Pedagogical Practices in Teaching Reading Comprehension: A Case Study of Three EFL Teachers in a Secondary School in Ethiopia

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Abstract

Various studies investigating psychological variables associated with reading comprehension are currently available. However, there has been little linguistic research conducted to examine the pedagogical practices of teachers in teaching reading comprehension of EFL Secondary Schools, Ethiopia. The present study was conducted to fill the research gap by examining the current practices of teachers in teaching reading and how the teachers handle and organize reading comprehension. This study employed a descriptive and interpretive case study design that was analyzed through qualitative methods. The data was collected from observations of the most experienced EFL teachers' best representative comprehension classes and interviews with these teachers at Fasilo Secondary School, Ethiopia. The observation results of a corpus of lessons and interviews with teachers about their work were analyzed using an evaluative-interpretative paradigm. The results of this research revealed two-stranded themes. First, this study revealed that all the teachers exhibited similar practices of teaching reading comprehension, such as, giving

assignments and expecting correct responses and a brief description of the topic. It also revealed that the teachers neither focused on the content nor showed any attention to constructing meaning of the content in the text. It is recommended that teachers need to teach reading comprehension in a systematic way to help students be equipped strategies with improving their reading comprehension.

Keywords: reading to learn, instructional practices, reading strategies, EFL, comprehension

Introduction

Reading is central to learning and the ultimate goal of teaching reading is reading comprehension, a critical proficiency that has a considerable effect on the entire life of the learner. It is an established fact that reading skill has a paramount importance in English as a foreign language context where students have limited access to learn the language. Reading can enhance not only language proficiency but also other content related learning, and it helps to gain an understanding of the world, enabling the students to think about and react to what they read (Huang et al, 2009; Lien, 2011). On the other hand, many EFL/ESL students often face difficulty in understanding academic literature in their fields of studies as they join university education underprepared for the reading demands placed on them, and they lack the literacy skills needed to understand highly sophisticated information, synthesize main ideas across texts, and make meaning when reading for academic purposes (Dreyer & Nel, 2003; Faggella-Luby, Ware & Capozzoli, 2009; Ippolito, Steele & Samson, 2008).

Reports from secondary school teachers, experts, and the larger educational community suggest that too many students have a limited ability to understand reading texts. Further, local research has continued to show that the reading ability of Ethiopian secondary school students is deteriorating over time (Eshetie, 2010; Jha, 2014; Medihanit, 2010). Similarly, despite many years of English being taught as a subject at primary and secondary schools, students have continued to fail in their academics in every level, especially in reading

(The Institute of International Education (ISE), 2012; National Agency for Examinations (NAE), 2010; USAID, 2014), which implies an urgent need to improve their reading proficiency.

Reading comprehension research has produced detailed and valuable information regarding the development of reading comprehension skills through modeling and guided practice of reading strategies until students eventually use these strategies independently (Huang & Nisbet, 2012; Liang & Dole, 2006; McNamara & Magliano, 2009). These higher order skills are meta-cognitive strategies, namely planning, monitoring or regulating, and evaluating (Schraw, Crippen, & Hartley, 2006). Planning involves identification and selection of appropriate strategies and allocation of resources, and can include goal setting, activating background knowledge, and budgeting time. Monitoring or regulating involves attending to and being aware of comprehension and task performance and can include self-testing. Finally, evaluation is defined as appraising the products and regulatory processes of one's learning, and includes revisiting and revising one's goals (Schraw et al., 2006).

Due to various factors, however, translating the empirical evidence into practice is still an ongoing challenge. While teaching trends are usually related to reading achievement, research has continued to report that reading instruction was based on only some skills such as identifying words, finding main ideas, identifying cause and effect relationships, comparing and contrasting, and sequencing in isolation. The teacher tells students to read the text on their own and then, students are directed to identify the main idea and draw inferences from the information given (Durkin, 1978; Collins & Gillies, 2010; USAID, 2014). The researcher believes that all these problems will be alleviated if teachers are genuinely exploiting comprehension instruction properly.

This study rests on the belief that two –stranded data currently prevalent at all Ethiopian educational levels including universities are indicators for the critical students' reading problems that need extra attention. The first component of data comes from the researcher's experience as a primary and secondary school English teacher and a university lecturer. The second data is based on the research evidence and a number of complaints from the larger literacy community both

from within schools and universities in the country and the larger public, all of which asserted that reading is the most problematic for students, yet it is the most important skill in the Ethiopian education system. Therefore, this study was designed to understand the pedagogical practices of EFL high school teachers in teaching reading comprehension in an attempt to bridge this gap.

Reading plays a vital role for the academic success of students, but the local research reviewed in this study has offered an extremely strong support for the consequence of wrong teaching practices of reading that resulted in students' underachievement in their reading ability (Collins & Gillies, 2010; USAID, 2014). The present practice of teaching reading comprehension in Ethiopia supports the view that students are not rightly taught to use their meta-cognitive reading strategies in reading a text. As a result, the English proficiency of students in secondary schools is deteriorating over time. The National Agency for Examinations (NAE), 2010) revealed that in both the 10 and 12 grades, the mean score for English was below the minimum requirement. The percentages achieving 50% and above were only 17.8% for grade 10, and 25.9% for grade 12. Similarly, the reading proficiency level of the students and the academic expectation of the students in the curriculum does not match (Abiy, 2012; Eshetie, 2010).

Given the scarcity of studies that examined how EFL teachers handle reading comprehension in actual classrooms with Ethiopian secondary school students, the present study has focused on understanding a great deal about the teaching trends of teachers because of the potential of effective teaching practices for enhancing students' reading proficiency. As for the significance of the research, this study was presumably considered the best alternative with the potential of helping students improve reading comprehension. Hence, the results of this study could help to conceptualize, plan and implement reading instructions, or it is vital to consider the possible consequences of not understanding how teachers organize the actual reading classes on the reading achievement of their students.

On the whole, in light of empirical data on the students' poor reading proficiency and the current trends of reading comprehension instruction in Ethiopia, this study was conducted to start with improving the reading literacy of the students and enhance their

reading comprehension. The researcher believes that there is a huge gap between what has been suggested as effective teaching reading in the literature and the current reading instructional practices, which warrants further study in the area, and this explanatory research, was therefore, designed to respond to this need. For the attainment of these objectives, the following research questions were formulated.

1. How do teachers handle reading comprehension in the actual classroom?
2. How is reading comprehension organized in an EFL classroom context?

Literature Review

Reading comprehension

The impetus for this study stems from the amalgamation of the central themes of the bottom-up (Gough, 1972), the top-down (Goodman, 1967) and the interactive (Stanovich, 1980) models of reading. These reading models are usually used as a foundation for the conceptual framework of researchers in the field of educational psychology and reading. The concept of reading involves the construction of meaning in transaction with texts, in which Hammerberg (2004) stresses, "... the construction of meaning is an interactive process, more so than merely decoding the words, saying them aloud in your head, and assuming comprehension 'happens' when the words are heard" (p. 650). This 'meaning construction' (product) requires the reader to interact with the text to comprehend it (process), which implicates that the process and product of reading are always interwoven. A focus solely on processes limits our ability to determine potential impacts of textual, reader, and task factors on reading performance.

The early reading process (Learning to read) includes developing awareness of letters, identifying the alphabet, syllables, and phonemes and learning spelling patterns and words. The bottom up model emphasizes understanding linguistic units and the lower-level processing skills, such as knowledge of vocabulary more than other models do. Thus, the bottom up model does not address the reading process that requires the reader to develop their schemata. According to Munoz (2010), finding or underlining examples of tenses or grammar

structures, scanning a text for specific information, making a timeline of the events in the text, finding synonyms or definitions of words in bold are reading activities used in this approach. Variables including grammar, vocabulary and syntax are the main focus of bottom-up theories and models. In short, bottom-up reading is the mechanical, word-driven process in which readers move from lower-level processes, (e.g., interpreting graphic symbols) to higher-level processes (e.g., assigning meaning to words) (Stanovich, 1980). Because reading is the gateway skill to further learning, children who cannot read proficiently seldom catch up academically and often fail to graduate on time from high school or drop out altogether (Center for Public Education, 2015).

On the other hand, reading to learn is a reading activity beyond learning to read that is employed by the reader to help him/her understand a text better. Introduced by Goodman (1967), the top-down model of reading views reading as a psycholinguistic guessing game. The theoretical assumption of this model rests in the belief that readers can improve reading comprehension by activating their own schemata. They then use their vocabulary knowledge in decoding words in the text to confirm, disconfirm, or modify previous expectations (Aebersold & Field, 1997). Hashem (2009) pointed out that the top-down model focuses on some reading skills, such as prediction, inferences, and content guessing. Unlike the bottom-up model, in this model, texts have no stand-alone meaning. It is the reader who reconstructs the meaning of the text by fitting it into his prior knowledge. Contrary to the bottom up model of reading, which emphasized breaking the reading process down into isolated pieces, the conceptual framework of the top-down model was based on a premise of the reading process.

Thus, reading to learn is essential because the learner needs to develop strategies, such as identifying main ideas, interpreting and inferring ideas from a text necessary to deal with complex academic challenges, and hence these reading skills need to be emphasized.

The interactive reading model explains that the bottom up and top-down models of reading compensate each other for effective reading processes. Carrel1 (1987) and Stanovich (1980) posit that when a reader lacks the appropriate content schema for a certain text, he/she will rely more heavily on bottom-up processes to

compensate for a lack of necessary background knowledge. The opposite could be true about some readers who lack the bottom-up processes necessary to comprehend a text. The proponents of the interactive model approach advocate that having automatic recognition skills will free the reader's mind to make connections between the parts of the text, interpret the text more accurately, and comprehend what is being read. Such interaction between high-level and low-level processes seems to take place simultaneously.

It can be argued that bottom-up processes play the major role for effective reading comprehension as learning to read is a foundation for the latter parts of the reader's life and students who do not show better performance at this initial stage of reading face many problems latter in the reading to learn. Still, the top-down model is of great importance as it acknowledges the role of social context that can fully explain the process of reading, and because the model propagates the need for social interaction between a teacher and students, including scaffolding, students and students. Thus, it would be a mistake to understate the pedagogical implications of the interactive model for effective reading instruction as research consistently revealed that bottom-up and top-down processes compensate for each other (Carrel, 1987).

The Interactive Model rests on the assumption that neither bottom-up nor top-down models can by themselves describe the reading process, indicating the need to have an interaction between bottom-up and top-down processes. Stanovich (1980) suggests that poor readers tend to resort to high-level processes more often than skilled or fluent readers. The use of top-down processes seems to compensate for poor readers' lack of recognition skills or use of bottom-up processes. Overall, the comparison analysis of the three models indicates that EFL teachers need to teach reading comprehension in light of the basic premises of these models to their students so that they can make sense of texts. Therefore, the researcher takes the position that EFL teachers need to take feasible elements related to reading instruction from the bottom up, top down, and interactive models of reading which indicate that the three levels of interactions in the reading processes are essential combinations for effective reading.

Several studies and the cognitive Psychology have consistently revealed the kinds of effective instructional procedures and their implementation to foster reading proficiency. Despite the fact that translating the empirical evidence into practice is still an ongoing challenge; the reading theories that have emerged in the last two decades have enlightened our understanding of the concept of reading comprehension and the factors that affect reading comprehension. Reading comprehension research has also produced detailed and valuable information regarding the development of reading comprehension skills and the factors that are influenced by these skills (McNamara & Magliano, 2009). Reading requires the reader to deliberately interact with a text to construct meaning, and the ultimate goal of this complex process is reading comprehension. The word" deliberately" here is important in that the reader can comprehend a text only if they intentionally use their maximum effort to achieve understanding.

Theoretical framework of the study

The theory of meta-cognition, which was founded by Flavell (1976) in cognitive psychology, primarily emphasized the development of meta-cognitive awareness and cognitive knowledge of readers. Based on this model, one component of meta-cognition is meta-cognitive knowledge and meta-cognitive experiences, and the second component that occurs before, during, and after reading is called meta-cognitive experiences. Claros (2008) stated that cognitive theorists conceived language learning as a cognitive and individual process in which knowledge is constructed as the learner is exposed to comprehensible input, and is given opportunities to both, negotiate meaning and receive negative feedback.

The socio-cultural theory theorizes the mind as a basic structure to develop concepts and acquire language, and assumes that interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Regarding this, Vygotysky (1978) considers learning as a social process that is enhanced by active interaction. Particularly, the socio-cultural theory has influenced the second and foreign language pedagogy because, based on the premise of this theory, teachers can transfer higher order meta-cognitive reading strategies to their students by

scaffolding, modeling and thinking aloud methods. Vygotsky (1978) stresses that the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (inter-psychological) and inside the child (intra-psychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between formations of concepts and individuals. The concept of the zone of proximal development that highlights the need for social interaction between a more able person and a less competent person on a task is also pivotal in learning and teaching a second or foreign language setting.

A growing number of recent studies have consistently provided ample evidence of the relationship between the use of reading strategies and student academic achievement (Glaser & Brunstein, 2007; Patrick et al., 2007; Torrance et al., 2007). Specifically, research has revealed important findings related to enhancing reading autonomy with explicit modeling strategy instruction (Akkakoson & Setobol, 2009; Huang et al., 2009). Similarly, Alhaqbani and Riazi (2012) revealed that the shift from learning to read (emphasizing the importance of decoding skills) to reading to learn, which includes designing, incorporating and teaching reading strategies to improve reading comprehension is vitally important to improve reading comprehension. Other studies have also provided additional insights into many aspects of the reading process related to training students to be strategic readers, which finally helps them create self-regulative attitude toward the path of academic achievement (Cubukcu, 2008; Karbalaei, 2010; Shokrpour & Fotovatian, 2009; Zhang & Wu, 2009).

Research has consistently revealed core lesson components that make instruction more effective in reading classrooms (Bos & Vaughn, 2006; as cited in Denton et al, 2007). It has also identified elements of effective instruction, such as explicit instruction, targeted instruction, time on task, quick pacing of lessons, positive feedback, corrective feedback, and student motivation (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2002). Consequentially, teachers should plan instruction so that students have ample practice applying their new skills and strategies in a variety of settings, and they can also lead discussions to make students aware of how they can use their new skills and strategies in other classes

(Denton, Bryan, Wexler, Reed & Vaughn, 2007). Durkin (1978) states the use of strategies and problem solving skills and experiences in the process of reading as "the essence of reading". In the last three decades, instructional research on reading comprehension has been guided by the conceptualization of comprehension as a problem-solving process.

In light of this conceptual framework, this study was conducted to understand the implementation of instructional practices within reading comprehension classrooms. A recent research-validated instructional practice, strategic instruction was specifically reviewed as a benchmark to evaluate teachers' instructional practices and hence provide a glimpse of understanding and additional insight into this study. The goal of strategic instruction is to provide explicit instruction and practice in a set of strategies that will enable readers to be successful in their content area classes (Denton et al, 2007).

Methods

Participants

The participants of this study were three EFL teachers at Fasilo Secondary School, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. The sample teachers were selected on the following criteria. He or she must be one who took CPD (Continuous Professional Development), an informal training and experience sharing, which currently receives much attention in Ethiopia. Moreover, he or she must be one of the most experienced teachers in teaching English. In this way, participants in the research were the three most experienced EFL teachers who have an average of 20 years of teaching experience in the school. Teacher recruitment efforts began by targeting 9th grade teachers who were considered to be skillful teachers of reading comprehension, and grade 9 was selected on the assumption that more comprehension instruction may be offered there than in primary grades. Further, the profile of grade 9 English teachers when the present study was conducted showed that these teachers were qualified as having Bachelors of Education in TEFL and were more experienced than grade 10 English teachers.

There were 4 female and 12 male teachers who were currently teaching English as a foreign language, out of which 3 males were selected, for they had more than 20 years of teaching experiences. Six

of the sixteen school teachers had a Bachelor's degree in art (BA) and the remaining 10 teachers had bachelor's degree in education (BED). Interestingly, each of the three participants of this study had a bachelor's degree in education, a degree emphasized in Ethiopia, for it is concerned with the study of teaching methods.

Research setting

This study was conducted in the second semester of 2017 academic year at Fasilo Secondary School, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. A general English course that incorporates the four language skills, speaking, listening, writing, and reading is offered every day (from Monday to Friday). Vocabulary and grammar lessons are also integrated in the lessons. The first section of all the lessons in each chapter is reading, which is followed by vocabulary, speaking, listening, and finally writing. Each English period is 50 minutes a day and lasts for two semesters a year. Teachers are required to have a bachelor of degree in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language). It is also important to note that English is considered a compulsory subject for university entrance. Teachers have to face large number of students ranging from 50 to 70 students in a class. From the researcher's several years of teaching experience in Ethiopian high schools, it is evident from complaints from high school teachers and the larger public that many students have a low level of reading comprehension. Further, the great majority of the students in government secondary schools in Ethiopia lack basic reading skills in English. Overall, the English language skills of the students in general and the reading skill of many of the students in particular in secondary schools is low and they are both slow readers and they do not comprehend what they read.

Research Design

As the major purpose of this research was to examine how EFL teachers organize and handle reading comprehension, a descriptive and interpretive case study that was analyzed through qualitative methods was designed to help understand the current pedagogical practices of teaching reading in the teachers' best representative reading classes. This study employed case study for the following reasons. First, it could help the researcher collect the rich and genuine practical teaching

experience of classroom teachers. This was the most useful pedagogical tool to contextualize the theoretical concepts, and hence bridge the gap between theory and practice as teaching practice is a social phenomenon that requires an in-depth study in real life settings (Yin, 2009). Following the qualitative approach, data was collected through individual teacher interviews and classroom observations in an Ethiopian high school and the results were analyzed using an evaluative-interpretative paradigm. The analysis and interpretations were guided by perspectives derived from the two main dimensions of the conceptual framework and these were: Teachers' pedagogical practices in reading comprehension classrooms and its importance in the lives of students and reading comprehension classroom organization in an EFL context.

Research procedures

The teachers who participated in the study were asked to participate in a range of observation and interviews aimed at documenting and understanding their teaching of reading comprehension. In conversations with participants I explained that the purpose of the study was to understand the actual practice of reading comprehension, and how classrooms are organized in comprehension classes more fully. Participants in the study were asked to suggest some lessons that they considered representative of their teaching of reading comprehension, and they were asked their willingness to have their comprehension classes observed.

Participants in the study agreed to nominate the three lessons that they considered representative of their teaching of reading comprehension. Teachers were observed three times, in three-day chunks over a 12-week period, using three reading passages for in class tasks out of a total of five reading passages and a number of reading tasks provided throughout the semester. It is out of these reading passages that the selected teachers nominated their three best reading comprehension lessons. After each observation, teachers were interviewed about the lesson in an attempt to understand the instructional decisions and their preparation during the lesson enactment.

Data collection

Two research tools were used to collect data necessary for this study: teachers' interviews with the three most experienced EFL teachers who had an average of 20 years of teaching experience in the school and classroom observations of some lessons that the teachers considered representative of their best teaching practices of reading comprehension. To help obtain the data and analyze the findings of this study, an observation checklist was also used.

Data analysis

The researcher developed a theoretical framework from the literature consisting of reading comprehension theories that guide the study and form a basis to explore classroom practices, and the organizational patterns of EFL reading comprehension instruction. The theories could help clarify pedagogical concepts about the teaching of reading comprehension, and hence analyze the data obtained from both classroom observations and the teachers' interviews accordingly.

Having reviewed the literature pertaining to effective instructional practices, the researcher organized the observation data about the lessons. The instructional moments were selected to help evaluate the corpus of 9 teacher-nominated lessons that were illustrative of the three teaching practices identified. The interview data from these participants was used to add some insight into this study and provide further analysis.

Since the unstructured interview questions were based on the teachers' observed classroom instructions, they were used to prompt teachers for further discussion about their practices and to analyze for the reasons they chose some activities when they were being observed, and hence were used to corroborate the data obtained from the observations. Accordingly, the observation results obtained from the corpus of 9 teacher-nominated lessons were organized, categorized and analyzed into three major themes that emerged in this study. The results of transcription of the unstructured interviews were subsequently triangulated and interpreted to draw conclusions. On the whole, the data obtained from observations of the reading classrooms and the results of teachers' interview were analyzed to understand and

accurately represent teachers' experiences as well as their interpretations of those experiences in a particular setting (Duff, 2008).

Results and Discussions

The major purposes of this study were to understand how reading comprehension is organized in an EFL classroom and examine how teachers handle reading comprehension in the actual classroom. Thus, the data gathering tools used for this study provide a broad range of salient practices concerning the actual reading comprehension teaching practices of teachers in their nominated lessons. While the data mainly obtained from classroom observations reported two-stranded teaching practices, the interview result was aimed at providing additional insight on what it means for the selected teachers when they teach reading comprehension the way they do, and hence bolstering the validity of the data obtained from the corpus of nominated lessons.

Theme 1: Brief description on the topic, giving assignments and expecting correct responses

Few lessons demonstrate a 'seemingly' comprehension instruction, but in general terms, no genuine comprehension instruction was observed. Comprehension assessment, carried out for the most part through interrogation, was common. Checking whether students' answers were right or wrong was the big concern. Comprehension strategy instruction has received much attention in the past two decades, and has played a central role in the field of reading comprehension. Contrary to this fact, data from the majority of the teachers' nominated reading comprehension lessons showed that teachers evaluate their students' reading comprehension abilities rather than implementing strategy instruction. Across the lesson corpus, 'mentioning' which was immediately followed by 'questioning' were the techniques that received much attention in the nominated lessons. The following samples were taken from actual classroom reading comprehension instructions and these typical methods were treated as the end goal of reading comprehension instruction rather than as a means to an end. The following samples were taken from the teachers' nominated best lessons collected in this study.

Samuel's Reading Comprehension Classroom

A brief description of the three days of observations; therefore, will provide a fair representation of the data that demonstrates how the teacher spent his time during reading comprehension instruction. To begin with, this teacher clearly gave exercises, and focused on briefing about the topic of the reading section. It was in his classroom that the first of many examples of "explaining" (as opposed to instructing) was observed in which five minutes of his time went to "mentioning" the most important themes of the lesson, followed by another five minutes for "inferring" the meaning of new words and concepts, then quickly "paraphrasing" questions in the form of activities. The topic of the reading section was *"How Lion and Warthog became enemies"* (from the current grade 9 Student textbook of Ethiopia) in which this teacher exhaustively discussed the story provided in the text. In conversations with Mr. Samuel about his teaching, I asked him to explain why he focused on briefing about the topic of the reading section and spent much of the time on explaining, mentioning, and paraphrasing the reading selection. Mr. Samuel noted:

> *I like my students to be able to understand anything in the text. I know that I have to make things clear before the students begin reading the reading passage. This is because, in my teaching experience, I realized that most of my students expect me to do so.*

Based on the observations, it can be said, therefore, that the teacher did little attempt to teach comprehension because he was busy in asking and doing questions in the textbook. This observation was reminiscent of the study of Durkin (1978) who reported that teachers were observed to be assignment-givers, and comprehension evaluators (The focus was to make the topic clear and help learners understand the text. Thus, it can be argued that this teacher devoted very little time in effective reading instruction. The observed teacher spent considerable time in assessing students' ability to do assignments rather than teaching the students strategies that help them comprehend a text. The teacher's time allotment on discussing what had been read and giving and getting assignments done accounted for more than the total period. Given this observation, expecting reading

achievement in such kinds of teaching practices is rather inappropriate as it is in sharp contrast with the growing number of recent studies that have consistently provided ample evidence of teaching reading strategies for student academic achievement (Glaser & Brunstein, 2007; Patrick et al., 2007; Torrance et al., 2007).

In all the observed classrooms, completing assignments and getting right answers seemed much more significant to the teacher than concerns like: Am I using the right strategy that can contribute to reading ability? Do students understand this? The lack of attention to the first concern was observed because a large number of assignments had little or no significance in reading improvement. Therefore, it is important for the teacher to provide temporary support, or "scaffolding," to help the student move toward independent application of strategies and skills, and the long-term goals of maintenance over time, and generalization to related reading situations (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2007; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001).

Questions and Comprehension Instruction in Samuel's Classrooms

Comprehension and question-asking are two interlinked elements of reading, so it is imperative to mention some of the questions observed in the teacher's classrooms. Barell (2003) suggests that a good question helps to promote curiosity and student engagement, and reflects a genuine desire to find out, a deep feeling for wanting to know more than we already do. The feature and scope of questioning will have two pedagogical implications. First, if the teacher intends to improve students' reading comprehension potentials and uses questioning and answering, obviously this type of questioning strategy is an appropriate tool for comprehension instruction. On the contrary, if the teacher merely asks questions but has nothing to do with the students' answers except to say the students were 'right' or ''wrong', this questioning is used to assess their comprehension. In other words, while the former technique helps the students to advance their comprehension abilities, the teacher used the latter purpose of questioning (to learn whether they comprehended the text or not).

The teacher ordered students to read the text and he did the questions in the text book. Sporadically, however, what was read was

discussed with more emphasis on discussing the meaning of words and references. He spent more time introducing technical terms and jargon that are difficult; and by posing questions designed both to motivate and to guide the reading. Learning how to answer questions is indispensable for enhancing reading skills, deepening comprehension, and clarifying thoughts, increasing vocabulary, and enlarging the reader's schema about the world (Barell, 2003).

Concomitant with the considerable focus on questioning strategy is the fact that no attention was given to students to generate their own questions. This lack of commitment on the teacher's side is not pedagogically significant as generating questions helps the students determine a purpose for reading and guides them towards identifying the most important information and it requires them to construct answers as they read (Andre & Anderson, 1979). Let us now see the actual classroom practices of Samuel's reading comprehension lesson and how it was organized. The teacher read the questions in the textbook and nominated students to give answers to the questions one by one.

Bekele's Reading Comprehension Classroom

While the reading period of the second teacher was closely similar to what was observed in the first teacher's classrooms, what took place when he began teaching turned out to be an even better predictor of what was to come next. This teacher asked students to work in groups and with the entire class, but it was often difficult for him to organize the lesson partly due to the large class size. It was also apparent that this teacher needed to get assignments done in the first classroom and in all others as well. After skimming over several topics, this teacher found grammar at the end. Instead of clarifying what he said, he ordered students to do the "grammar" although he knew that the language item was new to them. Unlike the other teachers, this teacher frequently posed questions and asked students to generate questions. Given his commitment in providing his students an opportunity for generating questions, the teacher's practice can be taken as a good predictor of effective instruction. In connection, recent research has revealed that students who are taught to generate questions while

reading and after reading outperform those who receive no training (Kamalizad & Jalilzadehb, 2011).

The most important questioning strategy employed by this teacher was that he posed some questions before reading. This is still important because such kinds of questioning techniques have the potential to amplify what the reading text is all about. Barell (2003) proposes that questions like "What do you know? How do they know?" can be used as a means of probing deeper, and argues that challenging students by letting them know what the classroom expectations are that they communicate their thinking rather than providing one or two-word answers. Another more important aspect in Bekele's comprehension instruction was that students were discussing the reading passages in small groups led by him. Given the emphasis on generating questions strategy, followed by group discussion led by the teacher, the teacher's instruction shows that there are plenty of benefits in using this strategy for it helps readers develop their comprehension. According to Kamil (2004), cooperative or collaborative learning can be considered both a strategy and a social organization that fosters learning. Next, let us continue exploring the actual classroom practices of Bekele's reading comprehension lesson and how it was organized.

The teacher wrote the questions provided on the blackboard and nominated some students to give answers to the questions one by one. Although it was not clear why he wrote the questions on the board, it may be because of the scarcity of students' text. Then, he asked students to work in pairs and answer the questions written on the board. The teacher said something in order to learn whether what was read was comprehended. An interesting fact about this teacher was that he helped one or more students with comprehension tasks and provided clear instructions on how to do comprehension activities to his students. Finally, he began doing the questions with the students. One of the most significant practices of this teacher was that he stressed highly cognitive and critical thinking questions. When I asked him why he preferred such kinds of questions, he said:

> *These kinds of questions are important in making our students think critically, generate more ideas, and create more opportunities to use the language. It is also vital for the teacher as*

it gives ample opportunity to understand learner progress and assess their reading comprehension proficiency according to their reading achievement.

The fact that this teacher employed questioning strategy that help students develop higher order thinking skills, such as planning, monitoring or regulating, and evaluating (Schraw, Crippen, & Hartley, 2006) indicate that this teacher incorporated strategy teaching in his reading comprehension classes, which finally help for their academic achievement Cubukcu, 2008; Karbalaei, 2010; Shokrpour & Fotovatian, 2009; Zhang & Wu, 2009).

Mudesir's Reading Comprehension Lesson

This class was the first class the researcher his observed. While the reading period of the first teacher was similar to what was observed in the third teacher's classrooms, this teacher: however, seemed to be more enthusiastic in helping students. Nevertheless, much of his focus was in assessing students' comprehension. He instructed his students to open a certain page where the reading passage was given, and asked them to read and answer as quickly as possible. Similar to the second teacher, in this teacher's classrooms, too there was a whole class discussion after each student read. This time the focus was doing exercises from the textbook, and then the teacher corrected their papers.

The assignment which was in the student textbook listed a number of exercises (all taken directly from   the textbook entitled: *"The World in Danger").* The students were asked to do it immediately. After they listened to their teacher, the students began reading and discussing the passage given. The task asked students to answer the questions given after reading the text. This kind of instruction has several adverse effects. First, students do not practice using their reading strategy so that their comprehension processing ability will not develop. Second, they will develop a habit of rushing to the answer in every comprehension classes.

This teacher was clearly an assignment giver, not a reading comprehension teacher. It was in his classroom that the first of many examples of "mentioning" (as opposed to instructing) was seen. After he

wrote questions on the black board, he spent some time in instructing the students to read and answer. This short, unexplained instruction was followed by "monitoring" which the teacher himself was doing instead of scaffolding what each student had to do. Although the focus on having assignments done was also apparent in all of the observed classrooms of the other two teachers, this teacher became more noticeable in that he asked his students to do what immediately the reading classes began without any clarification and intermittently, what was read was discussed. Let us now see the actual classroom practices of Mudesir's reading comprehension lesson and how it was organized.

Similar to the other two teachers, this teacher wrote questions on the blackboard and told students to do the questions individually. Again, like his colleagues, he wrote the questions on the board. Then, he asked students to work in pairs and answer the questions written on the board. Most of this teacher's activities in the comprehension classes seemed to be highly monitoring, and assessing than instructing students in the necessary skills to help them comprehend a text. When asked, Mr. Mudesir explained:

> *Assessing is very important strategy to the students because it helps them understand the main points stated in the passage and helps the teacher to evaluate the learner progress. It is also because it helps students to check their reading comprehension.*

This teacher's grave concern in a teacher dominant role of assessing and evaluating students' comprehension for better learning revealed in this study contradicts the current pedagogy that pinpoints the necessity of student engagement and interaction for learner progress. The result of this study, therefore, is reminiscent of the findings of a plethora of research that previously reported the consequences of wrong teaching practices of reading that resulted in students' underachievement in their reading ability (Collins & Gillies, 2010; USAID, 2014).

Theme 2: Getting students to focus on answering questions and covering the subject in time

The findings from this study demonstrated that teachers focused neither on the content nor showed any attention to constructing meaning of the content in the text. In ideal comprehension classrooms, many scholars such as McKeown (2009) suggest that teachers need to focus on practicing strategy instruction and content instruction in balance. The most important difference between the strategy and content lesson in reading comprehension can be what the teacher might pose to students during reading. While the teacher might focus on a strategy lesson by having students interact with the text applying strategies, in the content focused lesson, the teacher can focus on helping students grasp important ideas and events in the text and on how they were connected. In light of this concept as a benchmark, let us see the teachers' teaching practices in relation to their focus of attention on: content or strategy teaching.

Learning Content in Bekele's Classroom

The opportunities provided by this teacher to his students to become good readers who are able to use strategies stands as separate from opportunities to learn specific content. However, relatively little attention was paid to strategy instruction in the course of reading comprehension instruction. Over the course of the lesson, the students do not read a paragraph, for there are only few copies of the text. Bekele's students were reading the title: "Africa", three African countries in focus. The idea that reading comprehension is, in fact, about learning content but is instead not about learning strategies is at the center of Bekele's beliefs in reading comprehension instruction. In other words, he extensively focused on teaching his students to master facts and stories in the passage. He explains:

> *I think that it is better to teach reading techniques. But, if you're just focusing on reading techniques, it should be through explanation and discussion; through this they can learn strategies but not in isolation of the teacher instruction. When I want them to learn the reading techniques, the process is always in learning content and learning strategies are always interrelated.*

The strict control of the reading comprehension classes on teaching students to master facts and stories in the passage may be interpreted as students were ignored opportunities to learn skills necessary to develop reading comprehension. The result of this study in this regard replicates the study of O'Brien, Stewart and Moje (1995) who revealed that lack of reading in the set of nominated lessons at the elementary level fits well with research on middle school, secondary, and post-secondary classrooms which suggests that content is often conveyed to students through pedagogies of telling rather than pedagogies that provide students with opportunities to negotiate text.

Learning Content in Samuel's Classroom

Compared with the other teachers, this teacher tends to focus more on content and especially, in aiming to equip his students with information about facts, grammar, and similar language items in the selected reading comprehension lessons. In an effort to understand this instructional moment and that his comprehension instruction emphasized on teaching content, I asked him why he employed such a teaching method. Samuel noted:

> *By focusing on teaching contents and concepts in reading comprehension classes before my students read the text, I am trying to deal with concepts and ideas about the topic that are essential for my students. This is because I believe that the ultimate purpose of teaching reading comprehension is to help students understand the concept and the idea of the topics given.*

Given that his lesson was aimed at teaching content and concepts in reading comprehension, the teacher might have thought that he was teaching reading comprehension well. However, empirical data from the research, by contrast, revealed contradictory reports as there is less evidence that this instruction transfers to higher-order cognitive skills, such as reasoning and problem solving (Scott, 2009). Contrary to this finding, if teachers develop their reading lessons systematically by including tasks, research has provided more evidence regarding the combined effectiveness of the two approaches of content and strategy teaching than when they are implemented in isolation. The goal of strategic instruction is to provide explicit instruction and

practice in a set of strategies that will enable readers to be successful in their content area classes (Denton, Bryan, Wexler, Reed & Vaughn, 2007).Therefore, the teacher's nominated best reading lessons depict that the direct content teaching was isolated from more in-depth discussions and teaching of reading comprehension strategies although the two approaches could be taken together by giving the learner more opportunities to help him/her fully understand a reading text.

Learning Content? in Mudesir's Classroom

Unlike the other two teachers, the reading comprehension instruction classes of this teacher seem to be superficially organized. First, the selected lessons which he assumed that were representative of his 'best' lessons were too shallow both in time (14 minutes in average) and in content as he rarely interacted with the students about what they read. Second, students had little opportunity for the development and practice of higher-level comprehension abilities as most of the time his entire attention was to get his students assessed through every reading passage. Apart from this, it was evident from the three representative lessons that he frequently went around and corrected students' assignments with little interaction with the students. When I asked why he didn't have any more interaction with his students over the course of the reading comprehension class, Mr. Mudesir explained:

> *In my two decades of teaching experiences, I know that it is difficult for my students to learn better if I do not teach the whole period comprehensively. The major role of the teacher to be in the classroom is to facilitate that students work hard and be assessed during reading comprehension instruction. He further explains that the teacher must supervise and monitor his students' progress in reading, but not the students.*

The fact that neither content nor strategy instruction was observed in the nominated lessons observed of this teacher should come as no surprise given this teacher did not interacted at all with his students about the text. The job of teaching requires both teachers and students to work reciprocally, and hence interaction is the most important part of learning. Regarding this, Scott (2009) posits that the

teacher asks a question and depends on her students to answer it. A challenge for any profession of human improvement including teaching depends on the clients in order to achieve results (Cohen, 1989, as cited in Scott, 2009).

Taken together, the teachers in this study emphasized explaining and discussing of concepts and facts in the reading texts and paid little or no attention to engaging students in tasks in their reading lessons. Therefore, it may be interpreted that students were denied opportunities to develop skills necessary to improve reading comprehension. This is because in the last three decades, instructional research on reading comprehension has been guided by the conceptualization of comprehension as a problem-solving process. Thus, this observation was in sharp contrast with the research that has consistently revealed core lesson components that make instruction more effective in reading classrooms (Bos & Vaughn, 2006; as cited in Denton et al, 2007). It has also identified elements of effective instruction, such as explicit instruction, targeted instruction, time on task, quick pacing of lessons, positive feedback, corrective feedback and student motivation (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2002). Consequentially, teachers should plan instruction so that students have ample practice applying their new skills and strategies in a variety of settings, and they can also lead discussions to make students aware of how they can use their new skills and strategies in other classes (Denton et al, 2007). Durkin (1978) states the use of strategies and problem solving skills and experiences in the process of reading as "the essence of reading".

Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, it may be possible to conclude that:

1. Despite the fact that few lessons demonstrate a 'seemingly' comprehension instruction, in general terms, no comprehension instruction was observed.
2. The findings of this study seem to focus on the question of what teachers believe and that practice is the center of reading comprehension. It is evident that what teachers believe is engineering the total comprehension process either negatively or positively as the sample teachers seemed to feel

unprepared to teaching reading comprehension and thus provide students with very few opportunities to negotiate text.

3. Over the course of the teachers' best representative comprehension classes; it was apparent that these teachers spent considerable time in assessing the students' ability to do assignments in contrast to the major goal of reading comprehension, which is to help individual readers attain the desired skills and strategies.

Recommendations

On the basis of the researcher's observations of the teachers' best representative comprehension classes and from teachers' responses on the reasons why they were observed doing certain activities in their reading classes, the following recommendations were made.

1. The purpose of teaching reading comprehension is to teach students how to deal with a reading text. Given the considerable attention that reading strategy instruction has received in recent research, the lack of this instructional framework in the teachers' actual classrooms suggest that the teachers need to revisit their teaching methods based on the literature. Hence, teachers need to teach reading comprehension to equip students with the necessary skills and strategies which in itself will improve their ability to perform well on reading assessments.

2. Teachers need to enhance student interaction both with the text and the teacher as engaging and motivating contexts in the reading classes are vital and mandatory. Moreover, teachers need to facilitate, model and guide students have to visualize and monitor their reading.

3. Teachers shouldn't only teach their students how to answer teacher made questions, but they should also encourage their students to generate their own questions as both the ability to ask and answer questions is equally important to improve their reading comprehension.

Despite the fact that this study touched upon a possibility of understanding EFL teachers' pedagogical practices in teaching reading,

students' perceptions and conceptualization towards the current reading instruction also need to be examined because of the potential of these two levers to fully understand pedagogical practices. Therefore, future research could be designed to compare and contrast EFL teachers' teaching reading comprehension with those of their students' attitudes and perceptions towards reading classroom practices.

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Appendix A: Observation Protocol adapted from Madden & Almasi (2006)

Town_____School: _____ Teacher:_____ Observer:_____
Number of Students:_____ Date of Observation: _____ Time Teacher Spent on Literacy Instruction: ____min. Start Time of Observation:_____ Time Children Spent Reading: _____ min. End Time of Observation:_____ Grade Level: _____

   Directions: During observation, place a check mark by the features observed.

Check mark	Feature
	1. The teacher gives the students adequate time to engage in reading tasks.
	2. Sets clear instructional purposes for reading comprehension
	3. The teacher engages students to generate questions of their own about what they read
	4. The teacher engages the students to focus on meaning as reading of the text
	5. The teacher Elicit students' prior knowledge to employ their background knowledge when reading text
	6. The teacher helps students set purpose for reading and self-evaluate.
	7. The teacher uses ongoing assessments (formal and informal) to inform and change daily instruction, specifically to meet individual needs.
	8. The teacher raises the students' awareness of the strategies they are already using and to facilitate opportunities for students to the reading instruction
	9. The teacher explains reading strategies and the rationale for learning them.
	10. The teacher teaches and models reading strategies and provides adequate time and opportunities for students to practice the strategies through guided practice and independent work.
	11. The teacher helps students purposefully monitor their own comprehension before, during, and after reading.
	12. The teacher teaches and models reading strategies and provides adequate time for students to practice the strategies through guided practice and independent work.
	13. The teacher assesses students' comprehension by asking various levels of questions.
	14. The teacher promotes social interaction and "scaffolding" as a means to develop students' complex skills.
	15. The teacher prompts students to answer questions.
	16. The teacher facilitates a collaborative learning environment to support the students' intellectual knowledge and skills.