Digitalizing the Language Input in Larkana, Sindh: Focus on Teaching Reading Skills

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Abstract

This research studies the use of digital devices/tools/means in teaching L2 (English) reading skills to intermediate (XII) students of district Larkana in Pakistan's Sindh province. Drawing upon the input hypothesis, this research demonstrates how reading as a skill can be effectively acquired using digital platforms. Qualitative data analysis culled through observations of an intermediate class consisting of fifteen students and their English language teacher was conducted to demonstrate how input can be digitalized using sophisticated gadgets, such as smartphones, notepads, and laptops, and how the digitalized language input can help the L2 students acquire reading skills. Findings demonstrated how the digitalized input along with the appropriate use of traditional teaching methods is an effective way of helping the L2 learners acquire phonic awareness, reading fluency (assimilation, elision, vocabulary learning), critical, and integrated (literal, inferential, and evaluative) reading skills.

Keywords: acquire; digital; input; reading skills; social media

Introduction

This research takes place against the backdrop of the burgeoning body of research on the digitalization of reading skills (Liu et al., 2018; Neville et al., 2009; Gutiérrez-Colón, et al., 2020). These studies discuss the operationalization of phonological awareness in developing effective strategies for teaching English reading skills to speakers of other languages. The studies conceptualize language input as learners' exposure to language through reading or listening. Other researchers have focused on how reading input can be digitalized using modern gadgets (Reiber-Kujpers et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2021; Naumann and Goldhammer, 2017; Taipale, 2015; Bold and Wagstaff, 2017).

Similarly, this study investigates how L2 (English) reading skills can be digitalized, focusing on an intermediate class in Larkana, a district in Pakistan's Sindh province. This study deploys 'digitalizing reading input' as a conceptual framework for analyzing the data. Besides, the study also demonstrates the practicability of such a conceptual framework in the classroom. Many researchers have already employed this conceptual lens in various contexts to examine the digitalization of reading skills and its effects on students/readers (Singer and Alexander, 2016; Chen et al., 2013; Hukill et al., 2017).
Given the positive effects of the digitalization process, the practice of digital reading has been widespread, and the traditional mode of reading is in decline (Hillesund, 2010). However, research focusing on digitalizing reading skills in Larkana's context is scarce. Therefore, this research analyzes how digital tools can help improve the L2 reading skills of students in Larkana.

**Literature Review**

Research studies related to acquiring L2 reading skills are now discussed. Researchers in Sindh's context have focused on proactive strategies and translanguaging, which boost up L2 skills; however, none of the studies (see Ali, 2021a; Ali, 2021b) used the digitized i+1 concept to explore how it encourages the acquisition of L2 (English) reading skills in Sindh.

Several studies have demonstrated how digital tools/gadgets can develop L2 learners' reading skills (Liu et al., 2018; Neville et al., 2009; Gutiérrez-Colón, et al., 2020; Jiang and Ren, 2020). Smartphones, iPads, laptops, and other devices connected to the high-speed internet can effectively improve L2 learners' reading skills. Digital gadgets can facilitate students to access online/offline reading resources and improve their reading skills (Zano, 2020). There are many programs that both researchers and teachers can utilize to enrich L2 learners' reading skills in a wide range of contexts. Akyol et al. (2014) have effectively used reading enrichment programs to improve L2 learners' reading skills. They employed one subject research technique and between subjects multiple-baseline levels model belonging to this technique. Moreover, the researchers used Ekwall and Shankar's reading inventory and reading comprehension test to collect data which were qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed to demonstrate how a meaningful environment can be created and how a reading enrichment program can be implemented to improve L2 learners' reading skills (see Akyol et al., 2014).

In Australia's context, McDonnell (2014) discusses the vitality of L2 learners' acquisition of reading skills, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Using qualitative analysis, he demonstrates how 'the whole language approach has rendered Australia a comparatively slow country than other English-speaking countries when acquiring reading skills.

El-Koumy's research-based book (2004) also develops the reading and other language-related skills. The researcher sets forth the weaknesses of both the skills-based approach and the whole language approach (El-Koumy, 2004). He then draws upon the strengths of the approaches and presents his theory of developing language skills, including the reading skills, which are the concern of the current research. He also highlights the importance of error correction and assessment in acquiring reading skills. Finally, the researcher integrates the different language-related skills to suggest the whole language approach, which he, unlike McDonnell (2014), claims plays a vital role in acquiring language skills, including the reading skills (El-Koumy, 2004).

There is also another research work conducted by El-Koumy (2006). In the research article, he used a quantitative, experimental design. He randomly chose seventy-two students from Manouf Secondary School for Boys, Egypt (El-Koumy, 2006). Afterward, he randomly assigned thirty-six participants to the control and experimental groups, respectively (El-
Koumy, 2006). In this way, he exposed both groups to a pretest to assess their referential and inferential reading comprehension (El-Koumy, 2006). The experimental group was given Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA), whereas the control group was given the traditional instruction about reading comprehension. This experimentation lasted for five months; afterward, the groups were post-tested to determine the results (El-Koumy, 2006). Data were analyzed in accordance with Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) and the T-test (El-Koumy, 2006). Findings showed a significant difference in both inferential comprehension and referential comprehension in favor of the experimental group (El-Koumy, 2006). Thus, the study demonstrated how DRTA is a highly essential technique for teaching reading skills of L1 or L2.

Another researcher discusses how many learners academically struggle because their teachers/professors do not teach the required reading skills to them. She also considers that reading at the secondary level is always different from the reading at higher levels, which all university students always encounter (Hermida, 2009). She suggests a sharp line between superficial and deep reading, specifically at the university level. If students are given effective, required instruction about reading strategies and are provided needed opportunities to practice such strategies, the students will manage to acquire the desired degree of reading skills (Hermida, 2009). Moreover, she recommends that the academic, aligned courses are helpful in improving students’ reading skills at both secondary level and higher level.

In Sindh's context, a province in Pakistan, Ali (2021a) used translanguaging as a pedagogical tool to demonstrate how it facilitates students in using their L1 knowledge in acquiring L2 skills. In another study, Ali (2021b) demonstrated how proactive teaching strategies in Sindh and Pakistan's higher education institutions could help develop learners' L2 skills. This study shows how digital tools can improve students' reading skills in Larkana's context.

**Methods**

This section contains the data description, research design, and data analysis method used in this study.

**Data Description**

Observations of an intermediate ESL class in Larkana's context were used as data for this study. Both the teacher and the students were aware that the observations were being made for a research purpose. The ESL class consisted of a male teacher and fifteen intermediate students. Eight students were males, while seven students were females. The teacher taught phonic awareness, reading fluency (assimilation, elision, vocabulary learning), critical, and integrated (literal, inferential, and evaluative) reading skills. The process of teaching the reading skills continued three weeks in a class that was taken thrice a week. Each class lasted an hour and was observed. In total, observations of nine hours were used to collect data.

**Research Design**

The research design used in this study can be categorized into four stages.
**Stage 1: Determining Criteria for Observations.** The nine-hour-long observations that lasted three weeks in an ESL class were made based on a list of criteria: (1) it should be an intermediate ESL class, (2) it should contain both boys and girls as students, (3) it should focus on teaching L2 (English reading skills (4) and the readings skills should be taught/learned using digital tools (modern gadgets, WhatsApp, email, YouTube, etc.).

**Stage 2: Selection of Relevant Excerpts from the Observation.** Relevant observations were manually registered on a notebook and a smartphone notepad.

**Stage 3: Codification of Relevant Observations.** The relevant observations were codified to identify patterns and generate themes.

**Stage 4: Qualitative Analysis.** In this stage, data were analyzed qualitatively using the concept of ‘digitalizing input’. This research is qualitative in its form, content, and analysis. Since the current research work traces L2 students' progress, using a qualitative method helps describe and narrate characteristics of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

Ethical protocols, such as confidentiality, have also been ensured in this research.

**Results and Discussion**

Reading fluency can be acquired when sufficient reading input is provided to an L2 learner using modern gadgets as pedagogical tools. The comprehensible input that an L2 student can easily understand plays a vital role in effectively acquiring L2 reading and other skills (Krashen, 1988). However, this comprehensibility and acquisition can be improved if digital devices are used in L2 teaching/learning contexts.

The students observed in this study were suggested by their teacher to access different reading material by browsing the internet through their smartphones or notepads. As observation demonstrated, their L2 teacher usually provides instruction about reading strategies to L2 students while emphasizing the role of online reading material and e-dictionaries, which are easily accessible through smartphones/notepads/laptops.

Observations also demonstrated that the L2 teacher always shares reading materials (neither too difficult nor much easier) with his students through email or WhatsApp. The reading curriculum developed by their teacher is ascending in its design as it starts from teaching basic reading skills to advanced reading skills. For instance, he first teaches basic reading skills using more straightforward readings, and after the assessment shows L2 students' successful acquisition of the basic skills, he moves to the next level. As the students proceed in their academic reading skills, they will encounter such readings and reading skills that will be a step ahead of their current stage of learning. This acquisition of L2 leading skills can be improved by employing digital tools (Liu et al., 2018).

Moreover, it was often observed that the L2 learners' phonic awareness was developed using smartphones. The learners received comprehensible input through traditional teaching and digitized means (novel strategies). Traditionally, digital devices can make the input more effective (David, 2021). When giving the digitized input, the teacher ensures that his students are learning reading-based, new information that is not far beyond their current reading level (e.g., reading fluency). Instruction of such a digitalized, comprehensible input develops L2
students' reading fluency, and they read texts at a fast enough pace to be well understood. In this way, the teacher teaches his students, which Lim, Whitehead, and Choi (2021) referred to as the digitalization of learning reading.

Apart from providing L2 learners with opportunities of improving their L2 reading fluency, he gives them readings as their homework. When they go to their homes with new ideas of reading fluently, they try to practice the concepts by doing their homework digitally and in traditional ways. The teacher also contacts through smartphone calls/emails with his students' parents advising them on how to monitor their children's reading progress at home. If possible, he makes reports of the progress by collaborating with the students' parents. Although he teaches reading fluency to the L2 learners using smartphone reading applications and reading material in class, it is their homes where they discover the practical value and results of the hybrid input. The following day, when the students come to the class, they feel confident. After a few months, as the teacher stated, they will feel very positive when they find themselves fluent in their L2 reading. Moreover, this effective acquisition of L2 reading skills comes about because the students and their teacher effectively collaborate in digitalizing the reading input.

A higher degree of reading fluency can be best acquired by instructing required input to L2 learners with digital tools; the teacher usually equips students with L2 assimilation, elision, and vocabulary. Such instruction plays an integral part in helping L2 students achieve a certain degree of reading fluency. Assimilation is a process of sound change in which the phonetics of one speech segment sounds like another segment in a word so that it may always result in changing of phonemes.

Assimilation lessons are taught by playing native speaker talks, dialogues, or videos on YouTube which help L2 students to get familiarized with assimilation through modern gadgets and develop reading fluency. The digitalized reading input is easily comprehensible for students. Learning and practicing assimilation using digital and traditional means add to the smoothness, flawlessness, and accuracy of L2 learners' reading.

Elision also helps L2 students to improve their accuracy of reading fluency. Elision is when sounds, especially three consecutive consonant phonemes, are subjected to sound omission. Except for two outer consonants, the one that comes between is usually omitted while reading or speaking (e.g., in bristle). Elision also omits bilabial consonants when they arrive at the end of a word preceded by a nasal, bilabial consonant: 'lamb' is an example that ends at a bilabial consonant sound /b/ preceded by nasal, bilabial consonant /m/. Such input is given to L2 students through YouTube videos on elision so that they can play these videos repeatedly and achieve comprehensible input in relation to elision. In this way, the teacher deploys digital tools as an effective teaching strategy to instruct knowledge of elision to his students.

Knowledge of L2 vocabulary also helps L2 students acquire reading fluency when social media and modern smartphones are appropriately used. The acquisition of L2 words and their categories, functions, forms, and meaning digitalizes the reading process. The knowledge of L2 vocabulary transmitted in such a way makes reading for L2 students an intellectually enjoyable adventure. Even though the acquisition of this knowledge takes time, the more vocabulary L2 students acquire, the more moments of enjoyment they feel when reading L2 texts.
Moreover, L2 students slowly begin to make sense of vocabulary items and employ such accumulating knowledge to improve their L2 reading fluency. The teacher sometimes uses entertaining, online stories to make learning L2 vocabulary fun. Thus, the teacher digitizes the reading input to help his students acquire L2 vocabulary and reading fluency.

Development of L2 Critical Reading Comprehension: Employing the Digitized, Comprehensible Input

Reading without understanding what one reads is no reading in the real sense of the term. Reading as a process must always be characterized by negotiating, constructing, and comprehending the meaning of texts in a context. Moreover, the process of understanding meaning must not be taken for granted because what one reads on a piece of paper/screen is not always the objective representation of truth or reality. L2 students should always guard against the propaganda hidden behind the textual lines. Therefore, it is suggested that students must learn to read critically because such reading enables an L2 student to question the claims of specific texts that the student reads.

Critical reading also enables L2 learners to question the claims of objectivity that may be found in second language texts. They can counter such claims that are repeatedly upheld in academic texts. Additionally, developing critical consciousness among students requires consistency of efforts and expertise of instructions. Teachers usually comply with such requirements using the digitized input to instruct criticism strategies to L2 students (see Liu et al., 2018). Hence, L2 students can improve their L2 critical reading comprehension by digitalizing learning (Lim et al., 2021).

The knowledge about critical reading strategies, which the teacher imparts to L2 students, is delivered in the best possible way by employing online videos on critical thinking, which assist the traditional lesson input. In the first phase, the teacher provides students access to online reading material. Afterward, using digital tools, he gradually equips students with all necessary knowledge of critical reading and enables them to apply their ability in reading texts. L2 students mostly read texts literally, but when they have understood the scope and meaning of the concerned texts, only then are they asked to read the texts critically. Moreover, this transition from literal reading to critical reading makes students successful L2 readers who can question whatever they find which fails to comply with logic, trust, belief, or reality.

Similarly, critical reading also enables students to compare and contrast their background knowledge against what they critically read in class. Furthermore, critical reading also makes students develop learned analysis and arguments in the L2 language. Such reading can enhance their understanding and passion for reading about a topic. More importantly, the knowledge about critical reading can be transferred to students using digital devices, such as smartphones, notepads, etc. In short, the findings of this research suggest that L2 critical consciousness can be developed effectively among students using digitized input.

The above discussion stands because the L2 critical reading skills instructed through digital devices and means are essential for students to learn. These enable the students to counter the fabricated propaganda embedded in many L2 textual constructions. Moreover, critical consciousness also makes the reading process a highly motivated mechanism in which
students' thirst for knowledge further increases. Moreover, critical reading can help overcome boredom that most students tend to feel when it comes to L2 reading tasks. In addition to overcoming boredom, critical reading also consolidates the personality of L2 learners who tend not to take things for granted.

**Development of L2 Literal, Inferential and Evaluative Levels of Reading Comprehension: Utilizing the Digitized Input**

After helping students to achieve L2 fluent reading skills and critical reading skills, the teacher embarks upon a much more comprehensive approach to teaching literal, inferential, and evaluative reading skills to L2 students. Speaking precisely, at this level, L2 reading skills are integrated to improve reading digitally. This teaching approach can be developed by using online means and offline digital tools when teaching literal, inferential, and evaluative skills (see Amiryousefi, 2017). The teacher guides L2 students to read literally, inferentially, and critically in one reading simultaneously. Such integrated teaching can be brought about using digital tools.

The teacher always instructs students to be cautious when the integrated approach to L2 reading skills is developed and deployed. L2 students also feel that they have completed the first phase of their L2 reading skills, and thereby they positively and confidentially prepare themselves for further, advanced undertaking. When the day finally comes, students curiously come to attend the class. The teacher always begins his lecture enthusiastically, considering the effective use of digital devices that can assist in acquiring reading skills (Zano, 2020). Besides, he often engages his students to participate in the class so that whatever 'input' they are given becomes quickly 'comprehensible' with the assistance of online resources. In this way, teachers guide and facilitate students to do literal, inferential, and evaluative reading simultaneously. When the teacher is done with his lecture, he invites L2 students to ask topic-related questions and search their answers online using smartphones/notepads. Some of the students ask questions about the simultaneous employment of L2 reading skills, and their questions are answered in a very cooperative, persuasive manner. Afterward, the teacher provides some readings to students through email or WhatsApp and asks them to pick an interesting reading. When they have done so, he asks them to go through the readings employing all the skills they have been taught.

Finally, L2 students start reading in a literal, inferential, and evaluative manner. They are quite able to understand texts as they appear on a piece of paper in their literal sense; simultaneously, they also engage themselves in the process of inferential reading by being able to read between the lines; moreover, students can also evaluate strengths and weaknesses of the assigned reading text. At this reading stage, they begin to develop a much more comprehensive process that simultaneously assimilates literal, inferential, and evaluative reading.

The use of digital means is very effective in developing students' L2 reading skills (Jiang and Ren, 2020). As discussed in this research, the online means and offline digital tools make acquiring reading skills more accessible and more effective. Furthermore, relevant YouTube videos add to lesson comprehensibility when students are asked to watch these videos online. Similarly, these digital sources help language teachers in what McDonnell (2014) calls
integrating different strategies to develop literal, inferential, and evaluative reading skills among L2 students.

**Conclusion**

This current research used observations as a data collection tool to examine how the teacher uses digital devices/tools/means to teach reading skills to L2 students. The site of observations was an intermediate ESL class in Larkana, Sindh, Pakistan. Moreover, the recent research has also successfully answered the research question in accordance with the research objective. Findings demonstrated how the language teacher could use digital devices/means apart from traditional teaching strategies to help his students acquire phonic awareness, reading fluency (assimilation, elision, vocabulary learning), critical, and integrated (literal, inferential, and evaluative) reading skills. The selective use of traditional methods and digital teaching strategies also resonates with what Amiryousefi (2017) calls merging flipped and conventional classrooms. This research was limited to acquiring L2 reading skills; however, more research can be conducted on acquiring L2 speaking, writing, and listening skills using the digitized hypothesis in Sindh's context.

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