READING COMPREHENSION PRACTICES IN GREEK ELEMENTARY EFL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract: The present study probes into elementary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' reading comprehension practices. It aims at gaining an insight into how they approach reading comprehension and specifically whether they explicitly teach students reading strategies, when interacting with written texts. Five instructors, who work at public elementary schools in a provincial city of central Greece, Trikala, participated in the study. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The results of this study indicated that reading lessons mainly focused on oral reading of texts, vocabulary instruction, assessment of text content through post-reading oral questions and written tasks. Concurrently, there was lack of strategy instruction, which means that teachers were not involved in teaching students *how* to approach and comprehend written texts in the English language. The pedagogical implications that result from this study are further discussed and the need for further research to verify these findings is accentuated.

1. Introduction

Foreign Language[1] (FL) reading research has yielded a number of insights focusing on vocabulary knowledge, automaticity in word recognition, reading fluency, extensive reading, activation of background knowledge in relation to text content, graphic representations, use of reading strategies and metacognitive awareness in order to ensure effective reading comprehension in the classroom (Grabe 2002, Psaltou- Joycey 2010). At the same time, according to the Common

European Framework of Reference (CEFR 2001), language learners should use strategies when being engaged in communicative events, such as the reading of a text, to maximize effectiveness and make students autonomous. In fact, strategy teaching and use has been inextricably linked with students' independence and self-regulation inside and outside of classrooms (Duke and Pearson 2002, Janzen and Stoller 1998). But what is reading instruction like in the classroom? How do educators teach reading? Do they teach according to research findings? The present study constitutes an attempt to address the above questions, though on a small scale sample. Namely, this study focuses on the exploration of EFL reading comprehension practices with the aim of detecting whether teachers instruct students to deploy reading strategies while interacting with EFL texts. While there is relevant research on First Language (L1) comprehension instruction (Baumann *et al.* 2000, Durkin 1978-1979, Ness 2011, Pressley *et al.* 1998), there is lack of relevant studies in FL (Janzen 2007). Janzen's study (2007) revealed emphasis on vocabulary instruction, decoding, connection between reading and writing activities, extensive reading, activation of learners' prior knowledge and use of various reading materials.

2. Literature review

2.1 Foreign language reading

The early work among people involved in FL reading assumed a rather passive, bottom-up view of reading mainly focusing on decoding, the process of reconstructing the author's intended meaning through recognizing the printed words and building up meaning for texts from the smallest textual units – letters and words – to larger units – phrases and clauses (Carrell 1988). In the 1970s there was a shift of attention from decoding to comprehension. Goodman's (1967) psycholinguistic model of reading exerted a strong influence on FL reading, according to which the reader becomes an active participant in the reading process confirming predictions, activating prior knowledge and using parts of text to construct meaning. Moreover, a truly top-down approach adopted in FL reading, when Coady (1979 as cited in Carrell 1988) elaborated on the psycholinguistic model for EFL reading and suggested a model drawing not only on the active participation of the reader in the reading process but on the reader's prior knowledge to yield comprehension. In the 1980s, research shed light on the use of reading strategies and strategy instruction in order to boost learners' reading achievement and render them autonomous readers. Based on L1 reading research (e.g., Dermitzaki, Andreou and Paraskeva 2008, Kletzien 1991, Olshavsky

1976-1977), accomplished FL readers are active readers, who have clear goals in mind for reading, are highly aware of the strategies they have at their disposal and tend to develop these strategies more effectively in their attempt to monitor and facilitate comprehension (e.g., Anderson 1991, Block 1986, Zhang 2001, Zhang and Wu 2009). In this context, successful comprehension emerges, when the reader extracts various pieces of information from the text and combines them with what is already known (Koda 2005). Thus, reading is no longer regarded as a passive skill but it is viewed as an interaction between the text and the reader (Psaltou-Joycey 2010).

2.2 Reading comprehension strategies

Reading strategies are deliberate, conscious actions, identifiable to the agent and others by intentions and selected goals (Paris, Lipson and Wixson 1983). Urquhart and Weir (1998: 95) also regarded strategies "as ways of getting around difficulties encountered while reading". In this sense, strategies represent a conscious response to a specific problem arisen, such as failure to understand the meaning of a word or find the information one was looking for (Dole *et al.* 1991, Urquhart and Weir 1998). Skimming, scanning, contextual guessing, predicting, summarizing – to name just a few – belong to reading strategies. According to FL reading research, learners should be instructed to use reading strategies, when interacting with written texts, to improve reading comprehension (Carrell, Pharis and Liberto 1989, Kern 1989, Macaro and Erler 2008, Song 1998), though the bulk of research on strategy instruction has concentrated on L1 (Brown *et al.* 1996, Palincsar and Brown 1984, Paris, Cross and Lipson 1984, Pressley *et al.* 1992, Spörer, Brunstein and Kieschke 2009). Therefore, strategies can be explicitly taught to help students understand why and when particular strategies are important, how to use these strategies, and how to transfer them to new learning tasks (Cohen 2007, Oxford 1990). In fact, Oxford (1990: 12) highlights that "strategy training helps guide learners to become more conscious of strategy use and more adept at employing appropriate strategies".

2.3 Instruction of reading strategies

Drawing on literature, one of the main focuses of FL reading instruction is on helping learners deploy strategies when interacting with texts in order to render them strategic and independent readers (Duke and Pearson 2002, Janzen and Stoller 1998). More often than not, strategy training follows a cycle of direct explanation of strategies, modeling, guided practice, where there is gradual transfer of responsibility from teachers to students, leading to more independent practice

(Duke and Pearson 2002, Pearson and Gallagher 1983). In other words, strategy instruction often begins with direct verbal explanation on behalf of the teachers in order to communicate particular information about strategies including what is to be learned (declarative knowledge), how it can be applied (procedural knowledge), when and why it can be used (conditional knowledge) (Duffy *et al.* 1986). Then, the teacher is involved in modeling the strategy based on examples from a text by thinking aloud the cognitive processes taking place during strategy application in order to turn the covert comprehension processes into overt (Dewitz, Jones and Leahy 2009, Duke and Pearson 2002, Pearson and Gallagher 1983). After strategy modeling, students are given chances to put the new strategy into guided practice, where teacher and students work together gradually transferring responsibility from teachers to students (Pearson and Dole 1987, Pearson and Gallagher 1983). Next, teachers provide learners with opportunities to individually deploy what has been learned in new reading materials, which contributes to the transfer of strategies to new reading situations and helps learners consolidate what has been learned (Duffy *et al.* 1986, Pearson and Dole 1987). Therefore, through strategy instruction learners become aware of what has been taught, how and when it can be used, which is very critical, as awareness raising helps students consciously apply a strategy and automatize it after practice, a trait of proficient readers (Duffy *et al.* 1986, Manoli and Papadopoulou 2012, Paris *et al.* 1983).

3. The Greek EFL teaching context at primary level

Allowing for the current educational context in Greece, English is taught as a compulsory subject in the third through sixth grade of state elementary schools – Greek primary education consists of six grades – for three hours per week – each teaching hour lasts 40 minutes approximately – except for some pilot schools, where English teaching takes place four times a week. In 2010-11, English teaching was extended to the first and second grade of some schools for two hours within the framework of a pilot scheme. Classes are generally characterized as mixed-ability classes incorporating individualized instruction. English instruction, which draws on the Cross-Thematic Curriculum Framework for Foreign Languages and English, particularly, follows a holistic approach to knowledge and emphasizes on the four language skills (reading, listening, speaking, and writing) through the communicative task-based approach, cross-thematic activities, learner strategies, cooperative work and alternative assessment methods. The specific Curriculum in turn relies on the CEFR (2001), which focuses on the principles of foreign language literacy, multilingualism and multiculturalism in order to develop cooperation, cultural awareness and lifelong learning.

Regarding the teaching materials, they are introduced in the fourth, fifth and sixth grade of state elementary schools by the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs, Culture and Sports, while in the first three grades the choice of the teaching material is optional based on teachers' choice. The course-book used in the sixth grade, particularly, in which the current study was conducted, is intended for learners at Pre-intermediate level (corresponding roughly to Level A2 of the CEFR 2001) and consists of ten units (Efraimidou, Frouzaki and Reppa 2009). All units focus on the development of the four language skills through communicative activities and the use of learning strategies, the boosting of students' cooperation through pair or group work, the raising of students' awareness of grammar through inductive and deductive approaches, and vocabulary extension through attractive topics and extracts from authentic reading and listening texts (Efraimidou *et al.* 2009).

4. The present study

The initial aim of the current study, which is part of a doctoral thesis on reading strategy instruction, was to investigate the reading comprehension practices adopted in some Greek elementary EFL classrooms, as there is dearth of relevant FL research (Janzen 2007), especially in the Greek context. An additional aim of this study was to explore whether EFL teachers instructed students to use reading strategies to derive meaning from written texts. This study contributes to FL reading research, since the process of reading comprehension – emphasizing meaning-making from texts – is often neglected in FL classrooms. Bringing studies such as this to the forefront helps highlight the need for EFL teachers to be knowledgeable of the strategies and dispositions involved in the reading comprehension process in order to best serve their students, since it is not enough to 'read' the text; students must understand the text. After all, getting an insight into what really happens in elementary EFL classrooms and how much comprehension instruction takes place is really critical, because, as Alvermann and Hayes (1989: 307) stated: "Any attempt to intervene in instructional practices must begin with an examination of what those practices are".

To be more precise, this study constituted an attempt to address the following questions:

What is the nature of reading comprehension practices in Greek EFL elementary classrooms today?

Are Greek elementary EFL teachers familiar with the concept of reading strategies?

Are they involved in reading strategy instruction?

5. Method

5.1 Participants

Five EFL teachers, who were employed at the sixth grade of state elementary schools in a provincial city of central Greece, Trikala, participated in the study. Assuming that there is less comprehension instruction in the first primary grades because of the concern for decoding skills, the sixth grade was selected for this research. All the participants were women due to the female preference for the specific educational field. Their teaching experience ranged from 7 to 22 years. As regards their educational level, all teachers possessed a Bachelor's degree. In addition, a teacher stated that she had attended a summer-course in England, while the others did not mention any previous living or teaching experience in other countries. All teachers were identified by a pseudonym to preserve anonymity.

Table 1: *Teachers' profile*

Teachers	Qualifications				Working experience	Gender	
	Bachelor's Degree	Master's Degree	PhD	Seminars		Male	Female
1) Ms Taylor	✓				22		✓
2) Ms George	✓				19		✓
3) Ms Phoenix	✓			✓	18		✓
4) Ms Goodies	✓				17		✓
5) Ms Draft	✓				7		✓

5.2 Data collection instruments

Data were composed of teacher interviews and classroom observations. A combination of information sources was sought in this research in order to validate and cross-check findings (Patton, 1990).

5.2.1 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants to investigate teachers' perceived EFL reading practices. Semi-structured interviews were opted as, though they draw on a list of pre-designed questions, they simultaneously allow for greater flexibility (McDonough and McDonough 1997). The interviews

were conducted at the different schools, where the participants teach EFL, and lasted from 8 to 15 minutes. All interviews were carried out by a sole interviewer (the first researcher) to maintain consistency and ensure that the same topics would emerge during all interviews (Pressley *et al*. 1998). The language used during the interviews was Greek, that is, the native language of the participants, to ensure that the interviewees would feel free to elaborate on questions without worrying about possible language difficulties. All interviews included some background questions to construct the teachers' profile (e.g., qualifications, working experience) as well as questions about specific components of the reading comprehension process (e.g., way of approaching EFL texts, vocabulary instruction, strategy instruction, assessment practices). Moreover, the specific interview questions were piloted before being used, so that the researchers could check if the questions could yield the kind of data required and eliminate possible ambiguous questions (Nunan 1992). Additionally, interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim for further analysis and objective record (Nunan 1992).

5.2.2 Observations

Direct, intentional observations of the reading lessons at these sixth grade classrooms were conducted in order to investigate the ways some EFL teachers approach reading comprehension. Classroom observations focused on teachers' instructional behaviors and choices with the aim of exploring whether teachers were implementing strategy instruction. The amount of each classroom observation varied depending on the amount of time allocated to each reading lesson, though our goal was to observe the reading lessons of the first two consecutive units of a ten unit course-book used at this grade. Therefore, the number of observations per classroom varied from 4 times (on condition that 2 teaching hours were at least spent on the reading section of each unit) to 8 times (in a particular case). All the observations were conducted by the first researcher herself to maintain consistency as a complete observer without interrupting the whole teaching process (Iosifidis 2003). Namely, the observer was sitting at the back of every classroom and jotting down instances of instructional practices, as they occurred, in the form of a previously established categorical checklist (McDonough and McDonough 1997). Data included comments about a teacher's general approach to reading comprehension, use of reading strategies, vocabulary instruction, assessment practices, and any other practice that seemed worth noting. Simultaneously, interactions and events were tape-recorded, as they occurred in actual classrooms for further analysis, a process that frees the researcher from the constraints of real time (McDonough and McDonough 1997).

5.3 Reliability of the qualitative data

Several steps were taken to ensure the reliability of these qualitative data. Firstly, the two authors-researchers independently coded the results into the specific categories and met to discuss the coding scheme. The researchers coded the data until they had reached 90% agreement (inter-rater reliability) on the coding of the instructional practices identified in this study. In cases in which disagreement on coding occurred, the two researchers compared their coding schemes and discussed possible discrepancies to arrive at a high level of consistency concerning the types of categories developed (Charmaz 2000, Patton 1990). Once the corpus of comprehension practices started to take shape, the researchers were engaged in negative cases analysis, which involved searching the data for examples that did not fit the emerging instructional practices (Charmaz 2000, Strauss and Corbin 1990). Simultaneously, methodological triangulation was achieved by drawing on a combination of information sources, that is, both interviews and observations, to derive data, validate findings and provide a more comprehensive perspective on the issue (McDonough and McDonough 1997, Patton 1990). Overall, the thorough data management and analytic procedures, such as verbatim transcription and accurate records of the interviews and observations, contributed to the validation of the research findings.

5.4 Data analysis

The aim of the current analysis was to identify patterns, sequences of behaviors that are characteristic of a reading lesson and draw conclusions from the overall picture (McDonough and McDonough 1997). In this way, the data gathered from both teacher interviews and classroom observations were analyzed using constant comparative method through open, axial and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Allowing for these processes, open coding included studying the data line-by-line pulling together real examples of the texts in order to organize them into categories, identifying important information, naming initial concepts by looking at what there is and giving it a name based on personal knowledge or literature (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Namely, applying a set of codes to the different units of texts helped the researchers reduce, organize data and find answers to the research questions (Ryan and Bernard 2000). After tape transcription of each interview, the researchers studied interview data line-by-line several times until they reached a coding of the most salient information. For instance, when Ms Draft reported that before reading the text she focused on the title and pre-taught vocabulary, they named this practice 'preparation for reading'. Then, they tried to

group pertinent data under a bigger category (concept), a category often composed of micro categories, aiming at connecting a category to its subcategories (Charmaz 2000, Strauss and Corbin 1998). For example, the 'oral questions' and 'written tasks' concepts were put under the 'comprehension assessment' category. Finally, they drew cross-case comparisons to identify similar statements leading to the main patterns emerged from the analysis of qualitative data (Charmaz 2000).

5.4.1 Analysis of comprehension instruction

The researchers studied the data coming from both the interviews and observations to identify teachers' instructional moves. In order to determine which teachers' reading practices constituted strategy instruction, they drew on literature to identify specific features of instruction that typify strategy instruction, such as direct explanation, modeling, guided practice and independent application (Dewitz *et al.* 2009, Pearson and Gallagher 1983). Three more categories were identified and added to depict the comprehension practices deployed on behalf of these EFL teachers.

Table 2: *Codes for teachers' instructional comprehension practices*

Comprehension practices	Account
1. Preparation for reading	The teacher is engaged in activities, like vocabulary pre-teaching, question-asking prior to text reading.
2. Text translation	The teacher or/and students are involved in translating the text line-by line in the participants' native language.
3. Strategy mention	The teacher mentions a strategy or asks students to use the strategy without giving further explanations.
4. Direct explanation	The teacher explains a strategy providing declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge.
5. Modeling	The teacher demonstrates how to perform a strategy through the think-aloud process.
6. Guided practice	Students practise the strategy but the teacher offers guidelines and explanations.
7. Independent application	Students individually apply the strategy in a new task to transfer it to new learning situations.

6. Results

The results of this qualitative analysis are presented in three sections. The first section includes reported comprehension practices based on teacher interviews and the second one consists of comprehension practices identified through classroom observations. The third section summarizes the main instructional practices of every teacher. Concurrently, excerpts from interview transcripts and transcripts of the observed lessons appear throughout this study aiming at providing rich data and objective interpretation of what really happens in these elementary EFL classrooms.

6.1 Findings for reading practices based on teacher interviews

Table 3 consists of categories pertaining to reading comprehension practices derived solely from teacher interviews. To begin with, almost all teachers mentioned that they spent time on preparing students' for reading mainly through questions and vocabulary pre-teaching. Then, the focus was on text reading through round robin reading (four out of five teachers deploy it). According to teacher interviews, heavy emphasis was placed on text translation into Greek (four out of five teachers emphasized on this activity) and vocabulary instruction through direct explanation in Greek, as almost all teachers were highly involved in vocabulary instruction. Ms Draft said: "We focus on the title, discuss unknown words, move on to text reading and translation and then we deal with comprehension tasks". Ms George also stated: "After preparing students for the new text, we read it through round robin reading and translate every sentence explaining unknown words. Then, I ask students oral questions based on the text".

At the same time, comprehension assessment was mainly emphasized through oral questions, as three of the five teachers reported that they were engaged in oral question asking after text reading to assess comprehension and, then, focused on written tasks which accompany a reading section. Ms Taylor mentioned: "I read aloud the text and I ask students comprehension questions orally". Nonetheless, their responses to the question regarding the assessment of students' comprehension performance were negative in terms of standardized reading tests, informal or teacher constructed reading tests and alternative assessment measures. For example, Ms Goodies replied: "I usually ask them to write the translation of an already taught text...I don't usually assess reading comprehension separately".

As for reading comprehension strategies, the teachers did not express some degree of familiarity with their use. In fact, some of them answered our question

negatively, while others seemed to be ignorant of their use, as they misunderstood the relevant question. For instance, Ms Taylor answered: "Well, I have to teach a syllabus and according to the book or the timetable I have to teach ten units, each of which includes reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills...and I will have to choose what to teach and what strategy to implement...No, I am not approaching it right, am I"? Additionally, none of the teachers seemed to be involved in teaching students to use reading strategies during reading comprehension, as there was no reference to explicit strategy instruction and all their answers were negative to the specific question.

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Table 3: EFL reading comprehension practices based on teacher interviews

	Types of classroom reading											Comprehension assessment				
Teachers	T reading aloud	Round Robin reading	Silent reading	Preparation for reading	Text translation	Vocabulary instruction	Strategies mention	Direct explanation	Modeling	Guided practice	Imdpendent practice	Oral questions	Written tasks	Informal reading tests	Standarised reading tests	Alternative assessment measures
1) Ms Taylor	+	-	-	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	-	-
2) Ms George	-	+	-	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	-	-
3) Ms Phoenix	-	+	+	+	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-
4) Ms Goodies	-	+	-	-	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
5) Ms Draft	-	+	-	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	-	-

6.2 Findings for reading practices based on classroom observation

Data in Table 4, which were derived from classroom observations in order to triangulate data from teacher interviews, indicated that all teachers prepared students for reading through questions, brainstorming, focus on titles and vocabulary pre-teaching. Ms George before dealing with the text of the second unit entitled "Going shopping" asked students questions like "Do you like shopping? How often do you go shopping? What do we usually buy from a supermarket"? Furthermore, it was noticed that teachers emphasized on vocabulary instruction, text reading and translating into Greek mainly through the mode of round robin reading, which was in agreement with the findings based on teacher interviews. Nonetheless, it must be mentioned that only one teacher differentiated her way of approaching reading from the rest, as she asked her students to read the text silently and do written tasks that follow a text deemphasizing vocabulary instruction without being involved in strategy instruction. Ms Phoenix asked students: "Read the text silently and do the True/False activity. You can find the answers to these questions based on the text. Don't worry about unknown words. Ignore possible unknown words".

Furthermore, a lot of comprehension assessment occurred in the reading lessons through oral questions and completion of written tasks following text reading, which was also certified by teacher interviews. After Ms Taylor finished reading aloud the text of unit one entitled "Our multicultural class", she asked students questions: "What is the main idea discussed? What does the author think about Ukrainian people? What does the author say about the country"? Regarding grouping procedures, the most prevalent ones were whole-class discussion and individual work neglecting pair or group work, as only one teacher used pair work in one of the reading lessons sticking to the book's instructions. Ms Phoenix told students: "Work in pairs to do activity B. Use the text to fill in the table below".

Last but not least, absence of strategy instruction was observed, since none of the teachers were actually engaged in teaching students *how* to use reading strategies to derive meaning from EFL texts, which concurred with the interview findings. However, it was observed that one teacher, Ms Phoenix, used some reading strategies in classroom, such as contextual guessing, ignoring unknown words, and scanning, without further explaining their use.

Table 4: *EFL reading comprehension practices based on classroom observation*

Teachers	Types of classroom reading													Comprehension assessment		Grouping procedures			
	T reading aloud	Round Robin reading	Silent reading	Preparation for reading	Text translation	Vocabulary instruction	Vocabulary assessment	Strategies mention	Direct explanation	Modeling	Guided practice	Imdpendent practice		Oral questions	Written tasks	Whole class instruction	Individual work	Pair work	Group work
Ms Taylor:																			
Unit 1	+					+	+							+	+	+	+		
Unit 2		+		+	+	+	+							+	+	+	+		
Ms Phoenix:																			
Unit 1			+	+				+							+	+	+	+	
Unit 2			+	+		+	+	+							+	+	+		
Ms Draft:																			
Unit 1		+		+	+	+	+								+	+	+		
Unit 2		+		+	+	+	+							+	+	+	+		
Ms Goodies:																			
Unit 1		+			+	+	+							+	+	+	+		
Unit 2		+		+	+	+	+								+	+	+		
Ms George:																			
Unit 1		+			+	+	+							+	+	+	+		
Unit 2		+		+	+	+	+							+	+	+	+		

6.3 Teacher's central instructional practices

Table 5 presents teachers' central instructional practices during FL reading comprehension. The most common patterns identified in this study included text reading, text translation, vocabulary instruction and assessment, oral comprehension questions and written tasks completion following a text. Nonetheless, there was one teacher whose instructional practices were slightly different from the rest. Namely, at the heart of Ms Phoenix's instruction lies activation of students' prior knowledge, students' involvement in silent reading and task completion, strategies mention without heavy emphasis on vocabulary instruction and text content. Ms Phoenix said: "Before reading the text, I usually ask students relevant questions. Then, students are involved in silent reading and task completion".

Table 5: Teacher's instructional comprehension practices

Teachers	Instructional practices
1) Ms Taylor	Some activation of prior knowledge, content heavily emphasized, teacher reading aloud /round robin, comprehension questions, written tasks, emphasis on vocabulary instruction and assessment, text translation, whole-class teacher-initiated discussions and individual work
2) Ms George	Some activation of prior knowledge, round robin, text translation, emphasis on vocabulary instruction and assessment, comprehension questions, written tasks, content heavily emphasized, whole-class teacher-initiated discussions and individual work
3) Ms Phoenix	Good activation of prior knowledge, silent reading, written tasks, no particular emphasis on vocabulary instruction, strategies mention (ignoring unknown words, contextual guessing, scanning), whole class instruction, individual and pair work
4) Ms Goodies	Some activation of prior knowledge, round robin, text translation, emphasis on vocabulary instruction and assessment, written tasks, content heavily emphasized, whole-class teacher-initiated discussions and individual work
5) Ms Draft	Good activation of prior knowledge, round robin, text translation, emphasis on vocabulary instruction and assessment, written tasks, content heavily emphasized, whole-class teacher-initiated discussions and individual work

7. Discussion

The purpose of the current research was to investigate the reading comprehension practices through teacher interviews and classroom observations aiming at detecting possible strategy instruction in these elementary EFL classrooms. The major findings and pedagogical implications of this research are discussed above.

There is general consistency between the teachers' reported comprehension practices and those observed, which concurs with previous research (Janzen 2007). The initial assumption that strategy instruction would be scarce in these Greek elementary EFL classrooms was confirmed by the findings of this study. The central pattern identified in this study was that teachers failed to instruct students in using and coordinating cognitive processes, such as comprehension strategies, in order to construct meaning from EFL texts, despite the bulk of research on the contribution of strategy instruction to reading improvement (Carrell *et al.* 1989, Kern 1989, Macaro and Erler 2008, Song 1998). The contemporary portrait of EFL reading instruction revealed high incidence of oral text reading, text translation, vocabulary instruction, and assessment of text content through oral, post-reading questions and activity completion. In other words, most of the teachers participating in this study usually began reading lessons by introducing the passage briefly and triggering students' prior knowledge, proceeded to have students read and translate the passage, focused on vocabulary instruction, comprehension questions and task completion. Instead of reading strategies instruction, the majority of teachers, who were mainly interested in their students' right or wrong answers, were engaged in a constant question asking process after reading was completed either by oral questions or questions that demanded written responses. Based on the coding process, Ms Phoenix slightly differentiated her approach to reading comprehension from the rest, as she practised a couple of strategies, while deemphasizing vocabulary instruction; however, no strategy instruction was practically observed. This differentiation can probably be attributed to a summer-course seminar that she had attended in England; the importance of attending seminars and continuing English teacher education was highlighted by Celani (2006).

In this context, the specific EFL teachers were not engaged in actual strategy instruction, as specific features, which typify strategy instruction like direct explanation, modeling, guided and independent practice (Duke and Pearson 2002, Pearson and Gallagher 1983), were not detected in these elementary classrooms. While scanning, contextual guessing or activating prior knowledge are often strategic behaviors, they are not strategic if teachers just mention them and ask students to practise them during task completion. According to Pearson and Gallagher (1983), sheer practice can be beneficial only for successful students, while it is possible that the 'practice only' approach underlying these classrooms may promote a 'rich get richer and poor get poorer' phenomenon. Thus, there was no evidence that these EFL teachers taught students to deploy the various

comprehension strategies validated by research in order to render them active, strategic and self-regulated readers that can apply strategies consciously, whenever a comprehension problem arises (Duke and Pearson 2002, Janzen and Stoller 1998, Pressley 2006).

Moreover, the only kind of instruction related to reading comprehension which teachers seemed to be involved in was vocabulary instruction. Namely, there was heavy emphasis on vocabulary development related to text content in almost every classroom, which is in agreement with previous research (Janzen 2007). In fact, almost all these Greek teachers and students appeared to be rather obsessed with the teaching of EFL vocabulary. When teachers were asked to name the main problem they might face in reading lessons, they unanimously referred to unfamiliar vocabulary, which was indicative of the time spent on vocabulary instruction. Strong emphasis was placed on vocabulary teaching, copying and assessing at a teacher's dictation on a regular basis or through informal tests. Therefore, in most cases the whole reading process focused on text reading and translation into Greek, vocabulary instruction and assessment. For instance, Ms Goodies, who, when asked to refer to the way she used to teach reading comprehension, replied: "We focus on vocabulary and try to explain the text in Greek line by line. Practically, a text translation into Greek".

Concurrently, the results of this study revealed absence of comprehension testing. Namely, it was found that almost all teachers did not assess reading comprehension through standardized tests, informal, teacher-constructed reading tests, or alternative assessment measures, like portfolios, though relevant instructions were provided by the course-book. It was revealed that if reading comprehension was tested, it would be a known-already taught text in combination with grammar and vocabulary.

There was also no significant differentiation in terms of instructional grouping, as whole-group discussion and individual work were prevalent in every classroom neglecting the development of cooperation among students. Although a comprehension activity following text reading in the first unit required students to work in pairs, the book instructions were completely ignored by almost all teachers (4 out of 5), who persisted in individual work, with the exception of one teacher, Ms Phoenix, who asked students to carry it out in pairs. The specific teacher behavior can be attributed to teachers' concern about imminent discipline problems. Moreover, another possible explanation for the absence of pair or group work that was observed in these classrooms is that these teachers did not actually receive training in implementing this instructional grouping.

The results of this study demonstrated that the reading practices identified in these Greek elementary EFL classrooms were still very strongly influenced by word translations to the detriment of comprehension instruction. Overall, the data collected in this study indicated that teachers should try to move beyond the narrow focus on vocabulary or content to student mastery of the cognitive processes adopted by accomplished readers, which is concurrent with previous FL reading research (Janzen 2007). This signals the urge for continuing English teacher education as a never-ending process (Celani 2006). Above all, teachers need to be informed of the contemporary research findings of comprehension practices through pre-service and in-service teacher education courses with a special focus on learning strategies in order to select the strategies and methods that suit them best and make the whole reading process more interesting, strategic and self-regulated (Pressley 2006). On no account, however, should the blame be put on teachers, as most of them are conscientious professionals, who try hard to help students learn EFL.

The present study – though it was conducted with a modest number of teachers – can have several useful implications, like spotting gaps in research literature, as there are few studies exploring EFL reading comprehension practices, providing an insight into what really happens in some elementary EFL classrooms and highlighting the need for teachers' constant professional development. However, allowing for the sample size, the findings of this study need to be replicated. In the attempt to get a deeper insight into EFL reading comprehension practices and draw more valid conclusions, further research is needed to validate and extend these findings. Namely, similar research design should be implemented not only in the elementary EFL classrooms of the city of Trikala but in different parts of Greece in order to get more tangible research evidence.

Notes

1. The difference between the terms foreign language and second language contexts has to do with the place where the language is learned and the social and communicative functions it serves (Oxford 1990). The authors accept this distinction and adopt the term FL in this study, as these denote different instructional approaches in different settings. In particular, English is learned as a FL in Greece to help learners communicate elsewhere without direct social and communicative functions within the setting where it is learned.

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