Evaluation of an EAP Reading Course at the Faculty of Education, Kuwait University

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This paper describes the assessment of the revised objectives of an English reading course offered at the Faculty of Education, Kuwait University. Students generally need English to comprehend texts written in that language, related to their discipline. According to a needs analysis, the course was designed to foster reading comprehension for academic purposes. After implementing these objectives for a year, it was decided to determine if they had been achieved. The results were obtained from pre-and post-tests conducted on 254 students. Analysis of data showed improvement in reading skills. However, there were differences between students from Arts and Science majors. Some recommendations for further modifications are suggested.

INTRODUCTION

Students in Kuwait are taught in their native language, i.e. Arabic. Those who wish to complete their university education and join the Science or Medical Faculties will be instructed in English. Other students in the Faculty of Arts or Education will continue their studies in Arabic. But the latter have to demonstrate their ability to handle the English language used for academic purposes. Upon graduating from secondary school, students have had eight years of English as a foreign language. However, they lack the essential skills in English required to succeed academically. Hence students must take English courses offered by the University which will provide them with the necessary skills to meet the requirement.

This study focuses on the Faculty of Education, since its Language Unit offers two courses in English which every student has to complete as part of the University requirements. Students need English mainly to comprehend texts written in English which are related to their discipline. This paper describes our attempts to determine (i) the extent to which the revised objectives of the first required reading course (English 110) were achieved; (ii) the extent to which the focus on reading for EAP (English for Academic Purposes) enabled student-teachers to acquire reading skills; and (iii) the extent to which there were significant differences between the reading achievements of students majoring in science-related subjects and of students majoring in arts-related subjects.

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OVERVIEW OF THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION

The Faculty of Education of Kuwait University combines both Arabic and English media of instruction. Student-teachers study their major fields in other faculties and the professional programme is offered by the faculty concerned. Arabic is used as the medium of instruction for majors such as Islamic Studies and Social Studies, whereas English is the medium of instruction for Mathematics and Science majors. Both groups of students follow the same language programme offered by the English Language Unit (ELU) of the Faculty of Education.

The Unit offers four English language courses. These are English 099, a remedial course, English 110, a pre-intermediate credit course, English 111, an intermediate credit course, and English 112, a special course for student-teachers. Students are enrolled in the various courses according to their scores on a placement test. As part of their university requirement, students must take two credit courses for graduation and should acquire a knowledge of the language necessary for their academic success.

In the Spring semester of the 1987-88 academic year, a Joint Curriculum Committee (JCC) was established at the Faculty of Education. It included members from the various departments in the Faculty and the ELU. The aim was to review the English Language programme and the teaching objectives since the establishment of the ELU in 1983. The JCC suggested the conducting of a needs analysis study in order to determine the purpose of language teaching in the Faculty of Education and the specific skills to be acquired by student-teachers. For this purpose a questionnaire was administered to elicit the opinions of Faculty staff members. The study concluded that the receptive skills should be emphasized with special focus on reading. This was manifested in the opinion of 35% of the respondents who ranked reading as the most important skill with listening second in importance. Speaking and writing were ranked lower (ELU Education Report, 1988). It may be noted that an earlier study had also singled out reading as a major requirement for Kuwait University students (Kharma, 1981: 398-404). Reading is also emphasised as an important skill in places where English is taught mainly for academic purposes (Narayamawamy, 1982: 159-170; Sekara, 1987: 25-29).

Accordingly, ELT objectives and materials which had previously focused on English for general purposes were revised and formulated for all the four courses offered to correspond with the students’ needs. The aim was to help student-teachers acquire a set of skills to help them during their studies in the University. An EAP reading course was subsequently designed as a first required course - English 110. Emphasis was placed on the development of reading skills. Writing, listening, and speaking skills were assigned subsidiary roles and were used to reinforce the reading skill. Because of time constraints (5 contact hours for 15 weeks) students were trained to use certain essential skills. The focus was on a skills-based approach rather than on a content-based approach. The course was intended to assist students to become independent readers and help them develop the mental processes needed while reading. It also aimed at teaching students high transfer skills which can be used in any content course. Students should become independent users of reading strategies in the absence of teacher supervision.

Implementation of the new materials began in 1989-90. This was interrupted in 1990-91 because of the Gulf Crisis. The programme was resumed in 1991-92. In the Fall semester of 1991-92, it was decided to determine whether the course objectives were achieved.

The current study was designed to address the following questions: “Has the focus on reading enabled student-teachers to acquire academic reading skills?”; “Are there significant differences: (a) between the student scores obtained from the pre- and post- tests (b) in the specific skill areas of reading comprehension (c) between the needs of the Science and the Arts students?”; and “Would the Science and Arts students be better served if separate courses were developed for each group?”

READING THEORY

Stanovich’s (1980: 32-71) interactive compensatory model of reading fluency formed the basis of this course. The model views reading as “interactive”. The reader makes sense of what they read (a) by decoding the linguistic items on the page – “bottom up processing” and (b) by relating this information to what they already know about the text – “top down processing”. It is during this interaction that the reader predicts and makes hypotheses about the text (Clarke and Silberstein, 1977: 135-154). A text has meaning only when the reader decides there is meaning (Tierney & Pearson, 1983: 568-569).

Background information is recognized as an important factor in developing comprehension. The mental organization that plays an important role has been formulated as schema theory (Rumelhart, 1980: 33-58). Schema theory states that a person’s existing knowledge and experience have an impact on the content and form of new knowledge. It is based on the premise that the text by itself carries no meaning. It only provides the clues to the readers as to how meaning should be constructed from their own existing schema. Understanding a piece of text does not depend on the knowledge of structure or vocabulary only, but on processing this information and linking it with the reader’s previous knowledge. The importance of background knowledge is emphasised by Coady (1979: 5-12). He observes that even when the student’s syntactic control is weak, the text can still be comprehended if the student has enough background knowledge. Similarly Carroll (1966) points out that “the more meaningful the material to be learned, the greater the facility in learning and retention” (p.105).
The absence of undergirding schema, which provide the structure for the integration of new information, would be expected to cause a breakdown in reading comprehension especially at the higher level of inference and evaluation. The absence of background information can also affect the comprehension of explicit facts because the material presented cannot be integrated with other pieces of knowledge (Steffenson et al., 1979: 10-29).

The view that reading is an interactive process between the reader and his prior background knowledge helped in the adoption of instructional strategies. These will be discussed in a subsequent section.

SUBJECTS

The total number of students enrolled in the reading course (110) for whom both pre- and post- tests scores were available was 254. They were distributed among ten sections. Those majoring in Arts numbered 132. The remaining 122 were Science and Maths majors. There were 29 male and 225 female students. All students had Arabic as the medium of instruction in their secondary school. They were in the first or second year of the undergraduate programme at the time of the study.

THE TEST: DESIGN AND ADMINISTRATION

The test employed was a placement test designed by the ELU teachers of the Faculty of Education in cooperation with the Testing and Measurement Office of the Language Centre. The test was specifically designed to assess the proficiency of the students of the Faculty of Education.

The test consisted of three parts, namely grammar, vocabulary, and reading. Only the reading section was adopted for the purpose of this study. It included forty multiple choice questions. There were eight reading passages varying in length and difficulty and containing 100 to 150 words. Four comprehension categories were highlighted. These were reading for specific information where questions were “textually explicit” (Pearson & Johnson, 1978) i.e., the answers to the question could be derived directly from the text. The other three categories were main idea of the text, identifying reference pronouns and drawing conclusions. Questions related to these three categories were “textually implicit” (Pearson & Johnson, 1978: 163-164), i.e., answers to these questions required deeper processing by the students as there were no direct cues in the text. Each item had four choices The possible score that a student could achieve was between 0 and 40. (See Appendix for a sample reading passage with questions).

The pre-test was applied early in the Fall semester of the academic year 1992-93. The same test was administered again as a post-test after students had completed the course. Using the same test as both pre- and post- tests avoided the problem of equating different forms of the tests. The length of time was considered long enough to control for any memory effects. In order to ensure adequate motivation, students took both tests with the impression that the results would affect their final grades. Consequently, the test was treated as a normal class examination.

To ensure reliability of the testing instrument, Cronbach’s Alpha was calculated for the total number of respondents’ scores. The results ranged between .80 and .84, which proved the test to be reliable.

TEACHING PROCEDURE

All the ten sections of the reading course followed the same textbook and the teaching plan prepared by the course coordinator during the period between the two tests. Meetings were held every two weeks with course teachers to assess course progress, review the materials, and the teaching techniques used in the class. To ensure some degree of standardization among the ten sections, unified set of quizzes, mid-term and final exams were conducted during the course.

The readings in the assigned book were followed by questions on the basic reading skills. Vocabulary was taught in context rather than in isolation. The vocabulary, sentence length, and structure of the readings gradually increased in complexity as the lessons progressed.

Students read in class and also listened to recorded readings to practice decoding the printed word, and to focus on segments of information and related thought units rather than on individual words. They were also required to complete a guided summary or cloze test based on what they had read.

Teachers used three broad instructional strategies extensively to provide direct instruction to students. These were as follows:

1. Linking prior knowledge with the text through the use of advance organizers and preview questions which help students to make hypotheses about the text. Advance organizers help to bridge the gap between what the learner already knows and what is necessary to know to complete a task (Ausubel, 1968). Advance organizers used were visual, oral, or written.

2. Using questions to direct students’ attention both during and after reading to help in promoting critical reading (Weinstein, 1978; Singer and Donlan, 1982: 166-186). Questions were based on the model provided by Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives. They are divided into six categories of increasing complexity. The questions at the knowledge and comprehension level are product-oriented and require convergent thinking. On the other hand, questions at the level of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation require divergent thinking and in-depth reader text interaction.
3. Teaching vocabulary in context, through association and contrasts. Semantic mapping was used to integrate new words with known vocabulary. This procedure helps students to organize or categorize associations which facilitate the retention of information (Sinatra et al., 1984: 22-29; Stahl and Vancil, 1986: 62-67). As a post-reading activity, it was used to help students recall vocabulary and organize the text.

RESULTS

Results of the pre- and post- tests were analysed to establish whether the four subscales i.e. comprehension of specific facts, main idea, reference, and inference and drawing conclusions, were significantly different at the 0.05 level in relation to two independent variables of sex and major. The chi-square and the t-test were utilized to examine the different groups.

The results indicate no significant differences between males and females regarding the four subscales in either test (see Tables 1 and 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscales</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>SIG (α .05)</th>
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<td>3.10</td>
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<tr>
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<td>229</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>2.03</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>2.52</td>
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<td>Main Idea</td>
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<td>1.36</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>0.14</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>1.96</td>
<td>1.24</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4.52</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>1.83</td>
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<td>0.06</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>3.60</td>
<td>2.58</td>
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Table 1: Pre-Test t-value of Differences between Female and Male Students

In contrast, a significant difference is apparent between Science and Arts students in relation to the four subscales (see Tables 3 and 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscales</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>SIG (α .05)</th>
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<td>122</td>
<td>11.35</td>
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<td>5.29</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>* .000</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arts</td>
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Table 3: Pre-Test t-value of Differences between Science and Arts Students

*Strongly significant
Table 4: Post-Test t-value of Differences between Science and Arts Students

Table 5 shows the pre-test and the post-test scores of the Science students. The Mean of the post-test is much higher than the Mean of the pre-test for all the four skill areas of reading comprehension. Similarly, Table 6 shows the pre- and post-test scores of Arts students. The post-test scores indicate an improvement in students’ performance in all four categories of reading comprehension. The Mean of the post-test is much higher than the Mean of the pre-test. To summarize, post-test scores show improvement in reading skills for both the Science and Arts students.

Table 5: t-value of Differences between Pre-Test and Post-Test scores for Science Students. *strongly significant

Table 6: t-value of Differences between Pre-Test and Post-Test scores for Arts Students. *strongly significant

Major gains were made in comprehension of specific facts. As mentioned earlier, these questions concerned specific details which could be found directly in the passage. In the questions dealing with main idea, reference, and inference, scores show improvements but to a lesser degree. Questions related to these areas depend on the understanding of the macropropositions and the micropropositions of the text. The answers to these questions would be derived from a more thorough processing of the text as there are no direct cues, but the answers are the logical implications of the information in the passage. Hence, students must know about the text structure and its rhetorical relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

The study indicates that there was an overall improvement in the performance of the students. This improvement may be attributed to the students’ commitment to the teachers’ instruction. It may also be a result of making the course more meaningful in terms of defining the purpose for which the students were studying English. The better performance of the Science students may be due to their more efficient decoding ability. Science majors had daily contact with academic English because of the nature of their study. Consequently, they were more familiar with discourse devices and had greater lexical access than the Arts majors. Their decoding ability may have allowed them to attend to higher processes required to comprehend the text. In the case of Arts students, there might be problems at the decoding level which would cause a block to comprehension. Reading ability is dependent on language proficiency (Clarke, 1979: 121-150; Cziko, 1980: 101-114). This is also clear from the differences in scores of the two groups.
In order to improve the reading abilities of students enrolled in the course, the following recommendations may be considered:

1. Separate courses would be more beneficial for Science students with emphasis on pertinent content and discourse patterns of their discipline. This would also allow them to handle materials at a higher level of syntactic and semantic complexity.

2. A longitudinal study is needed to evaluate the long term effects of course instruction on students. This would be useful for assessing the permanence and transferability of skills acquired in this course.

3. Training should focus on helping students develop task and text-specific strategies for optimal learning in the academic setting, after developing an intermediate level of reading skills proficiency.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX
Sample Reading Passage

Date Palms

Dates are no longer the main food of the people who live around the Gulf, but they are still very popular. They are in season from August to October, and farmers bring in truckloads from Saudi Arabia. Each one weighs from 100 to 250 kilos. Date merchants sell them by the roadside in Jalib-il-Shuyoukh, a suburb of Kuwait. Fresh dates are yellow or red in colour, but the ripe ones are brown and sticky. The number of date palms in Kuwait is rising gradually. From some 19,000 trees in 1976 they had grown to 27,700 by 1980. Date palms provide not only food, but the leaves are used to make baskets, beds, and the ceilings of the old Arab houses.

1. Dates are in season in the Gulf
   a. throughout the year.
   b. during the summer.
   c. for three months.
   d. in the winter.

2. The underlined word one means
   a. date.
   b. farmer.
   c. truckload.
   d. season.

3. Each load of dates weighs
   a. more than 250 kilos.
   b. under 100 kilos.
   c. between 100 and 250 kilos.
   d. approximately 25,000 kilos.

4. In 1980 there were
   a. fewer date trees than in 1976.
   b. the same number of trees as before.
   c. more dates trees than in 1976.
   d. many more uses for date trees.

5. Date palms
   a. are brown and sticky.
   b. have red and yellow leaves.
   c. are grown only for dates.
   d. have a variety of uses.