The Use of Reading Strategies and its Impact to Activate Students' Prior Knowledge

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Abstract

This study examines the role of reading strategies in activating students' prior knowledge, with a particular focus on how such strategies support comprehension and learning in English language education, especially in Moroccan clasrooms. Utilizing a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 Moroccan EFL teachers . The interviews explored participants' awareness, use, and perceived effectiveness of various reading strategies, including previewing, predicting, and connecting texts to personal experiences or prior knowledge. Interstingly, the analysis of the interview data revealed that strategic reading practices contribute significantly to the activation of background knowledge, thereby enhancing understanding and retention of textual information. Ultimately, The findings indicate that Moroccan EFL teachers employ a wide range of techniques to ensure that their students understand the text. The reason behind resorting to a wide range of techniques to make sure their students fully.

Keywords: Reading Strategies, Prior Knowledge Activation, EFL Teachers.

دور استراتيجيات القراءة في تفعيل المعرفة السابقة لدى المتعلمين

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ملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة دور استراتيجيات القراءة في تفعيل المعرفة السابقة لدى المتعلمين، مع تركيز خاص على كيفية مساهمة هذه الاستراتيجيات في دعم الفهم والتعلم في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية، لا سيما في الفصول الدراسية المغربية. وقد اعتمدت الدراسة على منهجية بحث نوعي، حيث تم جمع البيانات من خلال مقابلات شبه مهيكلة مع عشرة مدرسين مغاربة للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. استكشفت المقابلات مدى وعي المشاركين باستخدامهم لمجموعة من استراتيجيات القراءة، مثل التمهيد للنص، والتنبؤ، وربط النصوص بالتجارب الشخصية أو المعرفة السابقة. وقد كشفت نتائج تحليل المقابلات أن الممارسات القرائية الاستراتيجية تساهم بشكل كبير في تفعيل الخلفية المعرفية للمتعلمين، مما يعزز من قدرتهم على الفهم والاحتفاظ بالمعلومات المقروءة. وتشير النتائج في المجمل إلى أن المدرسين المغاربة للغة الإنجليزية يوظفون مجموعة واسعة من التقنيات لضمان فهم طلابهم للنصوص، وذلك في إطار سعيهم إلى تحقيق تعلم فعال وشامل.

الكلمات الدالة: استراتيجيات القراءة، تفعيل المعرفة السابقة، مدرسو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is frequently characterized as the process of extracting meaning from a text Clearly, the ultimate goal of reading is to gain a broad understanding of the text's content rather than deducing meaning from particular words or sentences (Snow et al., 2021). Due to its complexity, a large body of scholarly research has been conducted to define and develop reading models. Reading is regarded as a crucial component of teaching English and is the most significant of the four abilities required to acquire the English language. Therefore, cultivating reading ability is an important role EFL teachers should play.

Reading in a second language presents certain difficulties and challenges that might be closely linked to the text of the reader. What EFL learners bring to text is more important than what they get from it, EFL teachers are called upon to activate learners' schemata and background knowledge so that learners' engagement level with the text is enhanced. Aligning with this, background knowledge is frequently described as the act of combining new information with what students already know. Additionally, previous research has shown that prior knowledge activation plays a significant role in learners' comprehension of texts in a foreign language. These studies reveal that comprehending schemata's role in the reading process offers crucial insights into students' comprehension of written material (Al-Issa, 2006). This study was conducted to investigate the frequency with which Moroccan EFL teachers activate students' prior knowledge and the instructional reading strategies and the difficulties Moroccan EFL teachers encounter when activating students' prior knowledge.

The present study adresses the follwing research questions :

a) What kind of instructional reading strategies do Morrocan EFL teachers implement to activate Students'schemata ?

b) What kind of difficluties do Moroccan EFL teachers encounter when activating students' prior knowledge?

2. Review of Literature

2.1. The Role of Schemata in Reading Comprehension

(Anderson et al., 1977) argue that "comprehension of a message entails drawing information from both the text and the internal schemata until sets are reconciled as a single schema or message" (p.187).   This seems to highlight one of the basic assumptions behind the concept of schema theory. When we are presented with new information, schemata that are relevant to that information are immediately brought into play (or activated) to help us understand and make sense of it. As a result, what is often referred to as comprehension is the cognitive task of recreating the meaning of the text through the process of slots-instantiation (schema), employing concepts from both the reading text at hand and ideas previously present in our cognitive structure.

There have been several attempts by reading experts and scholars to provide concrete evidence of the important connection between schemata and comprehension. An example of this would be a series of experiments carried out by Carrell and Eisterhold (1988). They gave their students the reading passage "Story of a Policeman" who raised his hand and stopped the car. Students were asked to read the story and see what they could come up with. Following their research, this story was found to have two fundamentally different interpretations depending on which schemata the readers activated.

2.2. Implications and Applications of Schemata Theory to Classroom Reading Instructions

Schema theory appears to have numerous implications in text reading instruction, especially when dealing with difficult reading or culturally bound materials in an ESL or EFL context. Relatedly, Carrell (1988) argued that "some [EFL or ESL] students' apparent reading problems may be problems of insufficient background knowledge" (p.245) or a complete lack of suitable schemata for the reading at hand. Thus, it would seem that when students encounter reading problems that are thought to be topic-related, they can enhance and improve their reading skills by engaging in "narrow reading" (p.86) within their area of interest or knowledge. This

approach gives them the chance to acquire relevant schemata that could facilitate their understanding of the reading material (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). Similarly, Carrell (1988) argues that ''when schema inadequacies are very culture-specific, it would be tremendously beneficial to replace them with less culturally loaded texts or texts based on the readers' own experiences and cultural background'' (p.85).

2.3. Strategies to Activate Schemata in Reading Comprehension

Several instructional strategies can help readers activate prior knowledge and hence improve comprehension. The pre-reading phase revolves around these instructional tactics. They are diverse, but they all have a similar importance. To make it clear, no strategy outperforms the other terms of supporting readers in activating their prior knowledge for reading. Some are particularly good at activating readers' prior knowledge of literary materials, while others are effective in terms of informational questions. One of the most important functions of these strategies is to activate learners' prior knowledge in order to determine their readiness to tackle a text. These strategies are well presented by Labiod (2007).

2.3.1. Questionning

The teacher aids reading comprehension by offering readers' questions that they must answer. These questions are asked before the reader begins to read. The readers will be using their prior knowledge to find answers. Once they are engaging in the reading process, the readers encounter some already-triggered knowledge. The reader recognizes how much he already knows about the text and dares to focus on what he perceives as new information. This is likely to save the reader time by speeding up the reading process and assisting him in focusing his attention to ensure deep processing of the material (Marinaccio, 2012).

2.3.2. Brainstorming

The activation of readers' prior knowledge is one significant and fundamental advantage of brainstorming. Readers are likely to open their textbooks as soon as the teacher announces the topic of the material to be read and begin making notes about what they believe has relevance to the subject. All of the brainstormed information will be used to generate educated estimates about what will be encountered in the text. Feather (2004) and Labiod (2007) argue that "brainstorming provides plenty of materials for making predictions" (p.82). because of this strategy, it is assumed that the reader is aware of his prior knowledge of the subject matter of a given text before going into details in the reading process.

2.3.3. Discussion

Discussions can be used to learn more about what students bring to the table when they read. Teachers give their students a problem, a situation, or a topic to discuss in groups to generate class discussion. Following the discussion, each group presents their findings and ideas to the whole class. The purpose of this activity is to motivate students to share their learning material experience, interest, knowledge, and opinions or use a question and response form to consolidate content schemata (Cashin, 2011)

2.3.4. Know - Want to Know - Learned (KWL) Strategy

The rationales behind the use of KWL is to activate students' background knowledge related to the text. It mainly uses three columns chart. The first one is the K column which stands for what the learners know. In other words, this column is used to jot down the learner's background knowledge. The second one is the W column. This column is concerned with recording learners' predictions. The last column is named the L column. it is about recording learners' summary or their conclusion about a certain topic. From what is discussed above, it is reasonable to argue that this strategy handles the components of the teaching and learning process before, during, and after reading (Utami et al., 2014).

2.3.5. Anticipation Guide

The anticipation guide is a tool for activating readers' prior knowledge and encouraging them to use it to create predictions about the material they read. They consider their original ideas and the opinions of others as they read the information after the initial presentation and discussions of the statements. After reading, pupils combine the new information they have learned with what they already know to build new opinions. the use of the anticipation guide can help improve reading comprehension (Defrioka, 2018).

2.3.6. Semantic Mapping

The semantic map is an activity that can be used to elicit and build students' adequate background knowledge of a specific topic (Heimlich & Pittleman, 1986). Semantic map is an organized arrangement of vocabulary terms that displays what pupils already know about the subject and provides them with a base upon which they can build new knowledge from the text (Ibrahim, 2017).

2.3.5. Prediction

prediction is one of the strategies students use to solve problems and reason through them in all content stands. Students can use prediction to connect previously learned knowledge to new information they encounter in their readings (Kasmer, 2008; Sumirat et al., 2019). To achieve the learning objective, Teachers must employ appropriate strategies.

3. Research Methodology

The main aim of this study is investigate the frequency with which Moroccan EFL teachers activate students' prior knowledge and the strategies and the difficulties they encounter when activation students' prior knowledge.

3.1. Research Design

According to McMillan & Schumacher (2010: 22), "the research design describes how the study is conducted, and the purpose of a research design is to indicate a plan that will generate evidence that will be able to answer the research questions." This research is based on a qualitative research method using two semi-structured interviews to collect data.

3.2. Resarch Sample

The semi-structured interviews were conduted with a purposive sample of 10 Moroccan EFL teacehrs. The researcher chose Moroccan EFL teachers from different genders, age categories, and with different teaching experiences to ensure the criterion of representativeness

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

Semi-structured interviews took place via Zoom. After obtaining the study's participants' consent, the researcher recorded and saved all the recordings on their computer. Prompt actions were taken immediately after recording the data. In other words, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Later, false starts, errors and incorrectly transcribed words were corrected manually. Data then was classified into categories in a Word document so that they can be used to respond to research questions.

4. Results

4.1. Teachers' Semi-Structured Interview Findings

The questions of the interview seek to get teachers' views and feelings about using role-play activities in their classrooms. The main questions addressed in the semi-structured interview are:

a) What are your perceptions regarding the role of prior knowledge in teaching reading comprehension?

b) What are the most effective reading strategies do you use in reading lessons to activate students' schemata?

c) How do you use these strategies?

d) Why do you specifically use these strategies?

e) What kind of difficulties do you encounter when activating students' prior knowledge.

The findings in the semi-structured interviews questions show that Moroccan EFL teachers use different reading comprehension strategies to facilitate understanding and increase the student's engagement with the text. Additionally, another reason why Moroccan EFL teachers employ different reading strategies is to make learners lifelong and autonomous readers. Importantly, learners' training and autonomy have been widely discussed in the ELT field in Morocco. Training students on how to use different strategies will allow them to transfer these strategies to their real lives outside the classroom and ideally continue reading for their lifetime. This finding largely supports the findings of previous research (Isqksen, 1986; Feathers, 2004; Labiod, 2007). What is more is that, The Thematic analysis of Moroccan EFL teachers' responses regarding the instructional strategies they employ to activate their students' prior knowledge has resulted in five main themes. Moroccan EFL teachers have asserted that they always set the context for the lesson and activate students' prior knowledge using various instructional techniques which include the use of visuals and videos, pre-reading questions, class discussion and brainstorming.

5. Discussion and Conlusion

The analysis of the qualitative data indicated that Moroccan EFL teachers use a wide range of techniques to activate students' schemata. More specifically, the participants indicated that they often use brainstorming, class discussion, graphic organizers, story mapping, summarizing, visual aids, KWL charts, listing statements related to the topic of the text on the board, etc…. However, comparing mean difference between all the strategies listed showed that *pre-reading questions*, *brainstorming* and *class discussion* are the most frequently used instructional techniques employed by Moroccan EFL teachers to activate the students' prior knowledge.

Though Moroccan EFL teachers hold positive attitudes towards activating students' schemata and though they are aware of the importance and the benefits brought about by students' schemata activation, the process of background knowledge activation is not always easy and straight forward. Moroccan EFL teachers run into difficulties that potentially constrain and hinder their willingness and frequency with which they activate their students' prior knowledge. These difficulties are broadly classified into three main categories: teacher-related constraints, students' related constraints and textbook-related constraints.

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