The Case Study on Student-teachers Infrential Understanding

ShewaBasizew (M.Ed.inTEFL) & Assosa University

ZerihunBuli (M.Ed inTEFL) WollegaUnivesity

Abstract : This study aimed to look into impediments in student-teachers' inferential understanding in the reading comprehension practices at GilgelBeles College of Teacher Education, department of English Language, Benishangul Gumuz Regional State. In order to achieve the objectives of the study, a sample was taken from the student-teachers. Since there were 39 English third year students, all of them were included with comprehensive sampling technique. However, 12 respondents filled in inappropriately and their response was totally rejected. Similarly, all the three English instructors were included to be part of the study. Data collection instruments employed for the study were questionnaire, interview and classroom observation. The collected data was analyzed quantitatively for close ended questions. Percentage and frequency were used to analyze the data generated through close-ended questionnaires. On the other hand, data secured though interviews and classroom observations have been qualitatively analyzed and the discussion was made thematically. The study reveals that the main impediments that hinder student-teachers' inferential understanding while practicing for reading comprehension were lack of regular practice, poor background knowledge, the physical environment (high temperature), lack of motivation, large class size and lack of teacher commitment in supporting students. Besides this, the finding reported that loss of attention towards implied meanings and problem of using reading strategies are other impediments that made inferential understanding difficult. Hence, it is recommended that student–teachers need to develop motivation and practice reading activities more frequently. Furthermore, teachers need to show commitment in providing their students with more practical and authentic materials that promote inferential understanding.

Keywords: Inferential understanding, impediments, Reading Comprehension

1.Introduction

Reading comprehension in general and reading for inferential understanding in particular, is the process of constructing meaning from the text. Inference is the reasoning involved in drawing conclusions based on evidence and prior knowledge rather than observation. When inferring, students must draw conclusions when the answer is not clearly stated. They bring personal meaning to the text by connecting it with prior knowledge. Students must use hints or clues in the text or data to figure out the best solution (htt://WWW.candy4waayphonics.com/infe rences.htm).In its broad sense, the goal of all reading instruction is ultimately targeted at helping readers comprehend the text in the study of language. The process of comprehending involves

decoding the writer's message using background knowledge(Lenz, 1999-2005). Reading for inferential meaning is ongoing understanding of what is read. It is the ability that transforms written text into meaningful understanding. It requires the reader to be able to read the words, know the vocabulary, be relatively fluent and understand the language structure underlying the text. In addition, a reader must be able to relate the current text being read to the previous text in order to develop a clear understanding of the entire passage (Koul, 1997).

According to Nuttal (1996)cited in Biniam (1998) the term "inference" literally stands for something derived by reasoning, something that is not directly stated in the text, but only suggested. In this kind of reading, the reader needs to see or go beyond what is directly stated. It also needs the readers' interpretation even though the interpretation is partly based on what is given in the reading text and partly on what the reader knows-the prior knowledge of the reader. In reading for inferential understanding, the reader infers or deduces meanings from the text by himself or herself, makes judgments about what the reader is showing-agreement, disagreement, saying something is right or wrong, bad or good and doing something on the basis of what the reader has already read. Therefore, inferring information is more difficult than locating stated information due to the fact that the reader has to make mental association between external (the reading material) and the internal source (background knowledge) (Reddel & Unrau, 1994).

Obviously, reading is the principal source of knowledge particularly in academic discipline. Conversely, failing to capture the implied/inferential meaning of a given text will most likely results in poor comprehension. In this respect, the student-teachers who joined Gilgel Beles College in 2016 were not competent enough in English language in understanding and interpreting inferential meanings in reading for practicing texts. This was manifested when they respond to questions raised from reading comprehension activities because of their low understanding the idea of the text in reading comprehension questions. Moreover, the problem of identifying and using appropriate reading techniques while reading for inferential understanding were still commonly observed in English language classes. The incompetence of students in reading for inferential understanding at college therefore, is due to the lack of good background knowledge in how to tackle texts rich enough in inferential meaning (Schmitt, 2000).

In addition, Berhanu (2004) has conducted the study that investigated the kind of relationship that might exist between students' reading ability in English and achievement in some courses. And the finding indicated that the correlations between reading ability in English and achievement in some courses were found to be positive. But, the gap still existed on the reading comprehension practice of students. They are unable to understand the message of the passage that they have been provided-implied meaning. They use inappropriate reading strategies at the time of reading. Readers with language skills and strategies will not have the tools to take advantage of the obvious structures and comprehension cues that are part of considerate text nor will they

have the extra tools needed to overcome the barriers of inconsiderate text (Lenz, 1999, 2005).

Thus, this study is aimed at looking into factors impeding student-teachers' inferential understanding of English third year students at Gilgel Beles Teacher Education. Therefore, the finding of this study is expected to contribute for teachers in devising reading texts with more inferential questions that could enhance inferential understanding. More importantly, students could also benefit from this study when they frequently exert their effort to actively work those practical reading passages that promote inferential understanding.

2.Materials and Methods

This section deals with the research setting, research design, participants, sampling procedure, the data collection instruments and techniques of data analysis that were used in conducting the study. This study attempted to look into factors hindering student-teachers' inferential understanding in reading comprehension practice. The study was conducted on third year English department students at GilgelBeles College of Teachers in Benishangul Gumuz. GilgelBeles College is found in Metekel Zone in Madura district which is one of the districts in the region. The researchers have chosen to work on this problem since student-teachers' inferential understanding was extremely low at this college. This was observed while they conducted classes in regular sessions.

This study is a survey study on assessing factors affecting student-teachers' inferential understanding in reading

comprehension skills, in English classes. The third year English language department students and English language instructors in the college were the participants of this study. To this effect, comprehensive sampling technique was used as the number of participant students was very limited .i.e. 39. However, 12 respondents (student-teachers) respond inappropriately and it was subjected to rejection. Purposive sampling was used to engage instructors. Questionnaires, classroom observation and interview were data collecting tools employed for the study. Hannan (2007) pointed out that interviews could be used to collect facts and elicit information about the attitudes, opinions, perspectives and meanings. Therefore, semi-structured interview was intensively used in this study because it is a powerful means of obtaining information.

Besides, close ended questionnaire is also used as it is one of the most popular methods of collecting data in conducting scholarly research. It provides a convenient way of gathering information from a target population (Walonick, 1993).In addition to the previous two data collecting instruments, classroom observation helped the researchers in getting qualitative data that deals with description. Allwright (1998) pointed out that the purpose of systematic classroom observation is to identify and quantify the teaching activities in the classroom that may be considered important for a specific teaching procedure. Walkercited in Steinhouse (1975) stated that classroom observation has many valid and important educational purposes: description of instructional practice, investigation of instructional equities for different groups of students and

improvement of teachers' classroom instruction based on the feedback from the individual classroom or school profiles. Thus, the classroom observation supported by checklists was employed. To this effect, the three English language teachers were observed three times each with the total of 9 observations by using ten closed items checklist designed. The researchers checked and rated how teachers practice reading comprehension

that improves students' inferential understanding in the classrooms.

In this study, two forms of data analysis techniques were employed- qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative data were used to analyze the information obtained through interview and open-ended questionnaires. To analyze data generated through close-ended questionnaire, the quantitative approach was used.

3.Results

Table1.Students' attention on the inferential understanding

No	Items administrated	A	%	B	%	C	%	D	%	E	%
1	The ability to pay attention to the implied meanings of the reading text.	12	44.4	3	11.1	4	14.8	3	11.1	5	18.5
2	The ability to pay attention to the stated meaning of the reading.	2	7.4	5	18.5	6	22.2	6	22.2	8	29.6
3	The opportunity to practice reading for inferential understanding in reading comprehension activities.	5	18.5	9	33.3	8	29.6	2	7.4	3	11.1
4	The opportunity to participate in reading for inferential understanding independently in the class.	3	11.1	12	44.4	4	14.8	5	18.5	3	11.1
5	The effect of lack of practice on students' ability of reading for inferential understanding.	2	7.4	1	0.37	3	11.1	5	18.5	16	59.2

A. Almost not true of me B .Usually not true of me. C. Somewhat true of me.

 D. Usually true of me.   E. Completely or almost completely true of me.

Item 1 in the table 1 shows (44.4%) of the respondents agreed that students did not focus on the inferential (implied meaning) understanding of the reading comprehension. As can be revealed in item 2 in the above table, student-

teachers have high attention towards stated meanings than inferential meanings in their reading comprehension practice. Thatis (29%) students' answers report that almost all of them were practicing and focused on the stated meaning than practicing inferential meanings. Factors contributing to students' low inferential understanding tended to be lack of frequent practice in the classroom and lack of reading

experience at high school. Furthermore, most teachers were not prepared to come up with reading texts that would help them practice reading for inferential meaning. Scholars contend that overcoming poor reading comprehension requires plenty of practice with the focus of key reading strategies (Lucid, 2004).It can be understood from item 3 of the same table that only (33.3%) of students were practicing reading comprehension activities (inferential understanding). Item 4 describes that (44.4%) of the participants noted that they did not often

independently practice reading for inferential meaning.

From item 5, one can note that lack of practice in students' reading comprehension affects the knowledge of inferential understanding. (59.2%) of respondents interaction reports that the statement is truly showing the lack of knowledge of inferential understanding on their practice .As a result, it can be concluded that student-teachers have low tendency in practicing and focusing on inferential meanings during their reading comprehension.

Table 2: Strategies student-teachers used to practice reading for inferential meaning.

No	Items administrated	A	%	B	%	C	%	D	%	E	%
1	The ability to grasp the inferential meaning of the text.	6	22.2	8	29.6	6	22.2	5	18.5	2	7.4
2	The potential to predict the inferential meaning of the passage.	14	51.8	7	25.9	3	11.1	2	7.4	1	3.7
3	The context to guess the meaning of new words through word formation process.	3	11.1	10	37.0	8	29.6	3	11.3	3	11.1
4	Understanding the implied meanings by using some headings (introductory parts)	6	22.2	6	22.2	11	40.7	2	7.4	2	7.4
5	Knowledge of interpreting the writer's intention.	4	14.8	12	44.4	5	18.5	4	14.8	1	3.7
6	Effect of reading strategies to cope up with reading for inferential meaning.	5	18.5	6	22.2	11	40.7	4	14.8	1	3.7

A. Almost not true of me   B .Usually not true of me. C. Somewhat true of me.

D. Usually true of me.   E. Completely or almost completely true of me.

As shown in item 1 in the above table, most (29.65%) of the respondents usually failed to understand or grasp the main idea of reading passages that target inferential understanding. This idea would be easily confirmed and cross-checked through the next question about the strategy they used. That is item 2 (51.8%) of them responded that they perform low in using prediction strategy in reading for inferential understanding. But, Item 3 shows that (37%) of them can guess the meaning of the new words through the analysis of prefixes, roots and suffixes and that paves the way to the inferential understanding of the reading passage. On the contrary, item 6 argues against the knowledge of students about guessing strategy. That is, (37%) of respondents support the intention of the previous question that is student-teachers perform low in guessing meanings of new words (probably key words for inferential understanding) contextually. This implies that they still have reading comprehension

problems. However, the researchers anticipate that those student-teachers have more potential in reading for stated meaning than for inferential understanding. The table shows that there were some changes in using reading strategies in coping with the challenges related to reading for inferential understanding.

Therefore,(40.7%) of the respondents' view under item 4 in the table seems to suggest that there is improvement in reading for inferential understanding by quickly reading the first paragraph of the reading passage when compared to their previous reading comprehension habits. Item 5,(44.4%) of the respondents' response indicated that student-teachers were not usually able to interpret the writer's intention while reading for inferential understanding. These ideas strongly build the concepts clearly analyzed under items 1-6 previously mentioned. Finally, (40.7%) of respondents' response seem to suggest that recently students are more likely to use effective reading strategies to cope with problems regarding reading problems that hinder their understanding of inferential meanings. These ideas complemented with findings from interview and classroom observation.

Table 3:Strategies used by English instructors

No Items Administrated	A %	B %	C %	D %	E %
1. The effort of teacher in using different reading strategies, scanning, skimming	5 18.5	9 33.3	8 29.6	3 11.1	3 11.1
2. The effort of teacher in using different methods (pre-reading, while-reading, post-reading.)	6 22.2	8 29.6	6 22.2	3 11.1	4 14.8
3. Guessing the meanings of new words contextually.	1 3.7	3 11.1	7 25.9	10 37.0	6 22.2
4. The ability of using key words for predication of the inferential meaning.	5 18.5	10 37.0	6 22.2	3 11.1	3 11.1

A. Almost not true of me   B .Usually not true of me. C. Somewhat true of me.

   D. Usually true of me.   E. Completely or almost completely true of me.

Item 1 table 3 depicts whether the English instructors use different reading strategies to enhance students' inferential understanding while practicing reading comprehension with different methodologies in coping with the challenges that the students encountered. As can be seen (33.3%) and (29.6%) teachers do not usually use different strategies or methods to make students practice and cope with the challenges of reading for the inferential meaning. Again the data proves that instructors never use their efforts in using different reading strategies to support the learning in general and the reading practice in particular. Item 2 shows that student-teachers do not usually use their effort in using different methodologies to enhance practice reading activities independently. This creates problems on student-teachers ability to understand inferential meanings effectively .This is because they

do not use reading strategies like guessing and using key words for prediction effectively to undergo reading comprehension for inferential meanings. The study reveals that findings align with the data gathered through the classroom observation. Item 3 from the above table indicated that (37%) of the respondents usually let students to use contextual clues while they undertake reading. In the meantime, (25.9) of the respondents revealed that they somewhat practice the context as part of using inferential understanding.

4.Discussion

The objective of this study was to look into factors hindering the student-teachers' inferential understanding in reading comprehension practices. The finding from questionnaire, interview and classroom reported that students' low inferential understanding in reading comprehension practice emanates from various factors. Students are ineffective in paying attention to the implied meanings of the reading text. Students manifested poor performance in practicing reading for inferential understanding. This happened due to infrequent practice in the classroom and less exposure before they joined college. Having less prior knowledge about what to read is also found to be another factor which includes the knowledge, skills and abilities that students bring to the learning process. As noted by Back (2002) essential to comprehension is the process of relating to prior knowledge - the ability to integrate new information with previous life experience and texts read.

Moreover, most teachers were not prepared to come up with reading texts that would help the students to practice reading for inferential meaning.

However, one of the interviewee instructors who sometimes practices inferential understanding put his idea as follows.

I make students read different texts for inferential understanding. Sometimes I

bring small and pieces of paragraphs and essays to the class that enables them to

practice reading for inferential understanding. As a result, there are some

observed changes when compared to previous reading habits.

On top of this, the classroom observation depicts, sometimes they brought small paragraphs that target reading for stated meaning to the class but such texts were not enough in ensuring inferential understanding. On the other hand, an interview made with the three English language teachers revealed that student-teachers have poor reading experience in extracting inferential meanings. This is due to mainly lack of regular practice and lack of attention towards implied meanings. For instance, an interview held with one of the instructor which would strengthen the above idea was quoted as follows.

In my teaching experience, I have observed that students did not have good

background knowledge in reading and they often did not understand inferential

texts. They were not motivated to read the texts given to them. They have had

little reading comprehension practice in high school.

The other impediments cited are related to classroom size. Large classroom size affected the teaching learning process

since the teacher faced problems in facilitating everything important to the student with respect to reading comprehension. In addition to class room size, the physical environment was the other factor that affected students' inferential understanding. Barbara (2006) stated that "Heat and cold have been found to affect learning since the brain is the master control center of the body. When it is too cold or too hot, the brain is constantly reminding the body to do something about this condition. It will be difficult for the student to focus on his or her lesson because every minute or so, the brain will be sending messages. An interview held with instructors verifies that the temperature of the area has its own impact. As the temperature becomes hot, it is difficult to teach and manage classroom conditions effectively. To sum up, it is possible to generalize that the effect of classroom size, the physical environment-high temperature and lack of commitment of English language instructor affected student-teachers' knowledge of inferential understanding.

According to Lenz (1999), the most practical way of thinking about teaching reading comprehension is to organize instruction according to how you want students to think about strategies. For this reason, the most straightforward way of organizing comprehension strategies is to think about strategies that one might use before reading, during reading, and after reading. This would lay a foundation for them to easily grasp the main idea of the text they are exposed to read. According to the response gained from the respondents, most of them usually failed to understand or grasp the main idea of reading passages that target inferential understanding. The study revealed that student-teachers were poor

in guessing meanings of new words (probably key words for inferential understanding) contextually. This implies that they still have reading comprehension problems. They failed to identify key-words, prediction of the theme, problem of making mental interaction with the reading text, problem of using background knowledge and experience to come closer to the inferential meanings

However, the researchers anticipate that those student-teachers have more exposure in reading for stated meaning than for inferential understanding. In connection to the above justification, the respondents' response indicated that student-teachers were not usually able to predict the main ideas (for inferential meaning) by using the key words and were not able to interpret the writer's intention while reading for inferential understanding. The finding from the classroom observation and interview indicated that student-teachers were poor in using the reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, prediction, guessing, and also poor in mental association with the newly provided reading text. In turn, this can create frustration in student-teachers ways of learning when practicing reading for inferential meaning independently. The classroom observation and an interview result show that teachers did not experience in using different models of reading texts that facilitates students' knowledge about inferential understanding and its concept in teaching reading comprehension.

5. Conclusions

On the basis of the findings, the following conclusions have been drawn.

1. Findings indicated that infrequent practice was one of the challenges for the students in extracting inferential meanings in reading comprehension. The study reveals that this problem was emerged from lack of motivation towards reading for inferential meanings; poor high school background knowledge about reading comprehension. Besides, the impact of large class size and the physical environment (high temperature) of the area tended to affect the student-teachers' inferential understanding.

2. Teachers' commitment in designing or preparing authentic reading materials and in supporting student-teachers were the other impediment for the absence of practice in English language classes. Consequently, the performance of the students in inferential understanding was not encouraging.

3. Finally, the findings show that student-teachers were ineffective in using the reading strategies. Such as prediction, guessing, mental association with the reading text, poor in interpreting, in using contextual clues and in understanding the intended message to overcome the problems they had been encountered. Therefore, they were poor in using the different reading strategies.

6. Recommendations

Based on the data analyzed and the conclusions drawn from the analysis the researchers forwarded the following recommendations. Student-teachers should spend substantial amount of time in practicing reading comprehension activities either independently or in groups that could facilitate the development of the knowledge for inferential understanding. They should be committed to use different authentic reading materials that would promote inferential understanding.

Teachers should be committed in designing or preparing authentic reading materials and in supporting student-teachers by maximizing the practice time for inferential reading so that comprehension would be easier to learn.. Therefore, the classroom teacher is supposed to deal with key-points, background of the text and also some interpretations so as to make efficient readers in understanding inferential meanings.

The teacher has to teach reading strategies such as prediction, guessing, mental association interpreting and contextual clues that directly contributes for the students' success in inferential understanding. Thus, the researchers would invite other researchers who make further investigation on the area as lots of college students still perform under expectations in reading comprehension.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest between the authors.

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