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ENHANCING READING COMPREHENSION OF EFL STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

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Abstract

This paper describes the results of an evaluation study of an intervention program designed to EFL students with learning disabilities who wished to pass the national English matriculation exam in Israel. The innovative teaching technique aimed at imparting students with concrete reading comprehension strategies to enhance their EFL reading comprehension and their EFL academic self-efficacy. The findings indicated an enhancement of both reading comprehension and academic self-efficacy. The content analysis of students' verbal narratives also unveiled the factors that enabled these improvements. The prominent variables were found to be teacher-student dialogues which enabled free interactions during class time and the concreteness of the reading comprehension strategies both of which reduced anxiety and increased motivation. Additional resulting variables were an increased task-persistence and an adoption of self-regulation processes. There were also few indications of learners' difficulty to apply the strategies learnt during the intervention program emanating from inattentiveness, inability to adopt self-regulation processes, and to adjust to the class size and to the duration of the intervention program. Conceptually, foreign language reading acquisition involved the integration of three processes; the strategic- pedagogical, the cognitive and the emotional one. Practically, this study may lay the basis for the development of frameworks for EAP teachers and curriculum designs.

1. Introduction

This study is based on the concept that both EFL learners' language skills and their feelings should be catered to by educators (Schwartzer, 2009). It also adopts mediation (Feuerstein, 1980) between learners having LD and EFL texts. Mediation should best occur while employing a concrete and systematic plan for learners to follow (Galperin, 2010). This encourages self-regulated behavior (Zarei & Hatami, 2012) which is intensified by the inclusion of metacognitive activities (Martini & Shore, 2008). Altogether, these coping resources compensate for learners' deficits typical of their learning disabilities and yield an enhancement of both learners' reading comprehension (Graves & Graves, 2003) and their academic self- efficacy (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001)

2. Problem Statement

Reading comprehension instruction has to be delivered while emphasizing the process rather than the product (Schwarzer, 2009) and communicating by on-going dialogues between teachers and students (Michaeli, 2013). Generally, reading comprehension requires a high cognitive ability to step up the ladder of thinking levels, some of which are synthesis and analysis (Bloom, 1956). Specifically, as a multi-dimensional process, reading comprehension involves three factors: the reader, the text and the act of reading. In other words, the quality of reading depends on reading speed and accuracy, vocabulary, world knowledge, text structure and syntactic complexity, and motivation respectively. Working memory and phonological processing also contribute to reading comprehension (Lesaux, Lipka, & Siegel, 2006).

Unfortunately, students with learning disabilities demonstrate weakness in storing information, especially when coping with foreign language reading (Erçetin & Alptekin, 2013). Students with LD also have a difficulty in producing information like drawing conclusions (Shany, Wiener, & Feingold, 2011). Those that are defined as having ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) or ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) express additional problems concerned with controlling behavior. They are impulsive, hyperactive and lack appropriate attention skills. Consequently, they find it hard to plan, organize, maintain focus, and persist in tasks (Leons, Herbert, & Gobbo, 2009).

To overcome these deficiencies, Galperin (2010) suggests employing procedures that encourage cognitive development and regulate reading and thinking of poor readers. But, there are two obstacles while trying to adjust teaching techniques to specific disabilities. Firstly, the methods of identifying learning disabilities are controversial (Kavale, 2005). Secondly, non-responsiveness to intervention does not necessarily show a specific learning disability but only a specific reading difficulty. Therefore, a comprehensive intervention program is required to reorganize the learners' functioning and thinking in ways that address behavioral problems and reading difficulties (Kavale, 2005).

These problems call for the need to determine the nature of the learning strategies. They should mediate between learners and the reading texts (Feuerstein, 1980, 2004); transferred in an explicit (Dekeyser, 2003) and a concrete oriented manner (Galperin, 2010); arouse metacognitive thinking (Martini & Shore, 2008) to make reading strategies internalized consciously (Schmidt, 2001) and enable self-regulation processes occur (Zarei & Hatami, 2012). Further, educators should consider the learner as a whole person, appealing to his language skills and to his feelings (Schwarzer, 2009) which may affect his

self-efficacy and his willingness to self-regulate his behavior while reading. Ultimately, instructors should allot a reasonable time for learners to adjust and make a progress (Grabe, 1991). Not only does this kind of instruction enhance reading comprehension but it also enables faster processes of reading and reduces anxiety (Graves & Graves, 2003). Shakkour and Siegel's (2013) take EFL studies a step further by proving the transfer of language skills from a foreign language to ones' native language.

This comprehensive approach inevitably reduces anxiety (Mills, Pajares & Herron, 2006), promotes learner's motivation to cope with present challenges and increases task-persistence (Dovis et al., 2011). It also improves learners' reading comprehension and enhances their academic self- efficacy, i.e., students' beliefs about their own capabilities (Bandura, 2006) - with one affecting the other. However, scientists disagree about the relationship between these two processes. Some claim that enhanced self- efficacy mediates both anxiety and motivation and yields better academic accomplishments (Erkan & Saban, 2011). In contrast, Chemers, Hu, and Garcia, (2001) assert that the learners' cognitive, motivational, and affective conditions throughout the learning process mediate the effects of self-efficacy. In this respect, there is a gap in the fields of foreign language learning and learning disabilities (Wesely, 2012) regarding self- efficacy in general and the factors that enhance self-efficacy beliefs in EFL context in particular (Raoofi, Bee & Swee, 2012).

In order to fill this gap, an innovative teaching technique was designed to facilitate reading comprehension among EFL students having learning disabilities. This intervention program is based on the premise that concrete reading comprehension strategies improve the reading abilities of those students and enhance their academic self – efficacy. Hence, the program's name RCSE stands for 'Reading Comprehension and Self Efficacy'. So far, no EFL study has been found that puts a premium on the concrete approach to reading comprehension. An exception is Galperin (2010) whose theory of "mental action"- a 'pure' thought is, in fact, an outcome of mental transformation of an object- follows the principle of concreteness but in the field of basic reading.

3.   Research Questions

3.1. What is the contribution of the strategy-based RCSE program to reading comprehension enhancement in EFL for students with LD?

3.2. In what ways might the strategy-based RCSE program enhance the students' academic self-efficacy in reading in EFL?

4.   Purpose of the Study

4.1. To examine whether students with learning disabilities improve their reading comprehension in EFL after the strategy-based RCSE program.

4.2. To examine how the strategy-based RCSE program enhanced those students' academic self-efficacy.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Participants

The research population included 40 students with LD at the age of 19- 28 (mean age= 23.11, SD = 1.95). The participants engaged in reading comprehension courses in a college in the centre of Israel and aimed at succeeding in the Israeli English national matriculation exam.

5.2. Research approach

This study is an action research (Norton, 2009). As such, its objective was to check whether an instructional concrete framework could facilitate students' reading comprehension problems.

5.3. Tools

The intervention program

 Objectives

• Acquaintance with the characteristics of academic articles

• Strategic reading that includes:

- Distinguishing between main ideas and specific information

- Distinguishing between same and different

- Identifying sequences of actions

- Sensing the purpose/ mood/attitude of the writer

• Adoption of a positive attitude towards reading in EAP context.

Methods of Instruction

• Frontal and one- on- one instruction.

• Cognitive activities - following a procedure of key words extraction and   analysing and/or synthesizing these key words while relating them to broader concepts of thinking.

• Metacognitive activities - think aloud exercising of the procedures learnt during the intervention program

• Self- assessment tools- activating independent re- thinking procedures by comparing oneself answers with answer keys of reading comprehension tasks.

The reading comprehension exams

Reading comprehension exams were taken by the participants at three points of time during the research (pre- middle- and post intervention). All tests had a similar language level and text structure to that of the national English matriculation exam (samples available at the Ministry of Education site: https://meyda.education.gov.il/sheeloney_bagrut/) Also, they had the same types of questions, requiring synthetic and analytic thinking. Each exam contained two parts. The first part included questions of different types in English to check for understanding of the various ideas presented in the text. The second part contained a main idea question referring to the whole text. The participants had to answer in Hebrew using their own words (verbatim translations of parts of the text were not accepted as answers). Writing in Hebrew avoided copying the answer from the text and as such could better demonstrate the participants' understanding of the text.

6. Findings

The narratives of the semi-structured interviews provided support to the impact of the intervention program on learners' EFL reading comprehension achievements as well as their academic self- efficacy. The themes brought up were related to language skills, learners' conduct, instruction quality, easy applications, application difficulties and academic self-efficacy.

With regard to the first research question about the contribution of the intervention program to students' reading comprehension, the findings showed the following: (pseudonyms are used)

• The repetitive practice of concrete and explicit strategies eased up on the process of learning and encouraged learners to initiate, as Ruth (f 21) commented:"…today… when I see a text in English I immediately start working on it"

• The participants took responsibility over their learning as claimed by Ravit (f 22): "When I didn't understand it was because I didn't do what I was supposed to do."

• The RCSE imposed self-regulation processes, as reflected by Daniel (m 22): "The order, the stages really helped me but later I didn't always need to follow it."

• The RCSE accelerated thinking processes as reported by Avishay (m 23):"The stages of decoding a text made it a shorter process and I still understand."

• The RCSE increased task persistence as informed by Shay (m 23): "I can cope with any text and if there is a really difficult text I will make the effort and finally get the desired result."

• The RCSE improved abstract thinking as Alit (m 21) said: "I don't work like a parrot. I know where... to make connections and understand. I opened my mind. I don't think 'inside the box' anymore". And Avi (m 25) who said: "Understanding main ideas really helped me. The different sentences and the words were confusing but now I can do it"

• The RCSE stimulated skill transfer to additional English language skills like speaking and listening and even to other subjects such as Hebrew by implementing some of the strategies the participants internalized during the intervention program. These were explained by Noah (f 20): "I have advantages in many contexts. It is easy to speak and understand others." and by Yael (f 20): "It even helps me in other subjects like in Hebrew."

With regard to the second research question about the contribution of the intervention program to students' self- efficacy, the participants reported the following:

• The on-going teacher-student dialogues during classes empowered the participants emotionally as reported by Sarit (f 25): "you give confidence to the student, you tell us about yourself and the questionnaires that you asked us to fill in. At that point I said to myself, Yes, I can succeed. I became optimistic."

• The reading comprehension strategies empowered the participants cognitively as expressed by David (m 27): "The course is good because the materials are taught in a way that is simple to understand."

• The participants became less anxious and more motivated as reflected by Rinat (f 24): "…today I am not scared when I see a text in English I immediately start working on it."

• The participants' self-perception as EFL learners gradually improved as they were experiencing success as informed by Yarin (m 26):"I know that I am capable… At the beginning, I avoided doing the reading tasks… but lately I do it because I know how to do it and it is good."

• The participants' EFL self-efficacy increased as reported by Rotem (m 23): "I believe in myself, before I wasn't capable of it, I just wanted to pass the exam. Now I make an effort to understand, to improve my English."

• The participants' self-efficacy towards their prospective academic studies increased as told by Yafit (f 22): "I just wanted to succeed in the English matriculation exam but now I am thinking about moving on to higher studies."

Alongside the apparent benefits of the program, some minor difficulties bear mentioning.

• More careful planning of homework was requested as a way to reduce anxiety stemming from inattention of students as explained by Yossi (m25): "It is a good program in principle but there was a problem with the group. Some were not attentive that much so there were too many repetitions" and by Rachel(f 21): "I am afraid I will not succeed, I would have been happier if there had been more H.W

• Few participants demonstrated a difficulty in enforcing self-regulation processes attributed to personality characteristics as claimed by May (f 25):"…it is important to make sure that the student focuses on this way of thinking right from the start… it is difficult to focus on the new way. Had I done it earlier, it would have been happening automatically."

• Some respondents needed a longer period of time studying with the intervention program for better adaptation as noted by Zehava (f 20): "you didn't always have time… to give personal attention. There were times… I had to wait to my turn and then gave up."

• Some needed to be instructed in smaller groups as requested by Rom (m 23):"To have smaller classes so each student can practice according to his specific needs."

The findings explored varied factors that contributed to the increase in both readers' awareness to reading comprehension strategies and in reading comprehension achievements. The variables involved in these processes are in concert with contemporary research. The findings of the pre-intervention stage showed very low success rates regarding drawing conclusions. This problem is also discussed, by Shany, Wiener, and Feingold (2011) who attribute that to a difficulty in processing information among students with LD and by Erçetin and Alptekin, (2013) who discuss the same problem but especially in EFL context. The factors that facilitated the increase in learners' ability to draw conclusions at the post intervention stage are unfolded by the following qualitative findings.

This study corroborates Schmidt's (2001) assertion that learning is a conscious process and therefore it also strengthens Dekeyser's (2003) claim about the importance of explicit instruction all of which support Martini and Shore's (2008) statement about the importance of arousing metacognitive thinking. The study especially expands Galperin's (2010) theory about mental transformation of an object which is based on concreteness and gradual thinking process that is defined explicitly for learners to follow. Delivering the strategies in a concrete and explicit manner yielded participants' ability to analyse the information they were reading, to draw conclusions and construct main ideas from concrete pieces of information, stepping up to the level of synthesis (Bloom, 1956). This inevitably indicates an improvement in readers' working memory needed for successful reading (Lesaux, Lipka, & Siegel, 2006). Also, in accordance with Graves and Graves (2003), this study shows that explicit instruction accelerated the thinking pace.

In congruence with Zarei and Hatami's findings (2012) and those of Dovis et al.'s (2011), explicit and conscious instruction have a meaningful effect on learners' conduct expressed by an increase in self-regulated behaviour and increased task persistence respectively. However, the few cases of unsuccessful attempts to adapt to the intervention program reinforce arguments of other research concerning the factors that are likely to inhibit the process of learning. These were related to inattentiveness (Leons, Herbert, and Gobbo, 2009), resistance to an adaptation of self-regulation processes (Zarei and Hatami, 2012), inadequate duration of the intervention program (Grabe, 1991) and unsuitable class size.

With regard to research question two, the findings match those of recent studies which deal with the emotional aspects of EFL students. Referring to the instruction quality of the intervention program, the findings support Michaeli (2013) regarding the positive effects of instruction that is based on on-going dialogues between teachers and students that improved not only the learners' cognitive condition but also their emotional one. In a similar vein, the findings highlight the significant effect of mediation which enables direct learning according to Feuerstein (1980, 2004). The learners' will to take responsibility, take the initiative to work independently and eventually to persist in their reading tasks indicated that there was a link between the kind of instruction administered, motivation and task-persistence as noted by Dovis et al. (2011).

Also, the link between anxiety and self- efficacy as contended by Mills, Pajares & Herron (2006) was clearly demonstrated by this evaluation project. The learners attributed the problem of anxiety to their disbelief in their ability to succeed in EFL studies, i.e. they expressed low EFL self- efficacy and suggested an addition of carefully planned homework to reduce the effects of anxiety and encourage motivation to make a progress. Another finding regarding the improvement in learners' self-perception indicated an increase in their EFL academic self-efficacy. So, this finding goes hand in hand with Chemers, Hu, and Garcia's (2001) assertion that enhanced self-efficacy beliefs can be attributed to other affective conditions taken care of throughout the learning process. As such, this study contradicts Erkan and Saban (2011) who claim the opposite, i.e. that enhanced self- efficacy is the central variable which affects other affective conditions like anxiety and motivation. Unlike Bandura (1986) who asserts that the enhancement of students' self-efficacy results in better academic achievements, the present project pointed to the opposite direction; an increase in academic achievements enhanced learners' self-efficacy.

As the findings of this study showed a change in learners' behavior demonstrated by taking responsibility over their learning, adopting self-regulation processes and persisting in their reading tasks together with an increase in reading comprehension achievements, they confirmed Kavale's (2005) proposal that intervention programs should address a wide range of behavioral problems and reading difficulties. Adding the finding of increased learners' self-efficacy also indicated that this study followed Schwarzer's (2009) theory of the Whole Adult EFL Learner which advocates for treating both learner's language skills and his feelings. Regarding gap in knowledge, this link corresponds to Wesely's, (2012) call for gathering some more knowledge in the fields of foreign language learning and learning disabilities. It also extends Galperin's (2010) theory of "mental action" to the field of EFL reading comprehension and expands on the factors that enhance self-efficacy beliefs in EFL context in particular which are claimed to be missing by Raoofi, Bee and Swee (2012).]

7. Conclusion

The discussion above yields both conceptual and practical conclusions. Conceptually, EFL students with LD involved in EAP studies are likely to improve their reading comprehension abilities when instruction is based on an integration of three EFL reading acquisition processes, creating an EFL reading comprehension pedagogy model. In detail, this model comprises a strategic-pedagogical process, a cognitive process and an emotional one. The strategic-pedagogical process includes a variety of concrete ways to address readers' cognitive and emotional difficulties. The cognitive process incorporates reading comprehension procedural strategies that activate low order of thinking such as detecting words which repeat themselves or paying attention to syntactic clues to facilitate strategy application. The emotional process includes measures that aim at reducing anxiety, promoting positive self-perception and enhancing self-efficacy. The integration of these processes creates a synergy which triggers higher order thinking levels like analysing and synthesizing while reading.

Practically, some initiatives may be taken both to allow for an application of this intervention program in other institutions and expand on its form and content. The suggestions are, first, to simplify reading comprehension among EAP students with LD, professional development frameworks for EAP teachers should offer them the strategies inherent in the model. Second, to internalise learning materials, intervention programs should focus on activities that promote task persistence since students with LD need longer processes than regular students for internalization. Third, to encourage EFL students with LD to become mastery goal oriented, intervention programs should be planned carefully to produce immediate positive changes regarding learners' EFL self- perception and self- efficacy by experiencing small consecutive multiple successes. Forth, to get the most out of the lowest achieving students, they should be given, relatively to other students, more direct instruction to minimize inevitable disruptive factors such as large classes, inattentiveness, intervention programs' limited time frame and personal characteristics of learners who demonstrate resistance to intervention programs in their earliest manifestations.

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