

DEVELOPING EFL READING COMPREHENSION VIA USING ONLINE PEER-ASSISTED LEARNING STRATEGIES

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Abstract :

This study investigated the effectiveness of using some online peer-assisted learning strategies (OPALS) in developing the second year prep students' EFL reading comprehension and their self-esteem. Forty four students from Future Language Schools, East Tanta Educational administration were selected to be participants for the study. The quasi-experimental design was adopted as the forty four students were divided into two groups. The experimental group was taught by using some online peer-assisted learning strategies whereas the control group was taught following the conventional instruction planned by the ministry of education in Egypt. The tools of the study included OPALS checklist, a reading comprehension test (pre & post) and a self-esteem scale (pre & post). Analysis of the results revealed that the majority of the experimental group participants achieved a significantly higher level in their reading comprehension skills and their self-esteem than those of the control group. In the light of these results, it was concluded that online peer-assisted learning strategies were effective in developing the second year prep students' reading comprehension skills and self-esteem.

Key words: online peer-assisted learning strategies, reading comprehension, self-esteem, EFL prep stage students.

Introduction:

Reading is an essential skill in English especially for those learning English as a foreign language. Although reading is an crucial factor of academic, career, and social success, most students struggle to read proficiently. Students who cannot read are nearly in every classroom ;they often have problems with oral

reading tasks that may cause embarrassment and as a result lack of confidence in their abilities.

Many students would not cope with their classmates as a result of their poor basic reading skills. "The long term implications of poor reading skills are troublesome "(McMaster et al., 2006). If reading difficulties are not tackled at early stages, the future of children with reading difficulties will be compromised as having reading failure that would restrict the opportunities available for individuals to take part in the workforce and share in the growth of a nation in a technologically advanced world market. To overcome this problem we need to begin with

reading comprehension. Therefore, more attention must be directed toward reading instruction processes, programs and strategies.

McMaster et al. (2006:6) stated that "about 80% of pupils who were identified as having learning disability had primary shortage in reading skills related to language functions. Most of the problems related to reading skills are (decoding and comprehension).These pupils often struggle with oral reading tasks." On the other hand, Vaughn et al. (2001) pointed out that many teachers have neither specific training in teaching reading skills nor the time to provide one-on-one instruction to large number of pupils who need assistance and opportunities to actively engage in academic behaviors. This may be the reason for the lack of acceptable performance by pupils in reading. They concluded that even when reading is taught, pupils typically do not focus on building fluency including reading with speed and accuracy.

Modern approaches to academic instruction are emerging to help pupils be

successful in schools. One of these approaches involves using peers to deliver instruction to their classmates. This represents a new approach to meet pupils' needs and to allow them to work side by side learning new skills. Peer instructors represents also an innovative way to offer an economic method of conveying services in a time of reduced resources (Maheady & Harper, 1987).

Under the trend of collaborative technology, peer-to-peer technology and online learning community, PAL provides an important reference for the building of online peer-assisted learning community. Unlike traditional learning models, PAL encourages mutual help, supervision and communication among group members. PAL in online learning can develop consciousness and ability to improve understanding and command of knowledge. Learners interact in an online learning community, using their experience. Online PAL also helps to form spontaneous groups based on common and learning objectives and interests. (Gaofeng & Yeyu, 2007).

PALS have important features including reciprocal tutoring roles, opportunities to respond and experience success, supplementary practice of skills taught in the central part of reading curriculum, structured activities, pupils are trained to use specific prompts, corrections and feedback, verbal interactions between tutors and tutees, increasing the opportunities for the pupils to respond. Pupils are urged to review and ask questions during tutoring sessions depending on the teacher's instruction. Pupils can create questions and conclude through reciprocal peer interaction. Pupils get motivated when they receive reinforcement while working in groups. Teachers can satisfy the individual needs of pupils while the whole class are engaged. Students involved in PAL also engage in both formal and informal

learning that most likely create a learning environment which reinforces the benefits of interprofessional collaboration.

♦ Review of literature

Reading Comprehension

Reading can be defined as a comprehension process in which students need to learn strategies to read more efficiently, including guessing the meaning through context, make predictions and inferences about the text, and skimming to fill in the context (Al Youssef, 2006). "*Reading comprehension is viewed as the process of using one's own prior knowledge and the writer's clues to infer the author's intended message.*" (Medina & Pilonieta, 2006:223).

Reading comprehension is the gradual change of thought that takes place while reading. When readers integrate their thinking with the text, ask questions, make inferences, extract main ideas and summarize, true understanding occurs. This represents an active thinking process and guides new learning (Harvey & Goudvis, 2008). Abu Shamla (2010) defined reading comprehension as "the process of decoding and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with a written text".

Baier (2005) asserts that students who use reading comprehension strategies get more information when reading a text and as a result, they do better in reading comprehension tests. Fourteen students of the sixth grade in a private school were given the qualitative reading inventory for reading comprehension pretests after identifying their individual reading levels. Over six weeks, students were taught using self-questioning reading comprehension strategy on passages. Students were given a reading comprehension posttest in the eighth week of the study. Results showed that twelve of the fourteen students had better scores in reading comprehension test. Two of the fourteen students had the same results they

got in the pretest. After the analysis of the study, it was concluded that there was an improvement in reading comprehension scores after using the self-Questioning Reading Strategy.

Haboush (2010) conducted a study investigating the extent to which a program based on Multiple Intelligences (MI) theory would effect grade eight students' English reading comprehension skills. This study embraced different reading skills including skimming, scanning, making inferences, knowing the meaning of words through context and sequencing. The tools administered were an achievement test (pre & post) and weekly quizzes. Results confirmed the presence of significant differences between the control and the experimental group in favor of the experimental one only in skimming, scanning and getting the meaning of difficult words through context as a result of the suggested program. Regarding the other skills, no differences were identified as making inferences and sequencing needed more time to be developed and mastered.

Al Udaini (2011) investigated using a computerized program to develop grade nine students' reading comprehension skills and attitude towards reading. Four tools were used in this study: a questionnaire for teachers, a (pre & post) achievement test, a computerized program for the reading texts and an attitude scale (pre & post). Results indicated that the computerized program effectively developed the reading comprehension skills of grade nine students. The study also shed some light on the fact that having the students, involved in such technological environment, developed their attitude for learning and reading using computers as well.

Sitorus (2013) investigated using Student Teams Achievement Division (STAD) Method to develop students' reading comprehension achievement. The

subjects of the study consisted of 30 students of Tenth grade. The instrument used for collecting quantitative data was objective test of reading comprehension. Qualitative data were collected using observation sheet, diary notes and checklist. Data analysis revealed the effectiveness of using Student Teams Achievement Divisions (STAD) method in improving the students' achievement in reading comprehension.

Lubis (2013) investigated the effectiveness of using Collaborative Strategic Reading on students' reading comprehension. The research was conducted using experimental design with a pre-test and post-test. The sample of this study was 34 students of eighth grade. Students were put into two groups. The experimental group was taught using Collaborative Strategic Reading while the control one was taught traditionally. Data were collected using multiple choice test. Both of the groups were given a post-test. It was found that using Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) had a positive effect on reading comprehension.

To conclude, reading comprehension can be operationally defined as the learners' ability to understand the information presented in the text, predict and make conclusions, think, summarize, and make generalization depending on the writer's clues and his previous knowledge. Reading comprehension skills adopted in this study are prediction, scanning for specific information, extracting the meaning of unfamiliar words through context, sequencing of events, making inferences, summarizing and expressing opinions.

Self-esteem

Barrow (2010) stated that self-esteem is the ability to face challenge of life, the feelings of "being worthy, and the right to enjoy the outcomes of hard work". Dedmond (2009) defined self-esteem as

the complication of feelings that urge behavior, guides attitudes, and drives motivation. Self-esteem is the assessing outlook of the self-concept that matches the comprehensive view of the self as being worthy or unworthy (Baumeister, 1998).

Miller et al. (2010) conducted a study investigating the self-esteem of children who took part in a trial of Paired Reading (PR) for fifteen weeks. Four schools were chosen from the schools assigned to the same PR conditions, and other four schools from those that were assigned to the cross-age PR condition. The same -age group included 87 children of primary 6 while the cross-age group included 81 children of primary six. The control group consisted of 92 children of primary 6, selected randomly from neighbouring schools. The self-esteem scale of Rosenberg was used. Final scores were examined for both worth and competence. Significant pre-post improvement on self-esteem was noted in the same-age and cross-age groups, but there wasn't any improvement for the control groups. These results refer to the belief that PR can increase self-esteem level.

Another research done by Hisken (2011) investigated the relation between students' reading ability and their self-esteem, academic achievement and reading level. This study introduced ways to enhance and improve students' self-esteem. The study included peer reviewed journals, texts and dissertations which discuss different aspects of self-esteem, reading level and ability, and academic achievement. Results of this research showed that students' self-esteem level was impacted positively once they were able to be successful in reading. This proved a positive correlation between self-esteem and reading ability, reading level, and academic achievement.

Bagheri et al. (2012) research investigated the relationship between self-

esteem, personality type and reading comprehension of Iranian EFL students. Three instruments were administered including a questionnaire of self-esteem, a personality type questionnaire and TOEFL test for reading comprehension. The participants of the study were university students. Results of the study indicated that self-esteem is correlated positively with reading comprehension.

A more recent study by Tilfarlioglu and Delbesoglugil (2014) investigated the relation between self-regulation, self-esteem, attitude and foreign language achievement. Three hundred and eighty three participants from "Gaziantep University Higher School of Foreign Languages" in Turkey took part in this study. Data were gathered using adapted questionnaire. Results reported a positive relation between self-regulation, self-esteem, attitude and success of language learning.

Henceforth, self-esteem can be operationally defined as the energy that pushes human behavior for being positive or negative with life challenges. Since language learning is one of these challenges, so how learners value themselves and how they perceive themselves are basic aspects to achieve academic success in learning a new language.

Online peer-assisted learning strategies (OPALS)

PAL is learning through active help of peer group members (Wadooda & Crosby, 2002). It can also be briefly defined as "The development of knowledge and skill through explicit active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions, with deliberate intent to help others with their learning goals." (Topping & Ehaly, 2001).

The present study adopts the definition of The Access Center, (2008:12) for Peer-Assisted Reading Strategies " A structured strategy and an alternative

classroom arrangement for reading requiring a set period of time for implementation :25-35 minutes 2 or 3 times a week awarded "best practice" in which students take an instructional role with classmates. "

For online learning, the study employs synchronous communication in which learners are not in the same place, but they have full access of the necessary resources electronically, so they can interact and acquire knowledge. A blog was used in this study as an online tool for pupils to interact. A blog can be defined, as "an online journal that users can continuously update, in their own words, online", as quoted by Yang (2009, p.13).

A study conducted by Dunn, (2009) about "Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies" for students struggling with reading in the first level. Experimental group was taught using PALS partners along with the teacher directions. The control group was instructed on basal readers, reading books with specific levels, and one to one phonics instruction. Results showed that students who took part in the PALS program achieved improvement in their fluency, and this emphasized the benefits of the PALS program to minimize the gap between sufficient and insufficient first grade readers in control group. About 42% of the participants were reading at 60 wpm (words per minute) while 66% of participants were reading at 60 wpm in the implemented year. In addition to 42% increase in fluency rates.

Lu., (2011) reported the effects of online peer assessment and peer grading on students' learning. The study clarified the merits of online peer assessment and the significance of feedback kinds. One hundred and eighty one high school students were involved in peer assessment using an online system—iLap. The effects, on both assessors and assessees, were analyzed using multiple regressions. Results of this study showed that the

assessors's feedback that showed offered suggestions or revealed problems was useful sign of the performance of the assessors themselves, and that positive feedback was related to the performance of assessees. Yet, peer grading behaviors were not an effective proof for project performance.

A comparative case study examined the implementation of a model for striving readers that used the internet as a context for reading, writing and communicating in three different classroom contexts. An Internet Reciprocal Teaching was designed to support the online reading comprehension among elementary and middle school students. Results showed that peer collaboration was the basic mean of strategy exchange and that the students who were previously identified as struggling readers became active in coaching, leading, and sharing new strategies. As a result, peer collaboration seems to set the context for greater engagement in activities. (Henry, et al., 2012)

♦ Statement of the problem

Based on the literature review and related studies, the researcher's experience and the pilot study results, it is obvious that second grade prep students at Future Language Schools need improvement in their reading comprehension skills. Therefore, the present study investigated the effectiveness of using online peer-assisted reading strategies training in improving students' reading comprehension skills and their self-esteem.

♦ Questions of the study

The present study attempted to answer the following main question:

What is the effectiveness of using online peer-assisted reading strategies in improving 2nd grade prep students' EFL reading comprehension skills and their self-esteem?

For research purposes, the following sub-questions were derived from this main question:

- 1-What are the OPAL strategies most suitable for 2nd grade prep students?
- 2-How far would the use of online peer-assisted reading strategies develop 2nd grade prep students' EFL reading comprehension skills?
- 3-How far would the use of online peer-assisted reading strategies improve 2nd grade prep students' EFL reading self-esteem?

♦ **Purpose of the study**

The researcher sought to achieve the following purposes:

1. Identifying the effectiveness of using online peer-assisted learning strategies in developing 2nd grade prep students' EFL reading comprehension.
2. Identifying the effectiveness of using online peer-assisted learning strategies in developing 2nd grade prep students' EFL reading self-esteem.

♦ **Hypotheses of the study:**

This study tried to test the following hypotheses:

1. There is a statistically significant difference at 0.05 level between the mean scores of the control group and those of the experimental group on the post application of the reading comprehension test in favor of the experimental group.
2. There is a statistically significant difference at 0.05 level between the mean scores of the experimental group pre-post application of the reading comprehension test in favor of the post application.
3. There is statistically significant difference at 0.05 level between the mean scores of the control group and those of the

experimental group on the post application of the self-esteem scale in favor of the experimental group.

4. There is a statistically significant difference at 0.05 level between the mean scores of the experimental group pre-post application of the self-esteem scale in favor of the post application.

♦ **Method**

Participants

Forty four students of second year preparatory stage from "Future Language Schools" in Tanta City were chosen as the subjects of the study. The students were placed into two groups (control and experimental group), each of 22 students. The participants' age ranged from fourteen to fifteen years old.

Design

This study is a quasi-experimental one. Two groups were chosen as the participants of the study; the experimental group, and the control group. Both groups were pre-post tested to determine their actual performance in reading comprehension skills. They were also exposed to self-esteem scale to measure their self-esteem towards reading. The experimental group was instructed using blended learning which includes reciprocal peer-tutoring in the classroom and online peer-assisted learning strategies in the computer lab while the control group was taught using the regular methods. Both groups were instructed by the researcher to ensure better implementation of the study. The experiment lasted for 10 weeks during the second semester of the academic year 2015-2016.

Instruments:

To achieve the purposes of the study, the following instruments were designed and used:

- ✓ A checklist for identifying the online peer-assisted learning

strategies most suitable for developing second year preparatory students' EFL reading comprehension skills and self-esteem.

- ✓ A pre-post EFL reading comprehension test for assessing second year preparatory students' reading comprehension skills.
- ✓ A pre-post self-esteem scale for assessing second year preparatory

students' self-esteem towards reading.

◆ Results and discussions

The results of the study are statistically analyzed in terms of its hypotheses and they are discussed in the light of the theoretical background and related studies. Results of the study were reported as follows:

Table (1): Results of Mann-Whitney of both the control and experimental groups on the post-administration of the reading comprehension test

Skills	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	U	Z	Sig. (2-tailed)
Prediction	Control	22	17,91	394,00	141	2.8	Significant at 0.05
	Exp.	22	27,09	596,00			
Scanning for specific information	Control	22	16,98	373,00	120.5	2.95	
	Exp.	22	28,02	616,00			
Sequencing of events	Control	22	16,90	373,00	120	2.9	
	Exp.	22	28,00	617,00			
Expressing opinions	Control	22	18,00	408,00	155	2.2	
	Exp.	22	26,40	582,00			
Guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words	Control	22	18,82	414,00	161	2.1	
	Exp.	22	26,18	576,00			
Making inferences	Control	22	16,89	371,00	118.5	3	
	Exp.	22	28,11	618,00			
Summarizing	Control	22	10,00	230,00	77	4.5	
	Exp.	22	30,00	660,00			
Total	Control	22	14,98	329,00	76.5	3.9	
	Exp.	22	30,02	660,00			

Results in Table (1) indicate that the mean rank of the experimental group students in all the skills and in the total were higher than those in the control group. The table also illustrates that the estimated U value is significant at .5 level. This also shows that there is a significant difference between the mean rank score of both groups in favor of the experimental one in the seven skills and in the total

score on the post-administration of the test. The mean rank score of the control group is (14.98) whereas the mean rank score of the experimental group is (30.02). This variance between the experimental and the control group according to mean rank scores and U values lead to accepting the first hypotheses of the present study.

Table (2): Results of Wilcoxon Signed Ranks-test for the experimental group on the pre-post-administration of the reading comprehension test

skills	Ranks	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Z	Sig. Level
Prediction	Negative	•	•	•	3.5	0.05
	Positive	13	7	91		
	neutral	9				
	Total	22				
Scanning for specific information	Negative	0	0	0	3.3	0.05
	Positive	13	7	91		
	neutral	9				
	Total	22				
Sequencing of events	Negative	0	0	0	3.8	0.05
	Positive	18	9.50	171		
	neutral	4				
	Total	22				
Expressing opinions	Negative	0	0	0	3.2	0.05
	Positive	12	6.50	78		
	neutral	10				
	Total	22				
Guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words	Negative	0	0	0	3.2	0.05
	Positive	11	6	66		
	neutral	11				
	Total	22				
Making inferences	Negative	•	•	•	3.9	0.05
	Positive	19	1•	19•		
	neutral	33				
	Total	22				
Summarizing	Negative	•	•	•	3.95	0.05
	Positive	17	9	153		
	neutral	5				
	Total	22				
Total	Negative	•	•	•	4.1	0.01
	Positive	22	11.50	253		
	neutral	•				
	Total	22				

Results in Table (2) show that there is statistically significant difference between the mean rank of the students in the experimental group in the pre-post

measurement in all levels of the reading comprehension test and its total. (Z) values of are (3.5, 3.3, 3.8, 3.2, 3.2, 3.9, 3.95, and 4.1) which are significant at level 0.01

supporting the post application. The mean of the positive ranks in the pre-post measurement in all test levels is (11.50) with a size effect values as follows: (0.75, 0.70, 0.81, 0.68, 0.68, 0.83, 0.84, and 0.87). These values (as shown in table 15) indicate that (75%, 70%, 81%, 68%, 68%, 83%, 84%, 87%) of the total variance of the dependent variable (reading comprehension test) can be attributed to the independent variable (OPALS).

To conclude, this result goes along with many previous studies, for example, the results of Sporer (2009), Pool (2009), Blanch et al.(2012) and Farahat (2014) are in line with these of the present study in that using peer- assisted learning strategies

Table (3): Results of Mann-Whitney of the control and experimental groups on the post-administration of the self- esteem test

stages	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	U	Z	Sig. (2-tailed)
Total	Control	22	11,57	254,50	1.5	5.7	Significant at 0.05
	Exp.	22	33,43	730,50			

Table (3) shows that the mean rank of the experimental group post self-esteem scale is 33.43 where as the mean rank of the control group post self-esteem scale is 11.57. In addition, Mann-Whitney value is (1.5) and this indicates that differences between the mean rank of the students in the control group and experimental group were statically significant at 0.05 levels in

Table (4): Z value to examine differences between experimental group pre-post administration of self-esteem scale.

Items	Ranks	N	Means rank	Sum of ranks	(Z)	Sig.Level
14	Negative	0	0	0	4.1	0.05
	Positive	22	11,5	253		
	neutral	0				
	Total	22				

Findings in table (4) show that (Z) value is 4.1 and this refers to statistical differences at level 0.05 between the experimental pre and post self-esteem scale in favor of the post application. That supports the effectiveness of OPALSs in improving students' self-esteem.

has generally improved reading skills and reading comprehension skills as well. In addition, other previous studies supported using technology and merging it with peer-assisted learning strategies, for example, Hou et al. , (2009), Blau& Neuthal (2009), Lu.,(2011), Henry et al., (2012) and Waely &Aburezeq (2013). The results of these studies confirmed the positive impact of using peer-assisted learning strategies on EFL reading and writing skills with the help of new technological tools. Furthermore, the results of such studies enhance the results of this present study that ONPALS has developed the EFL reading comprehension skills of 2nd grade prep students.

favor of the experimental group due to applying OPALS training. So, the third hypothesis can be accepted.

To sum up, the variance found between the experimental and the control group according to Mann-Whitney value and Z value led to accepting the third hypothesis of the present study.

◆ Conclusions

Results of the present study and discussion led to the conclusion that, second preparatory grade students' reading comprehension skills have been improved. The experimental treatment (OPALS training) was effective in developing both

the pupils' reading comprehension skills and their self-esteem.

♦ **Recommendations**

In the light of the present study, the following recommendations are stated:

- 1- Teachers should realize the importance of online peer-assisted learning strategies (OPALS) in developing students' reading comprehension skills.
- 2- Teachers' roles should change from being the only source for information to be a facilitator, guide, monitor and a consultant.
- 3- Teachers should think of using different OPALS with other skills such as speaking writing and listening.
- 4- Teachers should receive training courses for qualifying them to use modern methods in teaching.
- 5- Students should be encouraged to use pair work in modeling reading passages.
- 6- Teachers should use online learning technologies to improve students' comprehension and critical thinking.

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