparatory school students view the materials used in English reading classes? 3) How is English reading taught in Gaza public and private preparatory schools? 4) How do students in both Gaza public and private preparatory schools respond to the tasks assigned by teachers in English reading classes? 5) How do the ninth graders in both Gaza public and private schools differ in their English reading comprehension levels?

Method

To provide a detailed description of English reading status at Gaza public and private preparatory schools, the study employed a mixed-method approach which made use of both quantitative and qualitative data. For identifying Gaza ninth graders' proficiency levels in English reading comprehension, a standardized test was administered to 430 participants who were randomly selected from thirteen public and private preparatory schools in Gaza. Then, non-participant observations and semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth data about the strategies utilized by Gaza public and private preparatory school teachers and students in English reading classes and their views on the English reading materials employed.

Results of the Study

The study results showed that important differences were found between the teaching and learning of English reading in Gaza public and private preparatory schools, in favor of those in the private schools. It was also revealed that neither the public school students nor their teachers were satisfied with their English reading materials. Moreover, the study reported all the strategies EFL Palestinian teachers and students practiced in their English reading classes (i.e., using L1, paraphrasing, using different types of questions, reviewing prior knowledge, discussing texts' pictures and titles, etc.).

Implications of the Study

The findings obtained from the study imply the dire need for considering EFL learners' needs and achievement levels when designing English reading materials. In fact, analyzing students' needs and achievement levels are some of the keys that contribute to successful development of English reading materials. For reading instruction to be successful, appropriate materials should be used. According to Tomlinson (2008), some language teaching materials can facilitate language learning while others can hinder it depending on their characteristics. The present study indicated that some aspects of reading materials in the *English for Palestine* series, including those related to text readability, topics of texts, and reading comprehension questions and activities, needed to be modified. Furthermore, the research showed that the English reading materials in

particular and English textbooks in general designed for or used with young Palestinian learners should be relevant to students' needs and achievement levels.

The study recommends that English reading vocabulary is best learned through context. It was revealed that most Gaza public preparatory school English language teachers excessively used oral drills in English reading classes. Apparently, the public school teachers need to lessen the time spent on spelling and pronouncing isolated vocabulary words in the pre-reading stages of the English reading classes. In this context, Maxwell & Meiser (1993) note that teaching reading vocabulary does not require pronunciation or spelling. Likewise, some authors (e.g., Strasheim, 1976; Hadley, 1993) note that practicing language through contexts is more effective than learning isolated bits of language through extensive memorization and monotonous drilling, and words are never to be learned out of context. Thus, it is recommended that much of the class time should be devoted to helping EFL students acquire subject knowledge and practice English reading sub-skills (i.e., skimming, scanning, guessing, drawing inferences, and summarizing) through which the learning of the new language items and patterns can be unconsciously reinforced.

Another important recommendation in this study is that EFL teachers should utilize the silent reading strategy in English reading classes. The study concluded that though most participants used reading aloud and quiet reading strategies effectively in English reading classes, they abandoned the silent reading strategy. Avoiding using silent reading can hinder EFL learners from independently practicing English reading sub-skills (e.g., skimming, scanning, drawing references, predicting, summarizing, and visualizing pictures). For students to be strategic readers, they need to be given the opportunity to practice such sub-skills. After finishing silent reading, teachers can then get students involved in reading aloud. This opinion appears to be concurrent with that of Kailani & Muquattash (2008), i.e., reading aloud activities should come after getting students to read silently and explaining the new vocabulary and structures in the text.

Related to the conclusions drawn in this study was the fact that EFL Palestinian teachers used twelve important question types in English reading classes: (1) teacher's questioning for warming-up, (2) teacher's questioning for the Arabic equivalents of English words, (3) teacher's questioning for synonyms and antonyms of key words, (4) teacher's questioning for vocabulary usage, (5) teacher's questioning for background information, (6) teacher's questioning for textually explicit information, (7) teacher's questioning about student book pictures, (8) teacher's questioning about students' opinions, (9) teacher's questioning for translating text sentences, (10) teacher's questioning for grammar, (11) teacher's questioning for paraphrasing text sentences, and (12) teacher's questioning for spelling. However, they neglected using inferential questions. Thus, EFL reading teachers need to use questions requiring answers that are implicitly stated in the texts. Such questions can urge students to draw inferences and deeply interact with a text. EFL students should go beyond the literal understanding of the text. This suggestion seems to be in line with Ehara's (2008) study, which revealed a significant effect for the use of inferential questions on EFL learners' reading.

The study also revealed that many of the participants used questioning for the Arabic meanings of text words, phrases, and sentences. Congruent with most previous studies conducted in this area (e.g., Seng & Hershman, 2006; Latsanyphone & Bouangeune, 2009; Khassawneh, 2011), the study participants felt that the L1 was one of the effective tools that could facilitate EFL/ESL learning. In fact, the L1 should be used only when the teacher cannot find any other possible way for illustrating classroom tasks. Various techniques can be implemented to better explain the meanings of unfamiliar words or clauses in the text (i.e., pictures, realia, drawing, miming, acting, definitions, synonyms, antonyms, guessing, and contextualization). According to Nation (2005a), the L1 should be used when needed but not overused, and that encouraging learners to use the L2 could be achieved through the following steps: (1) conducting tasks that are within the learners' proficiency level, (2) pre-teaching the language items, (3) using graded tasks, (4) getting students to pretend that they are English speakers, (5) making the L2 an unavoidable part of the task, (6) repeating tasks, and (7) discussing with learners the value of using the L2.

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