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Using Reading Circles Strategy for Developing Preparatory Students' Critical Reading Skills and Social Skills

A thesis Submitted for the M. A. Degree in Education
(Curriculum & Instruction: TEFL)

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2014

Abstract

Title of the Research: Using Reading Circles Strategy for Developing Preparatory Students' critical Reading Skills and Social Skills.

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The present study aimed at developing the necessary critical reading skills and social skills of the Egyptian EFL second year preparatory school students, through a proposed program based on using reading circles strategy. The study participants were 44 students from Sohag Experimental Preparatory School in Sohag Governorate. Instruments of the study included: A social skills questionnaire (SSQ), a pre-/post critical reading skills test (CRST), reading circles role sheets, and reflection sheets. The study results revealed that there was statistically significant difference at 0.01 level between the mean scores of the study group in the critical reading skills in the pre and post test in favor of the post administration. There was also statistically significant difference at 0.01 level between the mean scores of the study group in the pre and post-administrations of the social skills questionnaire in favor of the post-administration. The data showed that the use of reading circles strategy increased students' critical reading skills and social skills. Students mentioned that they learned how to summarize topics in few sentences. They acquired the following skills: (1) looking up words in a dictionary, (2) differentiating between a fact and an opinion, (3) expecting, the topic of a passage or a story, (4) making connections between the stories they read and similar incidents they knew about; and (5) working in groups. Moreover, they enjoyed drawing pictures of the lessons and stories.

Key Words:

Literature Circles, Reading Circles, Critical Reading Skills, Social Skills

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to my supervisors, **Dr. Zeinab Ali Elnaggar**, Professor of Curriculum and EFL Instruction, Faculty of Education, Ain Shams University for her continuous support and encouragement. She generously gave much of her time, thoughtful guidance, stimulating ideas throughout the development of this study. This work would not have been possible without her support.

I am heavily indebted to my supervisor, **Dr. Dalia Ibrahim Yahia**, Lecturer of Curriculum and EFL Instruction at Faculty of Education, Ain Shams University for her insightful comments, sincere efforts and her wonderful cooperation, may Allah give her healthy life.

My thanks are also extended to **Dr Ali Nassary Hassan**—Assistant Professor at Sohag Social Institute who has provided many heartening and thoughtful comments concerning the statistical analysis of the program which have enriched this thesis.

Special thanks are extended to the jury of the program for their kind assistance and the great efforts exerted by them.

Finally, I would like to express my special thanks to everyone who helped me during the completion of the current study, particularly, the members of my family and my colleagues at Sohag Experimental Language school who helped me throughout my work.

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Chapter One

Background and Problem

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Background and Problem

1.1 Introduction

Learning English has become a must in the twenty first century. English is one of the most widely used languages in the world. It is the language of communication in the fields of international politics, trade and tourism. It is the language most generally associated with higher education and research. Most scientific and technical journals are published in English. English also provides a foundation for lifelong language learning and for personal enjoyment and enrichment.

National Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Education (NAQAAE, 2009) stated that "Having a good knowledge of English is a requirement for membership in a global community." This makes it necessary for Egyptian students to be provided with a strong language basis that will equip them to be active participants in such a community.

Learners also should use appropriate social skills when dealing with others. They should listen carefully to others and participate actively in team work tasks, Learners are also expected to give complements to others in different situations.(Standard: 6-2-3). Students' behavior should reflect dedication and commitment to social values such as respect, truthfulness and honesty. (Standard: 6-3-2-1, NAQAAE, 2011, pp. 61-62).It is generally agreed that English language has four basic skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing. Some researchers believe that reading has a priority over other skills as it involves them."Reading is a source of information and pleasure which involves other skills such as

listening, speaking, writing as well as autonomous learning " (Ilhamy, 1997, pp. 45-62). Because of the importance of reading the ex-USA president Bush called reading the " new civil right" (Third Bush-Kerry debate: on Education)

The National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) considers "Reading is a basic human right. An inability to read in today's world is to be consigned to educational, social, and economic failure—an existence entirely devoid of meaningful life, liberty, or the pursuit of happiness."(NASBE, 2006, p.4) Saudi added that knowledge gained through reading has a great effect on developing individual's character comprehensively. He also said that reading is a tool for enjoyment, entertainment, problem solving, and an incentive for creative thinking (Saudi, 2007, p. 2).

Having a look at the national standards for teaching English as a foreign language set by NAQAAE reveals that the preparatory learners are expected to be able to skim and scan complex text for general meaning or to determine subject matter or organization. They are also expected to be able to guess meaning of new words from context, demonstrate culture independent reading for pleasure, and analyze information to determine relevancy of main ideas to supporting details. By the end of the preparatory stage learners should be able to ask and respond to high level thinking questions which connect new ideas to personal experience, draw conclusions about context, events, characters and setting from written texts and read critically to interpret and evaluate the content of long reading texts.(NAQAAE, 2009, pp. 21-23)

Moreover the general aims for TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language) in the preparatory cycle, as stated by the Ministry of Education reveals that learners are expected to develop the ability to extract

information from a listening or reading text or through different forms of mass media, improve the skills of logical and critical thinking, participate positively in dialogue and to respect the opinions of others e.g. through debate and discussion and the exploration of concepts. Students are expected to acquire a set of learning strategies e.g. problem solving, discovery-learning, creative thinking and critical reading. They are also expected to develop moral and social values by encouraging attitudes of tolerance, cooperation and team work. (Directives for general preparatory school teachers, 2009/2010, p.86)

1.2 Context of the problem

Several studies have been implemented in Egypt to investigate students' reading skills such as Amer's (2009) in which the researcher tried group work with reading activities and found it very effective. Also, Abohadid (2003, pp. 108-109) investigated developing students' higher order comprehension skills through free reading. She found that practical implications of the free reading in public libraries develops higher order skills. Also, Ali (1999) suggested that the reading materials used in literature circles develop students' comprehension "in terms of predictions, connections and activation of prior knowledge"(Ali, 1999 cited in Abohadid, 2003, p.26) Other studies such as El-Didi (2001), Abdelmoaty (2002) and Abouhadid (2002) emphasized that EFL reading comprehension skills are neglected in Egyptian classes. They also highlighted the need for adopting better teaching strategies to enhance EFL learner's reading skills.

Similarly, Ibrahim (2007, p.5) mentioned that there was a low level of reading comprehension among students at the second year of preparatory governmental schools. She added that students are not proficient in reading, are poor readers and consequently are poor

comprehenders. Furthermore, in Iran, Sharifian (2005) found that there is a significant correlation between the ability to determine fact and opinion, and the general reading comprehension skill. Critical reading skills require deep understanding. Also, Bedee (2010) added that teachers have begun to use literature circles within their classrooms, but some teachers are still apprehensive because they do not know whether they are as beneficial as the traditional reading instruction/discussion strategies that they are already using. Hence, more empirical studies are needed to investigate the effectiveness of reading/ literature circles in classrooms, and specially in EFL classrooms. The above mentioned studies pave the way to this study to be tried here in Egypt.

To depict the relation between reading and social skills, some researches were consulted such as Raymond (2008), who suggests that reading boosts social skills and empathy. She adds that someone who reads a lot of narrative may gain more insight into other people's behavior and know how to deal adequately with their expected behavior, actions and reactions. Similarly, Stanford researchers, Miles and Stipek (2006) found that children who are poor readers in their early years of schools are assessed by their teachers as more aggressive later on. In addition, the study found that students who have good social skills are more likely to be good readers. Miles and Stipek's study shows that the social and academic domains of school life are interconnected." This is assured by Leffert, Brady and Siperstein (2009) who see that students at all age levels need to be taught social skills. They see that competence at managing the social situations that arise in the classroom is often a prerequisite. It is a critical ingredient for making academic progress. Moreover, they confirm that infusing a social skills dimension into the language arts curriculum stimulates greater collaboration among

students.(pp.1-10)

Though reading boosts social skills and empathy, Johns, Crowley and Guetzloe (2005) mention that it is not necessarily that students know the appropriate behavior in any given situation by themselves. They assure that it is the teacher's responsibility to instruct students what appropriate behavior looks like. Coie (2004) sees that when students are rejected by their peers and lack skills to establish and maintain positive relationships, they tend to be troublemakers and resist teacher's authority. Coie confirms that those students have deficits in knowledge of strategies to resolve conflict are unable to repair damaged relationships. He warns that this may develop into a negative cycle of social interactions. Similarly, Clarke and Holwadel (2007, pp.20-29) wondered why their students still struggled to have positive social interactions during book discussions. They stated that "Book discussions often deteriorated into tension filled discussions marred by class inequities, bullying, name-calling, kicking, and threats." The answer may lie in the fact that they do not pay enough attention to their students' social skills. Similarly, Awbrey, Longo, Lynd and Payne (2008) focused on the lack of their students' proper social skills. They spent the allocated time for the curriculum on discipline and the instruction of social skills.

In the Egyptian context, there are some studies which investigated social skillssuch as Basta (2001) and Aboulaila (2002) who found that parents and educators maltreatment of children lead to their misbehaving and resistance. According to Salha (2007, p.4) Misbehaving is one side of the lack of social skills. Misbehaving of children who are maltreated can be seen at school when those school children are aggressive, refuse to abide by regulations, cause chaos, resist and refuse to cooperate with their mates. Basta (2011,p.15) mentioned that behavioral problems increase

when students have weak ties with their teachers. This happens when students are not allowed to talk about themselves or express their opinions. Students also misbehave when they do not participate in discussions or ask personal questions. She confirms that when students are given opportunity to participate in and comment on topics being discussed in classrooms this lessens troubles, aggression and bad-behaving. Also, Wahba (2010) found that when adolescents lack social skills they tend to be lonely and isolate themselves from others. Wahba examined 265 students in preparatory and secondary Egyptian schools and concluded that when adolescents are aware of and use social skills, their loneliness symptoms decrease. In the same line, Mohamed (2013,p.7) found that verbal and nonverbal violence is a phenomenon between preparatory students.

It is really important to pay attention to preparatory students' social skills. Lacking proper social skills may lead to improper sequences on preparatory students. To find an explanation for students' undesired behaviors Brodeskiand Hembrough (2007) stated the following reasons :

- Lack of social skills instruction,
- Inability to resolve conflict independently,
- Limited opportunities to practice social skills, and
- Exposure to violent and inappropriate behaviors

Brodeski and Hembrough considered the lack of teaching social skills at schools, students' inability to resolve conflicts by themselves and the exposure to violent behaviors and inappropriate behaviors among students to be the reasons for students' undesired behaviors.

Besides the above mentioned reasons for showing lack of appropriate social skills, Costley (2012) adds that parents' focus has

turned from positive behavior skills and character building skills to content area instruction and test scores. He comments that society has changed drastically throughout history. Students twenty years ago behaved differently than the students of today. Students do not seem to be getting the same core, moral, and character values that were previously taught by the parents. Therefore it has been left up to the schools to fill in the gap. Costley also claims that parents do not care about their children's morals and values as they used to be twenty years ago. Costley's claim is reflected in a meeting with a parent held by the researcher of the present study, concerning the negative behavior of a student, the parent assured that he is more concerned the academic performance of his son rather than with the student's improved behavior and social skills. (See Appendix A)

It can be inferred from the above mentioned studies that depriving students from reading skills can result in violence and crime as mentioned in the Reading at risk report. There is a demand to encourage Egyptian preparatory students to read and to use critical reading skills to be able to understand, comment, analyze and judge what they read. Students' social skills need attention to be paid to. Those skills need to be developed and improved. Akasha and Abdel Meguid (2012) see that even gifted students who excel their mates in subject matters are still in need of improving their social skills.

1.3 Pilot Study

To give a rationale for this study, a pilot study was conducted in October 2009 at Sohag Experimental Preparatory Language School. The pilot study aimed at investigating whether preparatory students read English texts outside their course books in their free time or not, and if they do so what type of books they prefer to read and how they read them.