



The Effect of Reading Strategies on Iranian Good and Poor Readers' Reading Comprehension Ability

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Abstract: *The purpose of the present study was to investigate the impact of reading strategies on successful and unsuccessful readers' reading comprehension ability. For this purpose, 128 of EAP students participated in this study. First, a reading strategies questionnaire was given to the participants. Then Nelson Test was used in order to get homogenized groups of participants. They were also given a reading pretest, to get the participants' level of reading ability. After that, participants were divided into two experimental and two control groups and then the treatment procedure began. Finally, all the groups sat for the reading posttest. The statistical analysis showed that the reading strategies instruction had impact on successful readers' reading ability but not on unsuccessful readers' reading ability.*

Keywords: *Short-circuit hypothesis, Schema theory, Reading strategies, Transfer hypothesis, Good readers, Poor readers*

INTRODUCTION

Reading is regarded as an important part of the four necessary language skills for acquiring knowledge, gathering information and the main skill that students need for their success at various levels of education. It is a way of interacting with text and constructing meaning-based on previous information, knowledge and experience. Among the four language skills, reading comprehension has always been the main concern of Iranian ESP instructors (Sajadi & Oghabi, 2011; Tabatabaei, 2007). According to Rivers (1981) "reading is the most important activity in any language classes, not only as a source of information and a pleasurable activity but also as a means of consolidating and extending language knowledge".

Many students demonstrate high levels of word accuracy but they have breakdown in comprehending texts. They are unable to answer questions about the text; especially inferred messages because they have inadequate prior knowledge, poor vocabulary, and misinterpret writers' ideas. John Munro (2002) emphasizes that effective readers use multiple levels of text processing when reading. They process text at a word level, a sentence level, a conceptual level, a topic level and a dispositional level. Reading only at a word level by simply decoding, is not an effective way for readers to comprehend fully a text being read.

One promising method to improve comprehension skills is strategy instruction. Providing students explicit instruction in comprehension strategies can be an effective way to help students overcome difficulties understanding text (Graham & Bellert, 2004). Teaching of reading strategies and comprehension skills increases the ability of students to comprehend a variety of texts and help them improve their reading. Reading comprehension strategies can help readers remember the key points, distinguish the necessary and unnecessary information, think about the main idea and comment on the subject matter. Good readers use

lots of strategies before, during and after reading (Dogan, 2002). An impressive number of empirical investigations have shown that language learners' use of reading strategies and their reading comprehension are related (Lee, 2007). This study aims at finding an answer to the question of reading problem versus language problem, first raised by Alderson (1984, pp. 1-27) and then followed by Carrell (1991, pp. 159-179). The present study relies on Casanave's (1998) expanded view of schema theory, the strategy schema, Goodman's (1971) language transfer or linguistic independent hypothesis, and Clarke's idea of short-circuit or language ceiling hypothesis in ESL or EFL.

Review of literature

In this section, the key concepts and theories underlying the study based on a review of the literature have been explained.

What Is Reading and Reading Comprehension

Before the 1960s, reading was defined as a process of decoding phonemes and was described as being attached to oral language skills (Carrell et al., 1988). In the early 1960s, educational psychologists argued various definitions for reading.

They outlined two main possible wide meanings, that is, (a) reading is the decoding process of syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic knowledge, and (b) reading is "the whole parcel of cognitive activities" carried out by a reader in contact with a text (Urquhart & weir, 1998, p.17). It was not until 1965, however, that reading comprehension received more attention from a number of linguists, psycholinguists and cognitive psychologists as it was recognized to involve mental processing. As reading is not a mechanical process but rather a meaning constructing activity, readers need to utilize their linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural resources when they break the code, understand the meaning and interpret the written text (Delbridge, 2008). Later on, in the 1970s, reading was pervasively defined as "a means of extending experience" (Taverner, 1990, p.4).

According to Snow (2002) Reading comprehension is the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language. Reading comprehension is the process of constructing meaning from a text and involves the complex coordination of several processes, including "decoding, word reading, and fluency along with the integration of background knowledge and previous experiences" (Klinger & Geisler, 2008, p. 65).

Factors that Affect the Process of Reading

While the various models try to explain and describe the reading process, the actual reading process may not exactly conform to any one reading model because reading is also influenced by several factors. Many factors affect a child's ability to comprehend text. These include

- Motivation/purpose/goals/engagement
- Vocabulary/word knowledge/background knowledge
- Automaticity of decoding
- Fluent reading
- Understanding and use of strategies employed by effective readers
- The nature of the text itself (difficulty and interest)
- The type or genre of text (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, poetry)
- The amount of reading done

Regarding the relationship between L1 and L2 reading, Goodman (1971) raised the Linguistic Independence Hypothesis or Language Transfer Hypothesis which claims that L1 reading ability can transfer to L2 reading situation. Royer and Carlo (1991, pp. 450-55) conclude that there is a transfer of reading skills from the L1 to L2 and that teaching reading skills in the native language may facilitate the transfer.

Language proficiency in an L2/F: L2 language proficiency is another strong factor in L2 reading. Clarke argued that weakness in L2 language competence can “short-circuit” reading performance. He believed that there must be a basic level of L2 proficiency for reading of any text.

Reading in EAP and L2 Classrooms

According to Dudley-Evans (1998) EAP refers to any English teaching that relates to a study purpose. Students whose first language is not English may need help with both the language of academic disciplines and the specific study skills” required of them during their academic course. EAP has some times been seen as one movement within ESP. There are four types of EAP situations:

1. An English speaking country, such as UK or USA
2. An ESL situation where English is the formal language of education and is widely spoken such as Singapore and Philipines.
3. A situation in which certain subjects such as medicine are formally taught in English, while for other subjects and at other levels of education the national language is used, such as Jordan in the Middle East.
4. A situation where all subject courses are taught in the national language, but English may be important for ancillary reasons such as the case in Iran.

Reading Strategies

Hardebeck (2006) defines reading comprehension strategies as tools or plans for facilitating and extending comprehension. Reading comprehension strategies can help readers remember the key points, distinguish the necessary and unnecessary information, think about the main idea and comment on the subject matter. Good readers use lots of strategies before, during and after reading (Dogan, 2002). A strategy is the mental representation of actions and consequences of actions that guide a behavior toward a goal. In general, the reading strategies are operations or procedures performed by a reader to achieve the goal of comprehension (Kern 1989). According to Richard (1992) strategies can make learning more efficient and effective. According to different authors, there are many classifications for reading strategies. For example, Carrell (1989) divided reading strategies as follows:

Global strategies: Those strategies having to do with general understanding of the text;

Local strategies: Those strategies having having to do with understanding detail of the text which require the reader to pay attention such as, sound-letter correspondence, word meaning, and sentence syntax;

Cognitive strategies: In 1967 K. Goodman (pp. 126-125) revolutionized the study of reading when he proposed that reading is a “psycholinguistic guessing game”. According to the definition presented by Goodman, reading is a process in which readers sample the text, make hypotheses, and so forth. Here the reader rather than the text is at the heart of the reading process;

Metacognitive strategies: Metacognition is thinking about what one is doing while reading. It is simply defined as cognition about cognition or thinking about thinking.

Good Readers vs. Poor Readers

Proficient readers use their minds actively to build meaning. They read purposefully and selectively. Whether they are reading for pleasure, to acquire new knowledge, or to perform a task, proficient readers use strategies to achieve their goals (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). They continually connect what they already know with what they are reading. When all is going well, these youths’ mental processes are functioning skillfully and automatically, with little conscious attention. When proficient readers get confused or off track, they realize this right away then consciously shift mental gears and apply appropriate strategies. They might identify the source of the confusion, reread it, and then explain it to themselves. They might knowingly make connections to fill in what the author leaves unsaid. And they might record important ideas and information, form sensory images, or ask themselves questions. Adolescent readers benefit from robust, general strategies that can be applied to a range of situations (Alexander & Jetton, 2000).

Good readers monitor for comprehension while they are reading whereas poorer readers simply decode rather than use information from the text to add to their knowledge base (Hedin 2010). Effective readers integrate text information with the knowledge they have about reading. They determine what the text is about so they can use what they know. They take their existing visual imagery knowledge and transfer it into oral language knowledge. At the word level, they work out how to say the words and what unfamiliar words might mean. At a sentence level they can say the sentence using grammar and punctuation or visualize it to gain meaning. The effective reader is able to link ideas and concepts in the text whilst determining the author's purpose. At the same time the effective reader is managing and directing their reading before, during and after the reading process. Poor readers are less aware of effective strategies and of the counterproductive effects of poor strategies, and are less effective in their monitoring activities during reading. Good readers use more strategies and use them more frequently than poor readers (Saricoban, 2002). Nambiar (2009) stated that Good readers are better at monitoring comprehension than poor readers. Poor readers are less aware of effective strategies and of the counterproductive effects of poor strategies, and are less effective in their monitoring activities during reading. According to Cohen (1986) Unskilled reading comprehension is one aspect to show the importance and need for training. Unskilled readers can become skilled readers and learners of whole text if they are given instruction in effective strategies and taught to monitor and check their comprehension while reading. Students who do not have strategies for making meaning from the text are disadvantage learners.

Research Question and Hypothesis

Is there any significant difference between experimental and control groups' reading comprehension scores across the good and poor readers?

The null research hypothesis driven from the above research question was as follow:

H₀. There is not any significant difference between experimental and control groups' reading comprehension scores across the good and poor readers.

Methodology

Participants

The participants of the study were 128 pre-intermediate EAP male students at Zanjan Farhangian University. Their majors were students of Primary Education at teacher training center of Shahid Beheshti University. The students were randomly selected from different classes. They were 19-25 years old, male, and third semester students. The subjects had passed their introductory courses, and were ready for their general English courses according to English curriculum programs for Iranian EAP students.

Instrumentation

Three sets of instruments and materials were used in the study, which are elaborated upon below.

- a. Nelson Standard Test (version 200 B) for pre-intermediate students
- b. Eight reading comprehension passages as pre-test and post-test
- c. A questionnaire comprising two parts: the first part consisted of reading strategies in English language with forty items and the second one was with 20 reading strategies in Persian

Design

The purpose of the study was to investigate reading strategies in Persian and English languages and their impact on English reading comprehension ability. The study basically depended on quantitative data collection methods. The study was a true-experimental one. It included proficiency test, pre-test, treatment and post-test.

Procedures

The following procedure was carried out on the four groups to carry out the present study.

The researcher extracted the reading strategies of successful readers both in L1 and L2 through a questionnaire. The students were asked to read the questionnaire very carefully and choose the best answers based on their experiences. The questionnaire consisted of two sections: English questionnaire with forty reading strategies and Persian questionnaire with twenty reading strategies in Persian language. Fourteen reading strategies were chosen from each, i.e., fourteen reading strategies from English questionnaire and fourteen reading strategies from Persian, with respect to the students' obtained marks.

Then, the Nelson Standard Test (version 200B) was administered to 208 students in order to homogenize the subjects in terms of their general knowledge of basic grammar and vocabulary. Based on the scores obtained, 128 students whose scores fell within one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected to take part in the next phase of the study.

In order to have two successful/good reader groups and two unsuccessful/poor reader groups in terms of their level of reading ability, a reading pre-test with 45 multiple-choice items, were administered to the students. With respect to their obtained marks in reading comprehension test, sixty four subjects were considered good/successful readers because their scores were one standard deviation above the mean (25-42). The remainder namely 64 subjects were considered poor/unsuccessful readers because their scores were one standard deviation below the mean (7-17). The participants were divided into two experimental groups (one good-readers group and one poor-readers group) and two control groups (one good-readers group and one poor-readers group). Each of the good included equal numbers, i.e., each with 32 students.

The subjects in experimental groups (one good-readers group and one poor-readers group) attended two session (90 minutes) a week for 6 weeks, i.e, one semester. In this period, they were taught the selected reading strategies both in L1 and L2 each with 14 reading strategies. It should be mentioned that two reading strategies (one in L1 and one in L2) were taught to experimental groups but control groups did not receive any instruction. Finally, the reading test which was used in the pre-test was administered as a post-test to the all groups. 55 minutes was allocated to answer to 45 multiple-choice questions.

Data Analysis and Discussion

To select the most appropriate statistical procedures to compare performances of the groups in the posttest, it was necessary to make sure that the groups' scores enjoyed normal distributions and met the assumption of parametric tests used in this study. So, the scores were submitted to the One-sample test first which revealed deviation from normality in none of the groups. Thus the obtained data were analyzed by performing an ANOVA. Descriptive statistics of the results are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on Reading Pre-Test

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	32	36.1563	1.74336
2	32	33.0938	1.63351
3	32	13.1250	1.64120
4	32	12.9063	1.71068

G₁= Experimental group (successful readers)

G₂= Control group (successful readers)

G₃= Experimental group (unsuccessful readers)

G₄= Control group (unsuccessful readers)

As can be seen in Table 4.5, the total mean values of reading comprehension test had been 36.15, 33.09, 13.12, and 12. 90, respectively for the G1, G2, G3, and G4. These differences suggested that pre-reading activities might have affected reading comprehension ability of the participants in different groups differently. In line with the above speculation, the result of One-way ANOVA (Table 2) revealed a statistically significant difference at .05 probability level in reading comprehension ability among the four groups ($P=.000 < .05$).

Table 2. One-Way ANOVA on Reading Comprehension Results at Posttest

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	15093.711	3	5031.237	1776.626	.000
Within Groups	351.156	124	2.832		
Total	15444.867	127			

In addition, to find out where the differences lied a post hoc test was run. The results of the Tukey HSD, run for this purpose, are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Multiple Comparisons of the Effects of Pre-Reading Activities on the Groups

(I) groups	(J) groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
1	2	3.06250*	.42071	.000
	3	23.03125*	.42071	.000
	4	23.25000*	.42071	.000
2	1	-3.06250*	.42071	.000
	3	19.96875*	.42071	.000
	4	20.18750*	.42071	.000
3	1	-23.03125*	.42071	.000
	2	-19.96875*	.42071	.000
	4	.21875	.42071	.954
4	1	-23.25000*	.42071	.000
	2	-20.18750*	.42071	.000
	3	-.21875	.42071	.954

G₁ = Experimental group (successful readers)

G₂ = Control group (successful readers)

G₃ = Experimental group (unsuccessful readers)

G₄ = Control group (unsuccessful readers)

As Table 3 indicates, there has been a significant difference between the reading comprehension mean scores of the successful readers in experimental group and G3 and G4 which indicated that teaching reading strategies to successful readers has significant impacts on their reading ability. However, as Table 3 shows, there has been a significant difference between successful readers in experimental group and unsuccessful readers in control group too, that is, G1 and G3 ($P = .000$). Regarding the mean value in Table 1 it is clear that successful readers in experimental group have outperformed the successful readers in control group.

The results indicated that the p -value for the comparison of group 3 and 4 is .95 which is smaller than the critical value i.e. .05. It can be concluded that strategies instruction to poor readers has no significant impact on their reading ability. Thus, the null hypothesis of this study was rejected.

Considering reading problem versus language problem, the results showed that reading ability and reading strategies instruction is related. At low levels of reading ability, this relationship is negative. On the contrary, at high levels of reading ability, the successful readers could use reading strategies and also transfer L_1 reading ability to L_2 situations. According to the Clarke (1980, pp. 244-253) good readers had passed the threshold level, and thus they could benefit from their reading strategies in L_1 and L_2 in order to read more efficiently.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicated that reading strategies instruction has positive effect on reading comprehension ability of successful readers. But as the results displayed, instruction of reading strategies has not any effect on reading comprehension ability of poor readers. The results show that there is support to

already familiar question of reading problem versus language problem raised by Alderson (1984) and Carrell (1991). Both elements of language and reading are significant factors but the difference is that for lower level of language competence it is a matter of language problem. Conversely, at high levels of language competence it is a reading problem. The findings also are in line with ideas of Saricoban (2002) and Nambiar (2009) who state that good readers use more strategies and use them more frequently than poor readers and good readers are better at monitoring comprehension than poor readers. Poor readers are less aware of effective strategies and are less effective in their monitoring activities during reading.

The results will help the teachers to remove their students' language and reading problems. If the good readers are taught reading strategies, they will be efficient and better readers. Unskilled readers can become skilled readers and learners of whole text if they are given instruction in effective strategies and taught to monitor and check their comprehension while reading (Cohen, 1986). The major conclusion that can be drawn on the basis of the findings of this study is that, reading is a multidirectional process, comprising interactions of many factors. Therefore, students should understand that to comprehend efficiently, they should try to activate their background knowledge rather than pay attention to every single word in the text. To close, this study has provided further support to the idea that providing for pre-reading strategies is an essential duty of teachers in helping students to comprehend unfamiliar texts. Strategy instruction is a suitable learning tool; by instruction reading strategy students learn how to make relationship among different ideas in the text. It helps the student to have a deeper understanding of the text. Furthermore, they let the students be aware of their thinking process and gain insight into their analytical and synthesis skills.

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