

Importance of EFL teachers' attitudes: a case on reading instruction

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Abstract

This paper identifies and analyzes EFL teachers' attitudes towards in-class reading instruction as well as some of the weaknesses in reading instruction at a language center in Mexico. The English courses offered by the language center should focus on an integrated skills approach. This study supports the fact that reading instruction represents an essential role for the development of language skills. More importantly, the study supports the fact that teachers' reading attitudes greatly influence their teaching approach towards reading. In order to collect data, there were three instruments used: class observations, interviews and questionnaires. There were 15 EFL teachers participating in this study. Results showed that even when EFL teachers think the reading skill is important, they believe that they are not prepared to teach reading or that they do not possess enough knowledge of reading. Therefore, teachers' feelings and beliefs affect the time they spend on teaching reading causing to overshadow teachers' reading instruction by only doing reading in class when the textbook dictates, and avoiding teaching reading skills and strategies. Although some teachers do not feel qualified to teach reading, they are all willing to receive training to improve their own reading skills and transmit this knowledge to their students. The study demonstrates the importance of teachers' attitudes for their choice of methodological approaches in the language classroom. Finally, the study provides some pedagogical implications which could help improve the current reading situation at the institution.

1. Introduction

Despite its complexity, reading attitude has been defined as the feelings towards reading that causes a learner to read actively or avoid a reading situation (Alexander and Filler, 1976 cited in Yamashita, 2004). Similarly, feelings such as self-confidence or insecurity on the part of the teacher may easily influence a teacher to decide whether or not to do a reading activity in class. Therefore, this study aims to identify and analyze EFL teachers' attitudes towards in-class reading instruction that could be influencing the teaching of reading. For that reason, I have considered necessary to mention some basic reading conceptions teachers probably need to be reminded of.

A clear distinction between reading in L1 (first language) and L2 (Second language) lies in that beginning second language readers lack the oral communication foundation that L1 beginning readers possess as part of their basic linguistic knowledge (Koda, 2005). As a consequence, L2 readers are most likely to have a limited amount of vocabulary, grammar and discourse knowledge when they start reading in a second language (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Additionally, each learner has different reading abilities in their own language. Therefore, not every learner knows how to transfer the skills that work best for them in L1 to second language reading. Moreover, students' motivation for reading in L1 and in L2 can certainly vary. For example, what could be of interest for learners to read in their first language might not be of any interest to read in a second language (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). In addition, cultural backgrounds mark the text organization used in texts. This is a difference learners usually have difficulty with since the way texts are organized from culture to culture change. These differences in reading are only a sample of factors that make reading in L1 different to L2. As a consequence, second language reading can not be thought of as a parallel process to L1 reading since situations are not alike. After all, if L1 students have the abilities to read which L2 readers lack, then it is the responsibility of language teachers to encourage students so that they develop these abilities (Paran, 1996).

Though reading is not the only skill to be taught in the language classroom, it is definitely one of the most important for many ESL/EFL learners (Carell, Devine, and Eskey, 1998; McDnough & Shaw, 1993). In the EFL setting, reading might represent an essential approach to learn the language since most learners of English might not really need to talk or listen to speakers of English, but they do need to read in that language for different reasons. In fact, in a study by Bautista-Maldonado (2000), he found that former EFL university students from a language center had to make use of their knowledge of English mostly for reading at their current jobs. Therefore, knowing how to read effectively in the target language; though not an easy task, certainly represents an opportunity for EFL learners to learn and use the language realistically.

In order to read in a second language, students need the guidance of their teachers. In fact, Nuttall (1982) pointed out that there is plenty of work for the

language teacher to do; for instance, she could make use of appropriate texts and activities that focus the learner's attention on the text itself. Nuttall also stressed the fact that learners should be given techniques so that they develop reading skills. Thus, the teacher's job signifies providing learners with the applicable tools in their potential reading situations out of the classroom. The teacher needs to be a reading guide in the learner's process of becoming thriving independent readers.

Despite the fact that students need to be guided in L2 reading, students are often left alone in the reading process due to teachers' reading avoidance. Results in studies performed on teachers' attitudes on teaching reading in English as a first language suggest the need to look at language teachers' attitudes towards reading. For example, Alverman and Moore (as cited in Urquhart and Weir, 1998, p. 224) found that reading activities in class were no longer than fifteen minutes, they never occurred as the main focus, textbooks were predominantly used, and stated information was the focus of reading. There was also absence of planning teaching skills and strategies. Therefore, reading was restricted by not spending quality time on the skill.

Additionally, Hall (2005) conducted a research that looked at the reasons that cause content area teachers in grades 6-12 to teach or not to teach reading. He found that most teachers agreed teaching reading in the content area was important, but they stated that teaching reading was not their own responsibility. Additionally, some teachers were uncertain about their qualifications for teaching reading. In one of the studies included in Hall's (2005), teachers admitted that their students lacked reading skills and blamed it on other teachers as well as students themselves for not being active learners. Hence, there is a variety of teachers' opinions, beliefs and attitudes along with reading practices in the L1 classroom.

A study on teachers' attitudes towards reading performed in the EFL setting showed interesting findings. In Maamouri's (2003) study on EFL Tunisian teachers' attitudes towards the reading course they were teaching, she found that most teachers enjoyed teaching reading and a few admitted that they felt a little bit bored at times because of the use of the same texts and tasks. A few teachers pointed out that they did not enjoy teaching the course due to students' lack of interest. These results

imply that teachers' attitudes towards the reading course might depend on many factors such as students' interest in reading. Results from L1 teaching reading studies as well as the study by Maamouri (2003) suggest that there is in fact a need to look at teachers' attitudes since there can be many factors involved in their instruction decisions.

Studies on L1 reading and Maamouri's show a variety of teachers' attitudes towards teaching reading; these results invite to perform studies on teachers' attitudes towards reading in L2. Although the results from the previous mentioned studies are interesting, only one gathered data from class observations.

2. The study

The study took place at the language center of the Universidad Autonoma del Carmen (UNACAR) located in Ciudad del Carmen, Campeche in Mexico. The language center at the UNACAR offers English general courses to all students on campus. Students take four hours of class a week in two hour sessions. The classes are to be based on the integrated skills approach to expose the learner to the natural process of language. However, this might not happen in the classrooms. In fact, in Wolczuk-Hubensky's et al (2004), research on causes for the high rate of students' failure at the language center of the UNACAR, they found that 76% of the EFL teachers considered reading to be of less importance within the integrated skills approach program of study. Thereafter, it is of extreme interest to find out the reasons these EFL teachers believe reading is not equally or more important than other skills in teaching English as a Foreign Language.

3. Method

In order to obtain quantitative and qualitative data, my investigation combined a questionnaire survey, class observations and interviews of 15 EFL teachers from the language center of the UNACAR. The questionnaire was designed by the researcher mainly based on the results from studies by Hall (2005) and Alverman and Moore (as cited in Urquhart and Weir, 1998) and her own experience teaching at the language center of the UNACAR. All the research instruments recorded teachers'

beliefs, perceptions and attitudes concerning reading and teaching reading to the undergraduate students of the language center of UNACAR. Participants responded a 5 point Likert scale and a set of statements that focus on the following questions:

What are teachers' feelings or attitudes towards teaching reading?

How important do English teachers think reading is for learners?

What is the main purpose for teaching in-class reading?

How much time is spent on teaching reading?

Based upon teachers' consent, and availability, there were 18 class observations which recorded any type of reading instruction given in class. Most teachers were observed at least once. Finally, interviews were used to clarify data gathered from the observations and questionnaires. Each participant answered the same four questions.

4. Results

4.1 Questionnaire data

The tables below show results from the survey. The results are presented in a table showing raw frequencies as well as percentages. In order to analyze qualitative data from the observations and interviews, they are categorized by common patterns in the respondents' answers.

Question	S. agree response	Agree response	Not response	Disagree response	S. response
Students from the language center of the UNACAR need to learn reading strategies.	87% 13		7% 1	7% 1	
Students from the language center of the UNACAR need to learn and understand reading.	20% 3	40% 6		33% 5	7% 1
Time spent on reading is sufficient.		7% 1	13% 2	67% 10	13% 2
It is my responsibility to teach students how to read.	27% 4	67% 10		7% 1	
I prepare different types of reading material for my courses.	7% 1	27% 4	20% 3	40% 6	7% 1

Table 1. General attitudes towards reading at the language center of UNACAR

Question	Yes	Number of respondents	Sometimes	Number of respondents	No	Number of respondents
I enjoy teaching reading.	67%	10	33%	5		
I am confident that I know how to teach reading.	33%	5	53%	8	13%	2
I would like to take a teaching reading training course.	100%	15				
I feel content with my level of reading comprehension.	13%	2	53%	8	33%	5
I feel qualified to teach a reading course.	20%	3	13%	2	67%	10
I feel nervous or afraid when I teach a reading activity in my classes.			13%	2	87%	13

Table 2. Teachers' feelings towards reading

How often do you use the following in class?	always	respon	someti mes	Numb	rarely	Numb	never	Numb
magazine articles			33%	5	40%	6	27%	4
passages from the textbook	93%	14	7%	1				
internet articles	7%	1	47%	7	27%	4	20%	3
literature such as poems, short stories, etc.)			40%	6	27%	4	33%	5
passages or articles from other areas of study			27%	4	40%	6	33%	5

Table 3. Use of different reading material

Question How often do your students do the following in class?	Always		Someti es	Respond	Rarely	Respond	Never	Respond
look for the main idea	27%	4	47%	7	20%	3	7%	1
answer questions which have explicit answers	47%	7	40%	6	13%	2		
read in silence	13%	2	53%	8	33%	5		
answer the textbook questions	73%	11	27%	4				
predict the idea of the text	27%	4	47%	7	20%	3	7%	1
analyze the organization of the text	7%	1	20%	3	47%	7	27%	4
work on a specific reading strategy	7%	1	27%	4	40%	6	27%	4

Table 4. Use of reading strategies

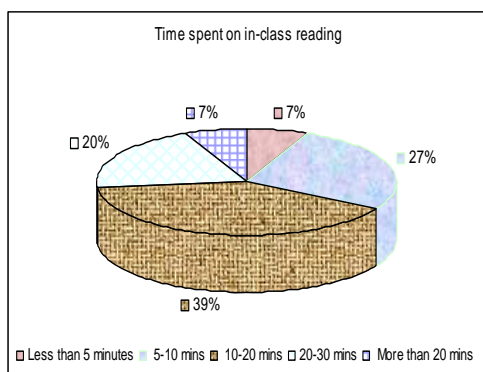


Figure 1. Time spent on reading

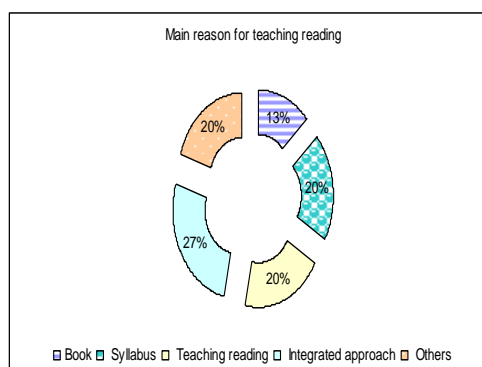


Figure 2. Reasons for teaching in-class reading

4.2 Observation data

In only half of 18 classes observed, teachers presented some type of reading activity. The passages from the textbooks were predominantly used. The average time spent on reading was 26 minutes. Also, most of the classes focused on vocabulary and translating words, and phrases from English into Spanish as well as reading the text aloud. Although some teachers asked their students to use some reading strategies such as scanning, prediction and text organization, there was no explicit information on strategies. In addition, in most classes students hardly got a chance to talk about the text. The purpose for having a reading activity apparently was to use the next activity in the textbook.

4.3 Interview data

The first two questions asked teachers what teaching reading in English means or represents to them, and how they feel when teaching reading. The most salient responses will be mentioned: 73% of teachers mentioned that it meant knowing strategies and techniques in teaching reading. In the next question, teachers were asked how they feel or what their feelings are when they teach reading. A majority, 60% of teachers said they felt confident. Some of the reasons they gave for feeling confident are the following: they know the vocabulary in the text, they enjoy reading, they teach pronunciation, and students learn vocabulary and grammar. Some teachers, however, had mixed feelings on teaching reading. For instance, 33% said the way they feel when teaching reading depends mostly on students' motivation.

The following two questions were related to reading time and reading purpose. When asked if they consider the time spent on in-class reading enough, 100% of teachers agreed that reading time is not sufficient. However, when they were asked about the main purpose for teaching reading to the students of the language center at this university, teachers had different answers. Teaching vocabulary was mentioned by 60% of participants followed by grammar (40%). Some teachers (26%) believe the main purpose to teach reading is to improve pronunciation and fluency while 20% believe the purpose is to cover the book. Also, 13% of teachers mentioned that the

purpose is to cover the syllabi, 7% said the main purpose is to practice English, and 7% mentioned that the purpose of teaching reading at this institution is to practice the four skills.

5. Discussion

The results of the analyses aiming to answer the four research questions can be summarized from two points of view: the attitudes EFL teachers express towards reading in general and the attitudes they show when they teach reading in class.

Firstly, similar to Hall's (2005) study results, the majority of teachers showed relative positive attitudes towards the importance of teaching reading. However, when in front of class, teachers seemed not to show this importance to their students. Students hardly discussed the texts and the 'reading activities' presented in class did not engage students' interest in reading. Reading in these language classrooms was controlled as in Alverman and Moore's (as cited in Urquhart and Weir, 1998) study results of reading in L1. Also, although most participants agreed that students at the language center need to learn reading skills or strategies, in none of the classes where reading was presented, was there explicit instruction of any reading skill or strategy.

Time spent on reading was another concern in this study. Some teachers agreed that reading time is not sufficient, but others did not. Another group was uncertain on the issue. During the interview, however, all of them shared the opinion that the time spent on teaching reading is definitely not sufficient. From the observations, it is noticeable that there is a need to spend more quality time on teaching reading. Some teachers spend as little as 10 minutes on reading in a two-hour class session, not to mention the nine classes observed where there was no reading instruction or practice at all.

A factor that could explain teachers' poor performance towards reading could be that most of them are not confident with their level of reading comprehension or knowledge of teaching reading or ignore the purpose of teaching reading in their classes. Like some teachers in Hall's study results, many teachers showed that they do not feel qualified to teach a reading course and that only sometimes are they

happy with their knowledge of reading. Although most participants said they do not feel nervous or afraid when they teach reading, they also said that only sometimes do they feel confident they know how to teach reading. In fact, during the interview only a few of them mentioned that teaching reading means to provide and model reading strategies to students. In addition, similar to Maamouri's study results, some teachers also said they feel disappointed when their students do not show interest in reading. Despite all these attitudes and beliefs, most of them admitted that it is their responsibility to teach their learners how to read in the target language. In fact, all of them showed eagerness to take a training course to learn teaching reading.

Despite the fact that teachers admit that reading is an important skill and that students at this institution need to learn how to read properly, an important evident problem is that participants do not seem to share a purpose for teaching reading. From the results in the questionnaire, it is evident that there are many ideas for teaching reading at the language center. Similar results were obtained from the interviews. From the class observations, the purpose was clear. Teachers follow the book consistently. In fact, a couple of teachers said that the only reason they present reading in class is because the book includes reading. Therefore, not having a clear purpose for teaching reading could influence the types of reading practices done in class. That is, most teachers use the book and do whatever it indicates while others decide to focus on translating words from Spanish to English to enrich students' lexicon; others decide to make students read aloud to practice and correct pronunciation and a few focus on actually reading and comprehending the text. In short, each teacher seems to have her own technique to 'teach' reading which is probably driven by her attitudes and perceptions towards themselves, the students, and the need for teaching reading at the language center.

6. Limitations of the study

Due to time constraint the class observations took place two weeks prior to the end of the semester, which might have influenced teachers' in-class performance. Moreover, observations might have caused some kind of discomfort to some teachers. However, most of them acted quite natural in their classes and answered

freely when interviewed. Also, there was no interview with the director of the language center or the university administrators to clarify the position of the language center towards reading instruction.

7. Implications

In order for students to be independent readers, EFL teachers actually ought to teach reading efficiently. Therefore, one of the first steps the administrators of the UNACAR might want to take into consideration is informing or reminding EFL teachers of the purpose of teaching English at the language center of the UNACAR. All teachers should have a clear purpose in mind since they all teach the same types of students. Moreover, the UNACAR should offer a methodology (integrated skills approach) training course or workshop for their English teachers to keep them up to date. A second recommendation would be to implement class observations from time to time to monitor teachers' instruction. The observations could be done by peers and by the director of the language center. Peer class observations could greatly benefit teaching at the language center by teachers' exchange of ideas. On the other hand, to make sure teachers are applying the techniques learned in the methodology course, the director of the language center should observe classes. Of course, this is also an opportunity to praise teachers' good work and effort.

8. Conclusions

In general, EFL teachers at the language center of the UNACAR think reading is an important language skill for general development and acquisition of the language. However, reading in the classroom is being restricted. One possible reason for teachers to do this type of reading practice could be that they have overlooked the goal of the English courses given at the language center of the UNACAR. Even when all teachers consider the time spent on teaching reading is not enough, there is time available in class to do so. In fact, the average time spent on reading was 26 minutes in a class of two hours. Thus, time does not represent a barrier to minimize reading instruction.

These EFL teachers' attitudes towards reading at the language center of the UNACAR represent a red light for the administrators of the university. Most teachers could be basing their teaching practices on their beliefs and attitudes towards reading. Fortunately, there is still hope for improvement. All teachers in this study are willing to participate in a training course and almost all of them are aware that teaching reading is their responsibility.

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