REFLECTION ON RESEARCHING EFL READING IN ACADEMIC CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

For many years a great deal of research on reading strategies has mainly focused on the cognitive and linguistic aspects. The main criticism against these two aspects of language learning is that they overlooked the social context of learning to a great extent. The cognitive and the linguistic frameworks are not comprehensive enough in understanding the process of reading especially among the EFL learners. This paper starts with some backgrounds on academic reading experiences of EFL learners, and researching reading within the sociocultural context. Then it discusses some the challenges of methodological and ethical issues in employing a qualitative to research in the area of reading. This paper covers issues related to two qualitative methods of data collection, reading diary and interview. It concludes that the challenging methodological issues in researching academic reading comprehension require cautious consideration throughout the research process. It recommends that new ethics guidelines be developed by ethics board members for the reference of researchers who embark on research in this area.

Keywords: Academic reading, reading comprehension, reading diary, penomenography, sociocultural theory


1.0 INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the fundamental skills of language which is perceived by language researchers, such as Piaget, Chomsky, Vygotsky and many others as a process which involves much more than merely seeing and pronouncing words. For many years reading has been investigated purely from a cognitive perspective and a great deal of research has focused on the cognitive aspect of reading (Dehqan & Samar, 2014). The main criticism against these aspects as processes of language learning in general is that they overlooked the social context of learning to a great extent. The cognitive and the linguistic frameworks are not enough in understanding the sophisticated process of reading especially among the EFL learners (Jawing,
In addition, developing and assessing learners’ comprehension is still one of the main problems faced by teachers in ESL classroom (Samar & Dehqan, 2013).

Conducting a study to investigate EFL undergraduate students’ reading experiences from the sociocultural perspectives is important as it will open a new avenue of understanding students’ perspectives on their reading and the strategies they employed in learning reading skills especially in the Jordanian context. Consequently, exploring the students’ academic reading experiences is important since it comprises the processes and techniques they are employing to acquire knowledge in their content areas which involve cognitive aspect, personal background, social contexts and so forth. Thus, understanding the difficulties is a priority that must be considered in the instructors agenda to come up with solutions that help students, who are particularly below the level of the English language proficiency, in meeting these challenges.

1.1 THE STUDY

There are three main questions in the study which are: i) How do the Jordanian undergraduate students learn to read in EFL classroom?; ii) How do the Jordanian undergraduate students view their reading experiences?; and iii) How do the teachers view their experience in teaching reading to EFL Jordanian students?

Data generation in this study was undertaken for ten months from September 2017 to July 2018. It can be divided into two phases. The data at phase one generated from the students’ diary. The rationale is that the students’ academic reading experiences can be observed during this duration at least for two semesters. Meanwhile, the data at phase two of this study generated by using semi-structured interview.

In Phase 1, prior to the data collection phase, the participants were informed that their full commitment and dedication were required for the reading diaries throughout data collection procedure. Research participants were given consent forms. It was stated in the consent form and everyone agreed to accept the terms and conditions throughout data collection phases. Their diaries were classified as confidential, were kept anonymous, used for this research and were not revealed to anyone else except the inter-raters.

In Phase 2, prior to conducting the interview session, research participants were given consent forms. The participants signed these forms, which covered ethical issues such as confidentiality and data access. The interviews were conducted at a public accessible place in a quiet meeting room. The room was conducive, considering its accessibility. Therefore, both the participants and the researcher felt comfortable with the setting as there were other people in the venue. The participants were explicitly informed of the researcher’s status at all stages of the data collection procedures. They were allowed to withdraw from this study at any stage of the data collection. The data they provided were deleted should they discontinue their participation. The participant only signed the consent form if they agreed with the terms and condition. The researcher elicited clarification from the participants during the first meeting that they agreed to keep in touch for 10 months. The researcher established a good rapport with the participants and was flexible with the interview schedules. The interview sessions were carried out based on their free time and convenient.
2.0 SITUATING THE STUDY IN PHENOMENOGRAPHY

It is important for this research to establish the foundation of phenomenography. This term was first used by Ference Marton in 1981 (Svensson, 1997). The basic premise underlying phenomenography ‘is to find and systematise forms of thought in terms of which people interpret aspects of reality - aspects which are socially significant and which are at least supposed to be shared by the members of a particular kind of society’ (Marton, 1981, p. 180). The essence of phenomenography is thus to learn about people’s experiences of certain phenomena. These experiences are recognised based on commonalities and idiosyncrasies, but in between there seem to exist various modes of experiences or forms of thoughts that might be worthwhile studying (Marton, 1981).

This research has been based upon the basic underlying theoretical approach of phenomenography, which aims at ‘description, analysis, and understanding of experiences, that is, research which is directed towards experiential description’ (Marton, 1981, p. 180). Here, the researcher adhered to what Marton (1981, p. 180) presents as ‘to learn about people’s experiences’ of a certain phenomenon. In the case of this research, the researcher positioned the phenomenon of academic reading as being rooted in the perceptions and experiences of ESL learners, because differences in thinking may reflect differences in both experiences and realities. In addition, the phenomenography stance also emphasises differences in thinking that may change and develop in different cultures and social realities.

3.0 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Ethics concern the profound morality of human conduct. In connection to social research, it alludes to good consideration, decision and responsibility with respect to researchers all through the process of conducting research. General worry about morals in social research has grown a pace. On the process of conducting research investigators would be facing some ethical challenges due to the blurring boundaries of privacy, access to and sharing of information in connection with others. Thus, the ethical questions become more significant as landscape of qualitative research, especially concerning the participants confidentiality, privacy, the use of data and interpretive and analytical process involved (Miller, Birch, Mauthner, & Jessop, 2012). The most profound ethical dilemmas in qualitative research arose when new tools are used to produce knowledge, and participant worry more about ‘how much information to disclose to whom and in what contexts’ (Miller et al., 2012, p. 2). Yin (2014) construes that in conducting research one has to follow ethical principles that could build up a feeling of trust, accountability, fairness as well as mutual respect.

In relation to the present study, the focused on all the ethical issues that may arise in the course of conducting this study. First of all, a formal permission to obtain the data using the undergraduate participants was sought from the university management. Secondly, the consent from the participants was obtained. They were informed that the information obtains from them will be highly confidential and private and used on only for the purpose of this study. Moreover, the participants were worried about the reading diary as one of the ways of data collection of the research study. Hence the researcher ensured them that their identity and privacy will be protected in course of conducting this study. Lastly, as in the case of using interview as the second instrument of data collection, all the ethical issues of the conducts of interview were considered, such as informed consent inform, confidentiality and privacy,
avoiding sensitive questions to reduce the participants’ emotional intense and dual role and over-involvement as suggested by Allmark et al. (2009).

In addition, the data were not disclosed to any other parties. The data was then made anonymous before it was presented to anybody else, including the research supervisor and the university.

4.0 CONCLUSION

This paper has examined a number of methodological and ethical issues raised during a research project on Jordanian undergraduate students learn reading as a Foreign language. In line with the philosophical perspectives, this study is based on the constructionism epistemological position under interpretivism research paradigm. This helps in gaining an in-depth understanding of a given phenomenon under investigation that is exploring the academic reading experiences of Jordanian EFL learners. Diary is one of the instruments is used in this study. It provides an avenue for recording the participants’ reading experiences. Interviews with the teacher are also helpful in this study as the teachers can provide some vital information on the EFL reading experience from their perceptions.

REFERENCES


