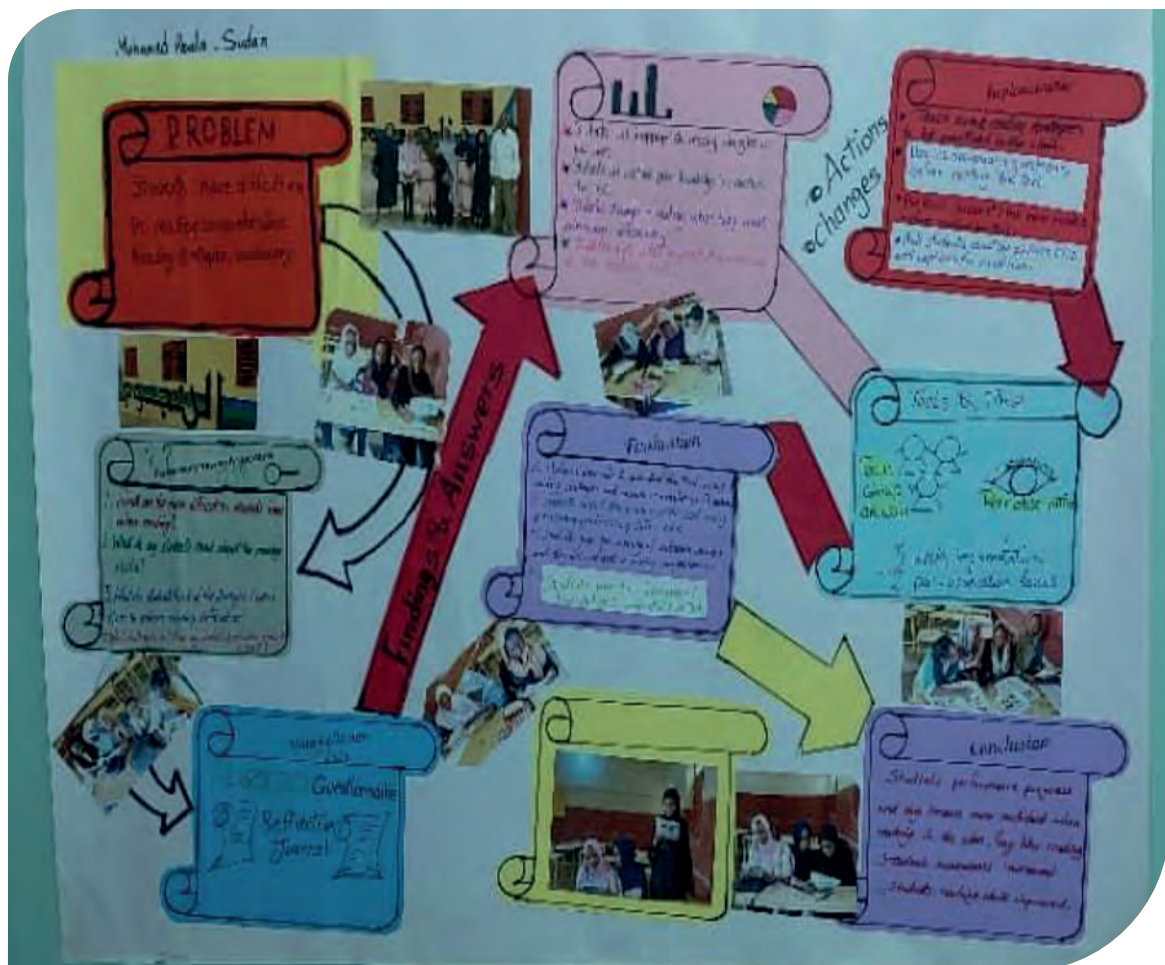




Exploratory action research on students' reading difficulties

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I work in the In-Services Training Institute as a trainer and teacher in Elnojoom Intermediate School for Girls situated in Sudan's Northern Kordofan State, Elobeid. I teach Grade 1 five lessons per week. I have noticed that most of the students in Grade 1 have problems in reading comprehension, especially when reading a text containing new vocabulary. Most of the students fail to predict the meaning of the new words. They also have problems answering comprehension questions during class. In a bid to understand this problem, I carried out this exploratory action research (EAR) in order to find out what the problem really was.

I chose this EAR to find out some of the comprehension difficulties that they face, as well as their perceptions of reading in the class and their feelings about the reading strategies they use in the class. I chose this topic because reading comprehension is an important skill that enables students to increase their understanding of a text read. It also helps learners learn new information and interact with the text. Reading comprehension is also an important skill in understanding the English language.

To help me explore the problem, I came up with the following questions:

- 1. What are the main reading difficulties my students face when reading?**
- 2. What do the students think about reading skills?**
- 3. What do the students think of the strategies I use during class to address reading difficulties?**
- 4. What challenges do students have when reading in class?**

To find answers to these questions, I used two tools: questionnaires and reflective journals. The reflective journal was important to help me explore my perceptions of the issue at hand. Furthermore, I used a reflective journal to record the actions and the events that happened and those that happened in the class during reading activities. I documented what was happening in the class to make use of it in providing responses to some of the exploratory questions. I chose the questionnaire because it enabled me to receive massive amounts of information from the learners in a short period of time in addition to its practicability. Thirty-one students participated in giving responses. The questionnaire included about five different questions addressing the exploratory aspects and focusing on students' perceptions of what reading comprehension difficulties they face. The questionnaire was carried out in Arabic to make the students understand it without any help and feel confident and free to participate in responding.

In terms of the main difficulties my students face when reading, the results of the exploration indicated that 24 out of the 31 students felt a willingness and motivation to read in the class. Ten of the students expressed that they did not use the title, captions, pictures or other contextual clues when reading a text, whereas six of the students did not tap on prior knowledge to understand the text. Nineteen of the learners did not use their prior knowledge to predict the text.

Almost all the learners determined the importance of a text and rephrased them. Eleven learners indicated that they could not decode the meaning of the new words, while 17 of the learners indicated that they lacked enough prior knowledge of the text.

In terms of what the students thought about reading skills, the results showed that the students stopped reading when they met new words. By this, they could not connect ideas in the text and so lacked concentration while reading. In terms of students' thoughts about the strategies used in the class, the results indicated that the majority of the learners thought that the strategies used in addressing reading were very good. I explored further through a reflective journal, and this indicated that the strategies were presented in a way that enabled the students to use them to read and understand the text. In the questionnaire, a few of them (9) said the strategies supported them in understanding the text. Generally, the results indicated that students had a challenge in interpreting the strategies used to predict meaning. They also had problems with decoding the meaning of new words, without which they lack sufficient prior knowledge to make sense of the text. Some had a problem with understanding vocabulary altogether. Whereas some learners face challenges in reading when they meet new words, others cannot connect to the ideas of the text. They also had a problem in using these strategies to help them read.

Based on these findings, I decided to create an action plan to address some of the issues identified. The action plan included teaching reading strategies and techniques to develop reading comprehension and was carried out for almost three weeks. It included the following.

- 1. Teaching some reading strategies, like teaching students how to use context clues to determine the meaning of unknown words in addition to:**
 - discussing or activating prior knowledge
 - developing questions while reading
 - connecting what they are reading to another text, something they have seen or something they have experienced
 - visualising or picturing what they are reading
 - making predictions about what will come next in the text
 - looking back for keywords and rereading in order to clarify or answer questions.
- 2. Writing and designing three pre-reading questions for the students to read before reading the texts. This would help them read with a focus.**
- 3. Presenting and modelling the new vocabulary before reading the text and asking them to highlight or underline the difficult ones. This would increase understanding and avoid them stopping at new words.**
- 5. Designing questions about the use of the pictures and the title to help the students predict the meaning of the text, using their knowledge.**

The action plan took three weeks to implement.

To evaluate the effect of the action plan, I used a focus group interview in addition to a peer observation carried out by one of my colleagues. The observer would focus on students' actions as well as the impact of various actions implemented – using pre-reading questions before reading, teaching the vocabulary before practising the reading activity, making use of the pictures, captions and title, and the prior knowledge to predict the meaning of the text. The students were asked about their insights regarding the action plan strategies. A total of five students participated in the focus group interview after the implementation. To gain the students' opinions regarding the action plan carried out, questions sought to get more information about the impact of the action plan. The design of the questions was guided by the results from the exploratory phase of this research.

The analysis of the data obtained established that the students were able to understand the text and answer the questions more easily compared to previously, according to the results of the action plan and the performance of the students. In the focus group, students said they were happy to use the strategies that allowed them to comprehend the content better. They indicated that they looked forward to reading after learning the meaning of new vocabulary. One student said: 'This increased my understanding of what I was reading'. They also suggested that by pre-reading the questions, their curiosity was increased and they were eager to know the answers to the questions. In the observation, my colleague noticed that they seemed interested in the material read and they were consistently interested in new things. By the end of the three weeks, students asked me to give them more time to experiment and learn more. Furthermore, some of the students began to ask many questions about the texts. This means that they were engaging more with the texts. This made them read with a focus on increasing their comprehension.

Additionally, the observations revealed that students made use of the pre-reading questions, so they began to use skimming and scanning skills to answer the comprehension questions. By practising skimming, they understood what the text was about. The pre-reading knowledge helped them to understand the text. The students were able to understand the meaning of the new vocabulary much more easily by speculating their meaning from the context and they were able to ask about unknown words. The pre-teaching of new vocabulary made the students get the meaning from the context, they were able to complete the vocabulary activities and so they felt more confident in reading. The previewing vocabulary and pre-reading strategies were also very advantageous because they provided the students with knowledge that they used during reading. This was clearly seen in answering the comprehension questions. The observations suggested that students seemed to perform better in reading than before.

Moreover, students were able to predict the meaning of the texts using the pictures, the captions, the title and their prior knowledge by asking questions about the pictures and titles of the text and by talking about them. I guided them by supporting them with clues. This activated the students' prior knowledge before reading. I ensured that students benefited from these actions and were able to connect to the new information, and this helped to support their comprehension. The pre-reading activities enabled them to predict the meaning of the vocabulary.

Through the actions I carried out, I realised that teaching reading strategies provided students with the tools needed to become aware of their thinking and provide confidence in their ability to think and analyse the text. Good readers constantly connect their back-ground knowledge to the new knowledge they encounter in a text. They relate the written word to their previous experiences to make reading more personal, which helps them to both understand and remember what they have read. Modelling or presenting the new vocabulary facilitates reading and motivates students to practise it without difficulties. It also reduces the students' anxiety which may also lead to boredom.

Before reading, we should encourage the use of a prediction strategy to involve the ability of readers to get meanings from a text through making informed predictions. We should help students through predictions by connecting their existing knowledge to new information from a text, to get meaning from what they read. Students must use the title of a text to trigger memories of texts with similar content. I led the students to use some clues from the text and their own experiences or knowledge that are relevant to the text to predict. I also encouraged them to use the title or the pictures and guess what the text will be about so that they connect to the text.

I would like to say that I feel confident in using my results in teaching reading. I can also now help other teachers to use EAR to solve students' problems anywhere. I found out that if teachers systematically investigate learning problems, they will solve them.

Finally, I would like to thank the British Council for the unique opportunity. I feel like a hero because I helped my students solve their problems and made them feel happy.



Students in class