Help-seeking strategy for developing reading skills of Iraqi EFL students

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to investigate the help-seeking strategy for developing reading skills and observing the attitude of Iraqi EFL students via statistical analysis research method. T-score was calculated to understand the difference between the performance in pre-test and post-test. As a result, help-seeking is a useful strategy that accelerates the process of learning without having to obstruct the flow of reading. In conclusion, the results of the study show beyond doubt that in maximum cases, help-seeking proves to be successful for EFL students at the first-year college level.

Key Words: Help-Seeking, Strategy, Reading, Attitudes.

Estrategia de búsqueda de ayuda para desarrollar las habilidades de lectura de los estudiantes irlandeses de inglés como lengua extranjera

Resumen

El objetivo del estudio es investigar la estrategia de búsqueda de ayuda para desarrollar habilidades de lectura y observar la actitud de los estudiantes irlandeses de EFL a través del método de investigación de análisis estadístico. La puntuación T se calculó para comprender la diferencia entre el rendimiento en la prueba previa y posterior. Como resultado, la búsqueda de ayuda es una estrategia útil que acelera el proceso de aprendizaje sin tener que obstruir el flujo de la lectura. En conclusión, los resultados del estudio muestran, sin lugar a dudas, que en la mayoría de los casos, la búsqueda de ayuda demuestra ser exitosa para los estudiantes de EFL en el primer año de la universidad.

Palabras clave: búsqueda de ayuda, estrategia, lectura, actitudes.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a volume of research and literature on learning strategies. Since the focus has shifted from teacher to learner it has become necessary to find out ways and means to motivate learners to learn, to reflect on their own learning and control their learning. Learning strategies can be classified in different ways. Naiman has classified strategies as primary and secondary. According to this classification, Help-Seeking would be a secondary strategy as it contributes indirectly to learning. Bialystok's classification includes 4 categories: formal practising, functional practising, monitoring and inferencing. Help-Seeking can be considered as a functional practising strategy as it increases the opportunity to use the language. According to Oxford's two-way division, direct and indirect, Help Seeking (HS) is an indirect strategy. It is a meta-cognitive strategy, that is, one that helps learners to control their own learning.

1.1. Significance of the study

Reading skills in English for EFL students invariably cause problems at all levels. It is necessary to think of strategies to improve the reading skills of EFL students at the college level, particularly in the first year, because that is the stepping stone to higher education.

The students proceed towards research activities and library studies starting from the first year and if students encounter difficulties in reading at this stage, they may lose interest in studies or become disheartened. They must feel confident about getting the right kind of guidance and support to encourage them to continue higher studies and develop the habits of deep study through self-motivation for library reading. College level students are already users of Basic English; however, some words may prove to be obstacles for various reasons.

Help-seeking is thus a useful strategy in education, especially in the development of reading skills for EFL students at the college level. Besides providing instant guidance, help-seeking strategy enables collaborative learning, group activities, knowledge sharing, socialization and self-learning. It takes learning from the individual to the group level. The researcher realized the importance of HS in developing the reading skills of EFL students and decided to implement a programme to study the conditions, situations and the mentality of students which are relevant factors in promoting effective reading skills.

1.2. Aims and Objectives

- To observe whether HS is more common in formal or informal situations

- To test whether individuals seek help when they are encouraged to do so.

- To calculate the number of instances when individuals seek help by using the HS phrases taught by the teacher

- To identify factors that prevent individuals from seeking help

- To find out whether students prefer to seek help directly, indirectly, individually or in a study group

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

One faces problems every now and then in course of the journey of life. More often than not, problems can be solved and difficulties can be overcome with the help of others. Of course, it is necessary to ask for help, to seek help when needed. Help-seeking implies a series of definite steps by consulting someone who can solve one's problem and help the seeker to find a solution to the problem. The effect of help-seeking as a learning strategy, particularly in language learning has recently been discovered and a lot of research is being done to employ the strategy effectively in language learning.

Appropriate help-seeking is a necessary skill in becoming a successful self-regulated learner (Newman, 1994), however many students under-use or abuse the help facilities offered to them by

interactive learning environments (ILEs). According to Karabenick and Knapp (2013), HS is a strategy which is fundamental to successful learning, particularly in situations when the student is unable to resolve a problem independently. Karabenick and Knapp (2013) have observed that some students ask for help before they even start thinking about a problem, while others avoid seeking help even after struggling fruitlessly on their own. Ryan and Hicks (1997) have rightly pointed out that HS helps students to address their immediate learning needs. They have also stated that some students who strive to gain understanding and hone their skills look upon HS as a positive learning strategy. There are others who avoid HS especially when it may reflect on their lack of effort. There are students who seek help for reasons other than academic, for example, to promote their social relationships.

Anxiety on the part of EFL students often leads to an unwillingness to communicate. Help-seeking helps to get rid of anxiety to some extent. Students fear being negatively evaluated and are apprehensive about public speaking. Recent studies report evidence that although effective help-seeking behaviour in Interactive Learning Environments is related to better learning outcomes, learners are not using help facilities effectively. Many scholars are of the opinion that "the ability to utilize adults and peers as resources to cope with difficulties encountered while learning is one of the most important abilities children can cultivate" (Gall, 1981: 22).

2.1. Literature Review

A study was conducted by Bram et al, in which Help-seeking behaviour in an intelligent tutoring system was analysed to identify help-seeking strategies, and it was investigated whether the use of these strategies could be predicted by achievement goal scores. Discrete Markov Models and a k-means clustering algorithm were used to identify strategies, and logistic regression analyses ($n = 45$) were used to analyse the relationship between achievement goals and strategy use. Five strategies were identified, three of which were predicted by achievement goal scores. These strategies were labeled Little Help, Click through Help, Direct Solution, Step By Step, and Quick Solution. The Click through Help strategy was predicted by mastery avoidance goals, the Direct Solution strategy was negatively predicted by mastery avoidance goals and positively predicted by performance avoidance goals, and the Quick Solution strategy was negatively predicted by performance approach goals.

Gall (1981) studied Help Seeking behaviour in learning. The writer is of the opinion that learning is seldom an asocial enterprise. Learners are bound to be influenced by the social and cultural environment. One cannot ignore the where, how and why of learning. Learners seek help from others in order to effect changes in their skills and behaviour.

It is something that is very visible in the classroom, which makes it great for teachers, Ms. Kiefer said. Karabenick and Knapp

(2013), a research professor at the University of Michigan, suggests that students will be more inclined to seek help in a supportive, mastery-oriented environment that values failure and struggle as part of the learning process. A struggle is like a composition, suggests Jackson, with many layers at play. You have to know when you need help, and that is a big challenge in most classrooms (Cheek, 1983).

3. METHODOLOGY

The results of the questionnaires were tabulated and analysed. Data obtained from the interviews was considered as complementary to the data obtained from questionnaires. Scores from the pre-test and post-test were analysed. T-score was calculated to understand the difference between the performance in pre-test and post-test. F score was calculated to compare the performance depending on different factors.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Questionnaires were distributed to 1000 students out of which 712 students submitted complete questionnaires. The aim was to test whether students asked for help on encouragement. There were 460 high achievers and 252 low achievers. Interviews were planned for a sub-sample of 50, however, only 32 students responded. The table shows the ratings of students, high and low achievers who showed an

inclination to seek help when encouraged to do so. There were no significant differences in the means of high and low achievers with both groups rating it between 3 (occasionally) and 4 (often) as a preferred way to learn. The questionnaire was based on a rating scale of 1 to 5.

Table 1

Item	N	Mean Score	SD	df	t
Preferred to seek help	454 250	3.73 3.64	1.00 0.96	702	1.228

In the interview, 20 + students said that they had always avoided seeking help until they were encouraged to do so. They had never thought of it as a useful strategy. They had looked upon learning as an individual endeavour. There were 2 students in the group who said that the first thing they did whenever they were presented with something new was to turn to their partners for help even before reading what was presented. They would wait for their partners to complete the task and then help them to do the same. They were pleased to know that they were encouraged to seek help, something which they had always been doing, and creating an impression in their mind that they were doing the right thing. However, they failed to realize that they were expected to seek help only after making independent efforts.

Table 2: Showing t-value of students who sought help in formal/informal situations and who preferred indirect help

Item	N	Mean Score	SD	df	t
Students who sought help in formal situations	449	2.59	1.04	696	0.216
	249	2.61	1.09		
Students who sought help in informal situations	452	3.66	0.94	698	0.351
	248	3.63	0.95		
Students who preferred indirect help	450	2.28	1.07	697	0.761
	249	2.34	1.13		

It can be observed from the table that the highest mean rating was given to students who sought help in informal situations. Comparatively, few students went for indirect help. In the interviews, almost an equal number of students opted for seeking help in formal situations and informal situations. 10 students said that they did not care about the kind of situation, that if they needed help, they would ask for it in any kind of situation. They were more anxious about getting the proper kind of help at the right time rather than worrying about the kind of situation. Few students said that they did not like to ask for help directly. Indirect help was avoided because they were not sure that their problem would be aptly conveyed by the bearer and interpreted by the helper. Most students said that if they needed help desperately, they did not mind asking for it directly. Only 2 students responded otherwise and said that they would rather not ask for help than approaching someone directly.

Table 3: Showing number of students who formed self-study groups

	High achievers	Low achievers	X^2
Formed self-study groups	60	28	6.47 (p< 0.05)

It is evident that in study groups, HS is used beneficially and widely by high achievers. Interviews threw light on some other issues related to HS. One of the factors is the source of help. For course related problems, students preferred to seek help from teachers, whereas for advice/suggestions regarding good study material, books, references, etc. they sought the help of peers. In the case of personal problems, tutors and teachers were totally out. The closest and intimate friends were preferred. Students had to deal with formalities like payment of fees, submissions, assignments, projects, etc. Some students made it a point to approach the administrative staff and confirm last dates, procedures and so on. Others relied on them rather than asking directly for help from the administrative department. Some students never went to the office for important inquiries related to the course.

4.1. Pre-test and post-test for testing the effect of HS for developing reading skills

An equal number of students were included in 3 groups made for the purpose. The control group consisted of 24 students who were neither encouraged to use HS nor taught any useful expressions for seeking help. The first experimental group was encouraged to seek

help. The second experimental group was taught expressions for seeking help. The analysis of the data is given below (Kuloheri, 2016; Tran & Tham, 2018).

4.2. Pre-test

Null –Hypothesis 3: There is no significant difference in the overall achievement of students in the control group, experimental group I and experimental group II before treatment.

Table 4: Pre-treatment difference in overall acquisition of reading skills among the sample groups

Group	Size	Mean	SD	F value	P value
Control	24	47.29	10.063	0.291	0.749
Experimental I	24	47.17	9.416		(Not significant)
Experimental II	24	49.04	9.062		

In the above table, since P-value is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is accepted at 5% level of significance. Hence, it is concluded that there is no significant difference in the overall achievement of English reading skills among the sample groups, before treatment.

4.3. Post-test

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference in the overall acquisition of English vocabulary among the control group and the experimental groups I & II, after treatment.

Table 5: Post-treatment Difference in Overall Achievement of English reading skills among the Sample Groups after treatment

Group	Size	Mean	SD	F value	P value
Control	24	63.88	4.514	7.488	0.001 (Significant at 1% level)
Experimental I	24	64.46	4.809		
Experimental II	24	68.42	3.900		

In the above table, since P-value is less than 0.01, the null hypothesis is not accepted at 1% level of significance. Hence, it is concluded that there is a significant difference in the overall achievement among the sample groups, after treatment.

4.4. Pre-test post-test analysis

Null hypothesis 3: There is no significant difference in the pre-test post-test scores of the control group.

Table 6

Test	Size	Mean	SD	r value	t score
Pre-test	24	47.29	10.063	0.7799	**11.391**
Post test	24	63.88	4.514		

In the above table, since the P value is less than 0.01, the null hypothesis is not accepted at 1% level. Hence, it is concluded that there is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the control group.

4.5. Pre-test post-test analysis of scores of experimental group I

Null Hypothesis 4: There is no significant difference in the means of scores of pre-test and post-test in the experimental group I.

Table 7

Test	Size	Mean	SD	r value	t score
Pre-test	24	47.17	9.416	0.767	**13.024**
Post test	24	64.46	4.809		

In the above table, since the P value is less than 0.01, the null hypothesis is not accepted at 1% level. Hence, it is concluded that there is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group I. The mean scores show that the experimental group I acquired more vocabulary in the post-test than the pre-test.

4.5. Pre-test post-test analysis of scores of experimental group II

Null Hypothesis 5: There is no significant difference in the means of scores of pre-test and post-test in the experimental group II.

Table 8

Test	Size	Mean	SD	r value	t score
Pre-test	24	49.04	9.062	0.462	**11.802**
Post test	24	68.42	3.900		

In the above table, since the P value is less than 0.01, the null hypothesis is not accepted at 1% level. Hence, it is concluded that there is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group II. The mean scores show that the experimental group II acquired more vocabulary in the post-test than the pre-test (Shirvani et al, 2015: Koskenoja, 2019: Tereso et al, 2018).

5. DISCUSSION

Academic mindsets form a foundation for student learning. This makes help-seeking behaviour useful to educators. Help must be easily accessible, given with an open mind, understood by the help seeker form the point of view of his level. Help-seeking is part of the learning process. The study also enabled the researcher to understand the

reasons why help-seeking is avoided. Reasons why help-seeking is avoided (Aleven et al., 2003):

• As children grow older, they become conscious. They do not wish to look foolish in front of their teachers or classmates.

• Some children are afraid to ask for help.

• Students do not like to ask for help from students whom they do not like or from those who are their rivals.

• When asking for help is immediately rewarded, students continue to ask for help in the future. In some cases, help-seeking hurts, it proves to be an embarrassing situation. Sometimes they are turned off or avoided. This prevents students from seeking help any further.

• Some weak students find high-level help difficult.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The findings show that students do not give much importance to the kind of situation, either formal or informal. They seem to be equally comfortable in both kinds of situations as long as they get the desired help. Data obtained from questionnaires and interviews helped the researcher to note that individuals make it a point to seek help

when they are encouraged to do so and they also make use of help-seeking phrases provided by the tutors or instructors. Results show that most of the high achievers prefer to study in groups and exchange help. Help is sought directly by students rather than indirectly. They do not believe that indirect help would solve their problems. It was observed that preference is given to peers and colleagues rather than tutors or instructors.

Few students showed a different kind of behaviour. They avoided seeking help in spite of their acceptance that it would be beneficial to them. Students will not always ask for help even when they are aware that help is needed (Skinner and Madden, 2009). Some students were introverts and personality problems like lack of boldness to approach someone for help prevented them from seeking help. Some students said that they trusted themselves more than others and would rather take efforts to find the meanings and pronunciations from a dictionary. There were students in the group who trusted the tutors or instructors more than they trusted their own colleagues. Students have preferences regarding the source of help. Students often bear an apprehension whether they would get help when sought. If help is denied or avoided, students are discouraged to seek help.

A significant difference is observed in the performance of students in both the experimental groups, in the pre-tests and post-tests. This shows that students who are encouraged to seek help do benefit from it. The performance is also better in case of students who are taught special help seeking expressions and phrases. Yet, results of the

study show beyond doubt that in maximum cases, help seeking proves to be successful for EFL students at first year college level. Encouragement to resort to HS brings to the students a realization that their problems can be solved immediately and easily. Once they start asking for help, it gradually becomes a habit. The researcher believes that regular practice and encouragement will enable the teaching community to create a positive attitude towards HS. Gradually, students will begin to accept it as a normal part of the learning process. When it is encouraged from the first year of college, it will help them to continue the practice as they proceed with higher education.

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