

The Effect of Shifting to Student-Centered Learning: Implementing Student-Centered Reading

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Abstract

The "traditional" forms of teaching are extremely familiar to students, who frequently favor learning that is focused on receiving instruction and reproducing knowledge. This study aims to examine the effects of these traditional forms of teaching practices, such as teacher-centered learning on EFL learners' engagement in implementing student-centered reading. The study uses an observation checklist and interview as tools for collecting data from twelve EFL elementary reading classes and their teachers. The statistically analyzed data has shown that whenever reading activities demand deeper, personalized discussion, the learners engage less and rely more on their teachers for assistance. When interacting with non-communicative tasks, EFL students take full ownership of their own learning; however, when interacting with communicative tasks, they require teacher prompting. Furthermore, learners' collaboration with each other on achieving reading tasks was, in most cases, either done to some extent or in a very limited range. Thus, EFL learners maintained dependency in carrying out reading activities through their preference for non-communicative tasks over communicative tasks and their collaboration upon reading activities in a limited range. Based on this, the design of communicative reading activities demands prompting, and learners need to be encouraged and guided for engagement. Students may be more receptive and interested if they are more informed about the advantages and effectiveness of student-centered learning. In spite of the effectiveness of student-centered learning in many contexts, it needs to be redefined to fit within the culture and specific EFL learning and teaching contexts.

Keywords: student-centered, EFL learners, reading, activities, tasks

1. Introduction

Gaining better results from language learning is indeed dependent on the quality of instruction used by the teacher to manage learning activities. The instructor is critical in creating a learning environment in which knowledge is co-constructed by the teacher and students rather than directly transmitted by the teacher. As a result, the conventional function of teacher as mere transmission of knowledge is transformed into advisor and facilitator of the learning process, with the goal of encouraging students to develop their own answers to offered problems. That enables students to put all their focus on their knowledge. The reason for this shift is mainly due to what has been noticed: the standards of most EFL learners' communicative competence are obviously declining in the 21st century, in spite of the updated reforms, facilities, and availability of multi-channels of learning. Thus, the new paradigm of classroom learning that shifted the focus from teaching to learning is highly supported, for instance, by McCombs and Whistler (1997), Geisli (2009), and Amiri and Saberi (2017). The student-centered method is a method of teaching that focuses on student interests and needs, and a teacher who acts more as a facilitator than a traditional lecturer allows students to explore their interests, ask questions, and collaborate with their peers (Llego, 2022). Adult learners, on the other hand, sometimes find it difficult to make the transition to student-centered learning because many initially object to what they see as the instructor's abdication of responsibility for managing instruction. However, being aware that this might happen can help to open up a discussion about the changes and help learners and instructors negotiate new roles. Many EFL Sudanese teachers proceed to practice traditional forms of teaching in which the students put all their focus on the teacher and s/he is the major source of information. Most of these classes still maintain teacher-centered strategies. In other words, these classes are still characterized by a situation where students are passive recipients of knowledge, and their dominance of classroom teaching time by increasing teacher-talking time (TTT) persists. In Sudan, as I have been

English language teacher for nine years, we rely on teacher-centered activities due to the constraints that are placed on us as EFL teachers, which force us to complete courses at a particular point in time. Furthermore, the majority of EFL Sudanese teachers teach English to enable their students to pass their exams. Therefore, various influential factors raised that influence on learners' attitudes, which hindered the majority of language practice opportunities in favor of students. Even though these classes are experienced in implementing student-centered learning through reading classes, they are still characterized by a situation where students are passive recipients of knowledge, and their dominance of classroom teaching time by increasing teacher-talking time (TTT) persists. Undoubtedly, student-centered learning has numerous benefits, including increased learners' engagement and motivation, enhanced critical thinking and problem-solving skills, improved communication skills, greater independence, and personalized learning. According to McCombs & Whistler (1997) learner motivation and actual learning increase when learners have a stake in their own learning and are treated as co-creators in the learning process. Additionally, students exhibit higher achievement when they can credit their success to their own abilities and hard work rather than luck (North Central Regional Laboratory, 2000), and students who succeed in taking on new responsibilities feel good about themselves and gain confidence (Aaronsohn, 1996). Despite the advantages of student-centered learning, it is nevertheless difficult for teachers to be open to change and adjust their instruction habits. This study aims to examine the effects the teacher-centered learning practices on EFL learners' engagement in implementing student-centered reading. It intends to answer these questions: To what extent does the implementation of student-centered reading affect students' interactions? What are the most influential reading activities on learners' interactions when they use student-centered reading? And what are the major factors influencing the implementation of student-centered EFL reading classes from EFL teachers' perspectives?

2. Background

The emphasis of education, particularly English learning and teaching (ELT), has long shifted away from a teacher-centered classroom environment, which is commonly referred to as the traditional mode of instruction, and toward more learner-centered teaching approaches. Thus, teaching in student-centered learning environments contrasts with the traditional idea of the teacher as being in charge of knowledge transfer. Llego (2022) defines a student-centered classroom as one in which students actively participate in their learning. This type of classroom is frequently more effective than a traditional lecture-style environment since it allows students to learn at their own pace and participate actively in their education. There are "more opportunities for transference of skills, strategies, thinking styles and approaches, attitudes, and so on" when students collaborate in teams, (Hosseini, 2014). However, a student-centered learning environment can be rather difficult for some students, especially those who come from societies where there is a considerable power distance between instructor and student (McFarlane & Berg, 2008; Pham Thi Hong, 2011). According to a number of the reviewed articles, especially those from non-western countries, student-centered learning is a western practice that is being imposed on non-western educational systems without taking into account the local culture and traditions (Jordan et al., 2014; Pham Thi Hong, 2011; Yusoff et al., 2013). Because students do not expect to be active learners who take responsibility of their learning. In reading lessons, students are encouraged to actively participate and assume primary responsibility for getting meaning from the texts. Jones (2007) asserts that teachers can help their students understand reading texts by engaging them in discussion activities where they can support one another and exchange opinions. However, Jones points out that it's advised for teachers to advise students to read the text before the lesson begins while instructing them in reading. For example, they read text independently to answer skimming and scanning questions. The main causes of EFL learners' difficulties in reading skills, according to research studies by Khan et al. (2020; Alotaibi, 2022; and Abeeleh and Al-Sobh, 2021), are a limited vocabulary, a lack of self-study exercises, and difficulty understanding the meaning of the text. As a result, the primary duty of teachers in reading classes is to focus on assisting the understanding of new words and clearly instructing their students to obtain the meaning of the text correctly by answering comprehension questions. Sudanese teachers provide little opportunity for students to experience authentic English learning experiences, which may be due to many reasons, such as the fact that EFL Sudanese learners are false beginners, using teacher-centered teaching as a strategy of teaching in the most classes, time constraints that are imposed on teachers, etc.

2.1 Creating a Student-Centered Classroom

To move toward the student-centered learning paradigm, instructors must be willing to prioritize learning while sharing power with students in the classroom (Barr & Tagg, 1995). This can be done in a thoughtful way through planning and the use of incremental steps. First, teachers can assist students in creating objectives for themselves and provide them with self-directed activities that will help them improve their self-esteem and learning abilities. As a result, teachers feel more confident in their ability to regulate the new environment and learners are inspired to take more responsibility for their learning. After that, teachers can help students identify their preferred methods of learning

and then use the most effective ones. Learning outcomes are improved when learners participate in decision-making. The teacher acts as a facilitator who goes over the student-set standards, timeframes, resource lists, collaborations, etc. when the learner is self-directed, that is, when he or she sets his or her own goals and standards.

When using the student-centered approach, teachers shift from whole-class instruction to small-group and individual inquiry. Since these groups are diverse, differentiated education is needed. The instructor focuses on subjects that small groups are interested in and stimulates inquiry into those areas rather than keeping students occupied with individual assignments.

Learners also benefit from reading and using authentic materials rather than textbooks and basal readers. There is now a balance between time spent studying material and memory and time spent learning how to learn and comprehend content. Thus, the instructor no longer serves as the "sage on the stage" but rather as the "guide on the side." Less instruction is given and more facilitation is done, with students taking on more of the organization, creation, questioning, and problem-solving responsibilities.

2.2 Stages of a Reading Lesson

It is the responsibility of the teacher to create teaching and learning activities that will engage students in critical thinking through a variety of tasks. The teacher must also continuously provide opportunities for students to actively use and develop their language abilities as well as practice higher order thinking skills, which include information analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. This will help students transfer skills that they can apply in the real world, along with expressing their ideas with their peers in activities and tasks that force them to use language both spontaneously and imaginatively. In the student-centered reading classes, teachers function more as coaches or facilitators, while students embrace a more active and collaborative role in their own learning. There are many activities that can be applied in the reading classes. However, this study will depend on the most common ones that are developed by the BBC-British Council. According to the BBC-British Council (2011), the main activities that are usually considered in teaching reading lessons are as follows: The first one is "lead in," in which teachers activate students' existing knowledge of the topic and generate their interest in the theme/topic of the lesson. Pre-teach selected vocabulary is the second activity that is designed to clarify key lexicon needed to help students understand the text and complete the next task. The third activity is the reading for gist task, which is used to encourage students to read for gist and get an overview of the text. The reading for specific information task is the fourth activity that is applied to give learners a better understanding of the text, such as identifying facts, figures, people, places, times, etc. The detailed comprehension task is the fifth one, which is used to give learners a deeper understanding of the text by identifying emotions, beliefs, opinions, intentions, and attitudes. The sixth one is post-text discussion, which is usually a speaking (or writing) task to allow students to comment on the text and respond to it in a personal way as well as widen the context of the text. It is obvious that students' responsibility for their own learning increases sequentially from one activity to the next, and their ownership of the learning process is gradually maximized.

2.3 Feedback on Some Related Previous Studies

This section is an overview of some research papers' results about the challenges in implementing student-centered learning, especially those that are caused by the learners' attitudes. According to Tawalbeh and AlAsmari (2015), student attitudes toward student-centered learning were a barrier for 77.1% of teachers. Although these studies all agree that student-centered learning is an effective learning technique for students today, they demonstrate various attitudes among EFL learners and highlight the challenges of using this method as a learning strategy. According to the findings of Tani's (2005) study, students in Asian countries prefer to remain silent during the teaching and learning process because they are afraid of making mistakes. Due to students' favorable "know-receiver" positions in the classroom and low engagement levels in the teaching and learning process, making the students less critical thinkers. As a result of teacher-centered learning, there is also a culture that fosters the development of positive student traits. According to Kumar's (2016) study, the majority of students were uninterested in learning using the student-centered approach because of a variety of reasons, including fear, a lack of interest and confidence, the size of the class, students' discomfort when collaborating with others, and the influence of their mother tongue. According to Mina and Zohreh's (2015) research study, despite teachers' strong motivation to adopt student-centered learning as an alternative teaching method, their actual duty as educators contradicts their views due to the restrictions placed on them, forcing them to rely on teacher-centered activities like course completion. The majority of African teachers provide their students English lessons to help them pass exams. Students trust their teachers to provide them with the knowledge they need to pass exams as a result.

According to Huda and Lubis (2019), students' passivity and self-confidence decreased, which resulted in fewer meaningful responses and communications as well as a lack of training for using student-centered learning-based

evaluation. The results of the study by Du Plessis (2020) showed that both teachers and students had a limited understanding of learner-centered teaching and encountered problems like a lack of knowledge and experience in learner-centered teaching as well as a negative impact from overcrowding and poor classroom management. When there are many pupils in a class, mumbling gets louder and shouting is required for everyone to be heard. Thus, it was observed in Lee & Branch's (2017) study that students with poor prior knowledge considered the student-centered learning environment to be confused and frustrated, whereas students with strong self-efficacy experienced the reverse. Similar findings were made by Hockings (2009), who discovered that low student self-efficacy was a major contributing reason to the failure of some students in a student-centered learning environment. In conclusion, students adopted various learning attitudes that hampered the application of student-centered learning as a classroom learning technique. Students' usual attitudes are to remain silent during the teaching and learning process because they are afraid of making mistakes, lack self-confidence, lack interest. Furthermore, students entirely rely on their teacher, believing in his function as a language knower, and teachers are bound by course completion, which drives them to respond with teacher-centered activities. As a result, it was shown that low student self-efficacy and poor student prior knowledge were crucial in explaining why some students struggled in a student-centered learning environment.

3. Methodology

The study use descriptive analytical method, two tools are used for investigating the implementation of student-centered reading in EFL Sudanese classes.

3.1 Data Collection Tools

The observation checklist was used as the primary tool for collecting data, whereas the interviews with the EFL teachers are the secondary tool for data collection that will assist in cross-checking and supporting the results gained from the observation checklist. For four weeks, data was collected from 12 EFL elementary reading classes. The observation checklist is divided into four sections, each section contains three items. Based on how much ownership the learners demonstrate over their learning processes, the three items in each section are graded as A, B, and C. For example, item "A" is intended to demonstrate that learners take full responsibility for their own learning; item "B" shows those who take responsibility for their own learning by relying on the guidance of their teachers; and item "C" demonstrates those who totally rely on their teachers in all learning processes. The first section that displayed in Figure 1 aims at examining the level of learners' interaction toward completing reading tasks at different stages of classroom learning. Figure 2's second section examines how much EFL learners could collaborate with each other in order to complete reading tasks and how that affected their interaction. Figure (3) depicts the third section, which examines how many and how well learners react to various reading comprehension problems. The fourth section in Figure 4 examines learners' involvement and whether they focus on communicative and/or uncommunicative tasks. The interview consisted of four questions that mainly addressed the reasons that affect students' performance in the student-centered reading classes. These questions are intended to be answered by the teacher who implemented the reading classes that apply a student-centered strategy.

3.2 Participants

The instructors of the observed reading classes are EFL Sudanese instructors who got CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching for Adults, Cambridge University). They had a good perception and practice of the student-centered approach as a teaching method, as well as a long and very good experience in teaching English as a foreign language to adults that ranged from 1 to 15 years. The students in these reading classes are EFL Sudanese learners at the elementary level; their age range is between 19 and 24 years. They had a basic understanding of the student-centered approach and its practices in the classroom. For the purpose of this study, students' roles in student-centered reading are verified through training.

3.3 Data Collection

Based on the BBC-British Council (2011) reading lesson's stages mentioned above here, there are six stages for a reading lesson; however, for the purposes of this study only the last four stages (reading for gist, reading for specific information, a detailed comprehension task, and post-text discussion) will be observed. These four stages were chosen for observation because they correspond to student-centered learning and are more ideal for empowering learners to take ownership of their learning process. Because the first two activities (lead-in and pre-teach selected vocabulary), particularly the second one, are teacher-centered, they are used to introduce language to help students grasp the text and accomplish the following assignments. As previously stated, data will be gathered from the twelve observed EFL reading classes and EFL teachers' interviews. Throughout all of these activities, specific items with a specific purpose

will be noted in each class.

4. Data Analysis

This study aims to examine how traditional teaching practices such as teacher-centered learning influence EFL learners' engagement in implementing student-centered reading. The collected data attempts to measure how much responsibility the learners take for their own learning in reading activities.

4.1 Observation Checklist Analysis

The observation checklist is mainly designed to check to what extent learners' learning practices in reading classes are processed by the learners rather than by their teachers.

4.1.1 Learners' Interaction in Completing Tasks

Figure 1. Used to show the three levels of learners' interaction across the four reading activities as follows:

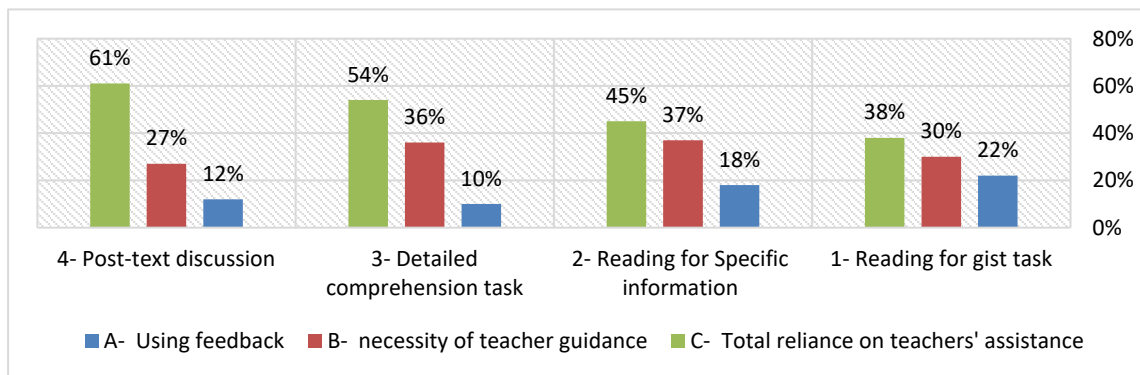


Figure 1. Learners' Interaction in Completing the Tasks

With reference to the first reading stage, it has been shown that the majority of the learners rely on teachers' assistance for completing gist tasks of reading, whether this assistance is necessarily required or total reliance on teacher assistance. The statistic result showed that 30% of learners totally rely on teachers' assistance for completing gist reading tasks, 30% of them need teachers' guidance, and 18% of learners use feedback to complete gist reading tasks. It means the majority of the learners achieve the gist reading task with teachers' assistance. The learners' dependence on their teachers is increased in the second stage of reading, in which they obtain specific information. The results showed that 45% of the learners completely rely on teachers' assistance when they engage in specific information tasks, 37% of them need guidance from teachers, and only 10% of the learners use feedback for completing specific information tasks. Learners engage in greater dependency on their teachers in order to achieve specific information tasks. In the third stage, the learners' reliance on their teachers in the detailed comprehension task is maximized, particularly in terms of total reliance, where 54% of the learners completely depend on the teacher, 36% of them need teacher guidance, and 10% of them use feedback to complete detailed comprehension tasks. The result of the fourth stage of reading revealed that the majority, representing 88% of the learners, needed teachers' assistance in involving themselves in reading tasks. 61% of learners totally depend on teachers, 27% necessarily need teachers' guidance, and 12% use feedback to complete tasks. Thus, the level of learners' interaction gradually decreases from one activity to be greater in the next. The learners' interaction decreases when learning processes get freer and allow learners to engage in a wide range of interactions by using personal experiences in learning. In other words, when reading activities give learners more opportunities for sharing their own personal experiences in the reading discussion tasks, learners' interaction reduces. In their study, Brahm and Gebhardt (2011) also found that students rely heavily on the guidance, control, and supervision of an instructor. Such an attitude inhibits the implementation and success of a student-centered learning culture. Thus, whenever reading activities demand deeper, personalized discussion, EFL students interact less and depend more on teachers for help. The reliance of EFL students on their teacher for completing their tasks is evident in all reading activities and with the majority of the students. Students-centered reading mainly depends on EFL students' effective interaction through deep discussion and personalizing reading activities; thus, the above results have shown that EFL students-centered reading is unsatisfactory in terms of students' interaction.

4.1.2 Collaborative Learning in Completing Tasks

Figure 2. Displays to What Extent the Learners Collaborated with Each Other to Achieve Reading Tasks as Follows:

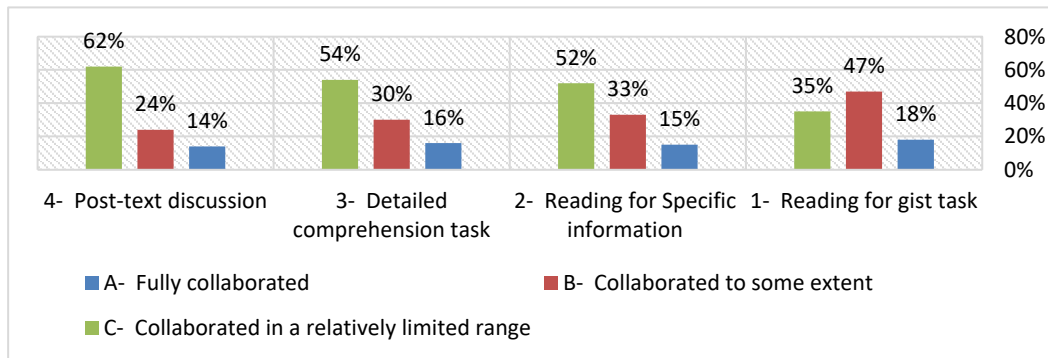


Figure 2. Collaborative Learning in Completing Tasks

The obtained results of learners' collaboration in completing gist reading tasks have shown that the majority of the learners do not fully collaborate with each other to achieve gist reading tasks. As 47% of the learners collaborate to some extent in achieving gist tasks, 35% of them collaborated in a relatively limited range, and those who fully collaborated for completing gist reading tasks are 18%. It means that learners' collaboration in achieving gist reading task is unsatisfied. Half of the participants in second stage of reading (52%) collaborated in a relatively limited range for achieving specific information tasks from reading text, 33% collaborated to some extent, and 15% collaborated in a limited range. The learners' collaboration decrease whenever the learning processes require more competent to be achieved. In the third stage of reading, the learners who collaborated in a relatively limited range for accomplishing detailed comprehension tasks became 54%; 30% of the participants collaborated to some extent; and 16% relatively collaborated in a limited range for completing detailed comprehension tasks. It is obviously the collaboration between the learners lessen from one activity to the next. The result of the fourth stage of reading (post-text discussion) has revealed that the majority (86%) of the learners do not fully collaborate with each other, particularly those who relatively collaborate in a limited range for achieving post-reading discussion questions. It is obviously noted that the number of those who relatively collaborated in a limited range gradually increases whenever they move toward freer activities that get learner chance to take more responsibility for their own learning. As a result, student-centered reading cannot be successful unless learners could collaborate effectively to complete various reading activities.

4.1.3 Answering Reading Comprehension Questions

Figure 3 shows to what extent learners are able to answer reading comprehension questions that are posed in the four stages of reading as follows:

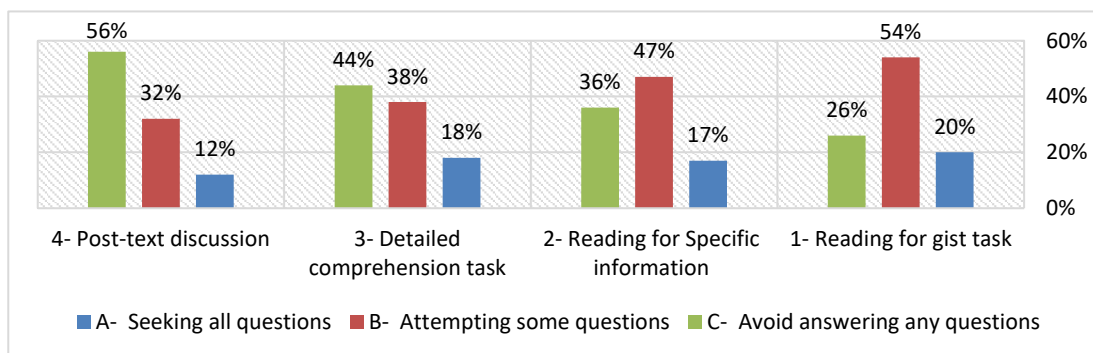


Figure 3. Answering Reading Comprehension Questions

Learners interact positively by answering the questions that were posed for general ideas (the gist task). The majority of the learners (54%), were able to answer some of the questions that were posed to be answered, 20% of them were able to answer all questions that were posed to pick out the general ideas from reading text, and 26% of them avoided answering any of the posed questions. The number of learners who avoided answering any of the questions that were posed for specific information presented in the second reading activity increased. The results reveal that the majority (47% of the learners) attempted some of the questions presented for specific information; 36 of the learners were unable to answer any of the questions posed, and 17% were able to answer all of the questions posed for specific information. In the third stage of reading, the number of those who avoided answering any of the detailed comprehension questions became the majority (44%), 38% of learners were able to answer only some of the questions posed, and 18% of learners were able to answer all of the detailed comprehension questions. It means answering detailed comprehension questions in the class designed for student-centered learning is unsatisfactory. The number of learners who avoided answering any of the questions posed in the first stage of reading (reading for gist task) almost doubles to 56% when they reach the fourth stage of reading (post-text discussion), while those who were able to answer some of the questions posed in the fourth stage of reading were in the 32% in the fourth stage, and only 12% of the learners could answer all the questions posed in the fourth stage of reading (post-text discussion). It noted that the majority of the learners are divided between those who answer some of the questions posed and those who avoid answering them.

4.1.4 Completing Communicative and Non-communicative Tasks

Figure 4 display to what extent learners could engage in communicative and/or non-communicative tasks across four reading activities as follows:

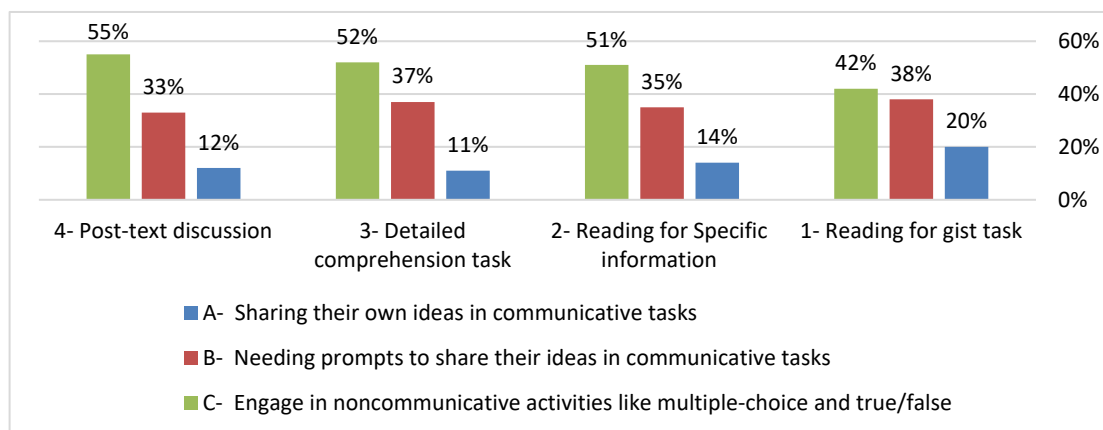


Figure 4. Completing Communicative and/or Non-communicative Tasks

According to the results displayed in Figure 4, the majority of learners in each type of reading activity prefer to engage in non-communicative tasks. It was noted that the preference for dealing with non-communicative tasks grew from one activity to the next, especially in the activities requiring learners' communicative competence. In the first stage of reading, for example, the majority of learners (42% engage in non-communicative tasks in the gist tasks), 38% engage in communicative tasks if they are prompted, and 20% are able to share their own ideas in the gist tasks. In the second stage of reading, 51% of learners choose non-communicative while looking for specific information, 35% require prompting to share their ideas in communicative activities, and 14% could communicate their own ideas in communicative tasks. In the third stage of reading, it was found that 52% of learners prefer to complete detailed comprehension tasks using non-communicative activities, 37% use prompted communicative tasks, and 11% use communicative tasks to share their own views. In the fourth stage of reading, the majority (55% of learners) also prefer to share their ideas in post-text discussion activities via non-communicative tasks; 33% of the learners could share their ideas in communicative tasks if they were prompted before attempting them; and 12% of the learners could share their own ideas in communicative tasks. This result aligns with the result obtained by Al (Asmari, 2015; Kalanzadeh, 2011), which reveals that the resistance of learners to participate in communicative activities is one of the major challenges for teachers.

4.2 Interview Analysis

The face-to-face interviews with the teachers who taught the observed classes are audio recorded. Four open-ended questions were built based on the results that were obtained from the observation checklist. The questions mainly address the reasons that affect students' performance in the student-centered reading classes. The following results are EFL teachers' views about the main obstacles to implementing student-centered reading classes, which can be concluded as follows:

- Lack of interest affects students' motivation to participate in discussions and reading activities.
- Students' interactions remarkably decreased from one reading activity to the next because learners were not experienced in taking responsibility for their own learning in traditional teaching forms.
- Because of students' limited language proficiency, most of them struggle to understand reading material and participate in discussion.
- Because of their shyness about committing mistakes, many of the students avoid speaking up or sharing their thoughts in a group setting, which can limit their participation and interaction with others.
- The composition of the group in terms of homogenous and heterogeneous groups also affects their interaction and performance.

5. Conclusion

There is no doubt about the efficiency of student-centered learning in learning and teaching English languages; however, there are challenges to proving this efficiency in different teaching and learning contexts. This study focuses on the effect of the traditional EFL learning style (teacher-centered learning) on EFL learners' engagement and performance in student-centered reading. It was shown that the majority of EFL learners' interactions in the activities of the four reading stages observed rely on the teacher's guidance and help, either totally or partially, which may be because of a lack of interest and limited language proficiency. This finding is congruent with Mina and Zohreh's (2015) findings, which reveal that students trust their teachers to provide them with the knowledge they need to pass exams. Students' performance in EFL student-centered reading, which was rated at a weak level, can be improved by giving students more exposure to more student-centered teaching and learning techniques. Students may be more receptive and interested if they are more informed about the advantages and effectiveness of student-centered learning. In spite of the effectiveness of student-centered learning in many contexts, it needs to be redefined to fit within the culture and specific EFL learning and teaching contexts.

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