The Effect of Teaching Reading Comprehension Strategies on Iranian EFL Pre-University Students’ Reading Comprehension Ability

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ABSTRACT: The present study investigated the potential of implementing reading strategy instruction in raising learners’ reading comprehension ability, extending the range of strategies they employed and enhancing their awareness. To conduct the study, 90 Iranian pre-university female students were selected based on a convenient sampling procedure. To collect the necessary data, three types of instruments were employed, a reading comprehension test, questionnaire and interview. A group of 53 students (experimental) was taught to employ reading comprehension strategies in reading some English texts during a period of 15 sessions while the other group of 37 students (control) was taught reading comprehension traditionally. The findings of the study show that while strategy training appeared to raise students’ awareness of reading strategies and could encourage strategy use by some students, the reading strategy instruction was not able to enhance the students’ reading performance.

Keywords: Reading; Instruction; Strategy; Comprehension

INTRODUCTION

Many students may take it for granted that the intended meaning of the author lies solely in the printed words on the page or screen, so that reading is no more than a process of obtaining meaning from the source. They approach reading passively, relying heavily on the use of a bilingual dictionary, thereby spending countless hours laboring over direct sentence-by-sentence translations. Despite all the efforts made, their reading comprehension remains poor. To enhance the reading comprehension ability in English, Alfassi (2004) states that students should “understand the meaning of text, critically evaluate the message, remember the content, and apply the new-found knowledge flexibly”. Since reading is a complex cognitive process, it is very important for teachers to train students to take active control of their own comprehension processes.

An important part of learning a foreign language is mastering learning. Mastering the fundamentals of learning not only can help language learners in learning vocabulary, acquiring basic structures, and improving the necessary linguistic and communication skills, but also help the learners to be in active control of their own learning processes. The process of becoming successful at learning creates learners who are autonomous and employ individualized approaches to learning objectives. Paying direct attention to the process of learning and gaining mastery over the language content results in learning the content more successfully, and contributes to the development of lifelong learners (Rausch, 2000).

From among various types of learning strategies, reading comprehension strategies have long been recognized by researchers of second/foreign language reading (Brantmeier, 2002; Slataci&Akyel, 2002). As a matter of fact, reading comprehension strategies separate the passive, unskilled reader from the active reader. Skilled readers don’t just read, they interact with the text.

Very few studies have been conducted to investigate the actual effect of teaching reading comprehension strategies on learners’ reading comprehension performance in Iran. The present study aims to probe into this important issue by providing formal instruction of the strategies to a group of Iranian EFL learners and comparing their reading comprehension performance with another group not receiving such an instruction.
literature review

Wright and Brown (2006) explored the potential of reading strategy instruction in raising the learner readers’ awareness of reading strategies, in extending the range of strategies they employed and in encouraging learners to monitor and reflect upon their reading. The findings have revealed that strategy training could encourage learner readers to reflect on their strategy use and seemed to boost their confidence in their own reading abilities. Salataci and Akyel (2002) investigated the possible effects of reading instruction on reading in Turkish and English. The results indicated that strategy instruction had a positive effect on both Turkish and English reading strategies and on reading comprehension in English. In still another study, Shang (2010) investigated a group of Taiwanese EFL learners’ use of three reading strategies (cognitive, metacognitive, compensation strategies), their perceived impact on the learners’ self-efficacy, and the link between reading strategy use and perceived self-efficacy on their English reading comprehension. The results of this study showed that metacognitive strategy was used most frequently, followed by compensation strategy, and then cognitive strategy. Besides, a significant positive relationship was found between the use of reading strategies and perceptions of self-efficacy. However, reading strategies were unrelated to reading achievement.

In the literature, studies that have been carried out on of reading strategy instruction are divided into two main categories. The first category of the studies describes the readers’ strategy use. The results of these studies have revealed that strategy use is different among more and less proficient readers. Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006) in a study on language learning strategy use revealed that students in the intermediate level reported more use of learning strategies than beginning and advanced students and that more strategic language learners advanced along the proficiency continuum faster than less strategic ones. Yau (2005) in another study found that proficient readers employ more sophisticated approaches to reading than less-proficient readers. For instance, in his study the skilled reader employed strategies of inference, summarization and synthesis during and after reading, while the less skilled reader applied bridging inferences, paraphrasing and repetition. YaaliJahromi (2002) concluded that the high proficient students used more strategies. The results of a study by Al-Melhi (2000) on the reported and the actual reading strategies and the metacognitive awareness of a random sample of fourth-year Saudi college students as they read in English as a foreign language showed that some differences did exist between the skilled and less-skilled readers in terms of their actual and reported reading strategies, their use of global and local strategies, their metacognitive awareness, their perception of a good reader, and their self-confidence as readers. The second category of studies has been conducted to investigate the effect of reading strategy instruction on the readers’ reading performance. Davis (2010), based on a meta-analysis of comprehension strategy instruction for upper elementary and middle school students in America, concluded that instruction on the use of reading comprehension strategies has a positive impact on students’ achievements in grades 4-8.

McKeon, Beck, and Blake (2009) conducted a two-year study in which standardized comprehension instruction for representations of two major approaches was designed and implemented. The effectiveness of the two experimental comprehension instructional conditions (Content and Strategies) and a control condition were compared. Content instruction focused students’ attention on the content of the text through open, meaning-based questions about the text. In strategies instruction, students were taught specific procedures to guide their access to text during reading of the text. The results of the study revealed that there was no difference between the performances of the two experimental groups for some aspects of comprehension. However, for narrative recall and expository learning probes, the students following content instruction outperformed that following strategy instruction.

Khosravi (2000) made an attempt to investigate the effect of scanning and skimming, as two reading strategies, on Iranian EFL students’ reading rate and reading comprehension. The analysis of the data indicated that scanning could significantly improve the students’ both reading rate and reading comprehension, while skimming only accounted for significant improvement of the reading comprehension of the subjects. Shokrpour and Fotovatian (2009) conducted an experimental study to determine the effects of consciousness-raising of metacognitive strategies on a group of Iranian EFL students’ reading comprehension. The results of this study revealed that compared to the control group, the experimental group showed a significant improvement in reading comprehension at the end of the treatment period.

Taking a look at studies reported above, one can come to the conclusion that the area of reading comprehension strategy instruction still requires further research, especially in an EFL context such as Iran and the present study intends to explore the issue more deeply by addressing a number of variables such as learners’ awareness of reading strategies, the extension of the range of strategies used by learners, and the effectiveness of reading comprehension strategy instruction.
Having reviewed the literature on reading comprehension strategy training, especially in Iranian context, the present research intended to investigate the effect of teaching reading strategies on raising the learner reading ability. It attempted to explore the potential of strategy instruction in extending the range of strategies that learners (in this case, a group of pre-university students in an EFL context) employ. Attempts were also made to investigate whether the training method was effective in enhancing the learners’ awareness of reading strategies. Since this study was conducted in a class where the students’ reading ability was mixed, an attempt was made to find out how students with different reading ability levels were influenced by reading strategy instruction. The present study enjoys significance in that it can provide an insight to the effect of reading strategy instruction on learners' performance and their awareness of reading strategies. Accordingly, this study aimed at finding answers to the following research questions:
1. Does strategy instruction significantly enhance learners’ reading ability?
2. Does strategy instruction significantly enhance the learners’ awareness of reading strategies?
3. Which strategies are used the most by learners?

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Participants
This study was conducted using two groups of 90 female pre-university students in a pre-university center in Karaj in the academic year 2013. They ranged in age from 17 to 19 and had already studied English for 6 years at school. Though the students had studied English for six years at school, since they are still taught English mainly based on Grammar-Translation Method, their English proficiency was not usually so high. At first, the researchers selected two intact classes as experimental and control group from the pre-university center where she had been teaching English. Since the number of students in the class which was selected as the experimental group was not large enough, two intact classes were assigned to the experimental group (53 in the experimental group, and 37 in the control group).

MATERIALS/ INSTRUMENTS

The texts which were employed during the instructional practice procedure were related to the topics of the subjects' English text-book with the average readability of .70. The texts included different topics such as earthquakes, IT, child labor, space exploration and the great people.

In order to gather data, three instruments were employed in this study: a reading comprehension test, questionnaire, and interview.

Reading proficiency test:
A reading proficiency test was selected from The Longman TOEFL book and administered to all the participants in both the experimental and the control groups twice, once as a reading comprehension pre-test before embarking the study and another time as a post-test at the end of the study. The topics of the test were related to the topics of the students' textbook taught in the class. The reliability of the reading comprehension test was computed through KR-21 method of estimating reliability after it was administered as a pretest to both groups. The reliability index obtained was 0.76 which revealed that the test was a reliable measure of reading ability.

Questionnaire
The assessment sheet with 12 items and based on a Likert scale ranging from 'never' to 'always' was employed to highlight the frequency of strategies used by the students of the experimental group before and after the instruction.

Interview:
Some students were selected randomly and were asked questions about whether they were familiar with the strategies before the instruction, whether researchers' modeling of the strategies helped them follow the strategies more easily, which strategies they found most useful, and how they felt about the usefulness of the strategy instruction program and its effect on their reading comprehension ability.

Procedure
The strategy training program was designed as a reading course during the spring 2013 semester, with class meeting three hours a week. The course aimed to enhance students’ reading comprehension in English through direct teaching of various reading strategies.
At first, the researchers selected two intact classes as experimental and control group from the pre-university center where she had been teaching English.

One group consisting of 53 students served as the experimental group. The researchers first modeled the strategies for the students and gave them enough practice on how to use them while reading. This was done during ten sessions. The other group which consisted of 37 students was regarded as the control group and received no strategy instruction, but participated in pre- and post-testing. However, in this group, the researchers followed the traditional reading comprehension teaching practices for helping students to read passages appearing in their textbook.

**data analysis**

Prior to the experiment and in order to make sure that no significant difference in terms of reading comprehension ability existed between the two groups, the reading comprehension pre-test was administered to both control and experimental groups. An independent sample t-test was then run to see if the two groups performed significantly differently on the reading comprehension pre-test or not. The results obtained from this statistical analysis (Table 1) revealed that the two groups did not differ significantly in their performance on the reading comprehension pre-test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>SEM</th>
<th>SF</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exp.</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>13.26</td>
<td>5.72</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cont.</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>15.16</td>
<td>5.48</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Independent t-test comparing the performance of the two groups on the reading comprehension pre-test

After implementing the 10-session training program, all the participants in the two groups were given the reading comprehension post-test, the same test which had been administered as the pre-test before starting the training. Descriptive statistics of the reading comprehension post-test are summarized in table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exp.</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17.88</td>
<td>5.65</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cont.</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17.24</td>
<td>6.37</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the reading comprehension post-test

In order to see whether the treatment given to the experimental group had caused any significant change in this group and to see if the performance of the students in this group was significantly different from that of the control group, an independent t-test was run between the scores of the reading comprehension post-test of both groups. The results obtained from this statistical test are presented in table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>SEM</th>
<th>SF</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exp.</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>17.88</td>
<td>5.65</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.504</td>
<td>0.239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cont.</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>17.24</td>
<td>6.37</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Independent t-test comparing the performance of the two groups on the reading comprehension post-test

The results presented in Table 3 demonstrate no significant difference in the performance of the two groups on reading comprehension test (t= 0.504, p> 0.05), suggesting that reading strategy instruction was not able to exert a significant influence on the reading.

In the next step, and in order to investigate whether the treatment given to the experimental group had caused any significant change within this group and to see if the students in this group had performed significantly differently on the post-test compared with the pre-test, the reading comprehension pre- and post-test scores of the experimental group were compared using a paired t-test. The results obtained from this statistical test are summarized in table 4.
Table 4. Paired t-test comparing the performance of the experimental group on the reading comprehension pre-and post-tests.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair1 (EXP)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>S.E.M</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.(2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretest-posttest</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>0.532</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>8.67</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the above table demonstrates, a significant difference was found between the performance of the students of the experimental group on the pre- and post-tests suggesting that reading comprehension strategy instruction could create a significant change on the behavior of the aforementioned group within the instruction period.

**Questionnaire**

The assessment sheet with 12 items and based on a Likert scale ranging from 'never' to 'always' was employed to highlight the frequency of strategies used by the students of the experimental group. Key to strategies used:

1. Reading text once
2. Reading text twice
3. Reading the first line of paragraphs
4. Using titles to predict text content
5. Using illustrations to understand content
6. Reading questions first
7. Using teacher's introduction to understand content
8. Guessing meanings based on cognates in English
9. Guessing meaning based on similarity to other words in TL
10. Guessing meanings from context
11. Using dictionaries
12. Writing main points in one's own words

In order to see whether any significant change had occurred to the awareness of and use of the strategies among the students in the experimental group, the strategies identified to be used in the initial strategies survey were compared with those actually employed in the final questionnaire given to the students. The analysis of the data was carried out using Excel Microsoft. The results of this comparison are presented in Figure 1.

![Figure 1: Strategies used in the initial strategies survey compared with those in the final questionnaire](image-url)

The figure also shows that the greatest improvement is seen in using the strategies: "reading text once", "reading first line of paragraphs", "reading questions first" and "writing main ideas in one's own words". A relatively moderate change is seen in employing the strategies "using the teacher's introduction" and "guessing the meaning..."
of the words”. A slight change is seen in using the strategies “reading text twice” and “using title to anticipate what the text is about”. A drop is noticed in using the strategies “dictionary use” and “using illustrations” when the performance of the students in initial questionnaire and the questionnaire used by the end of the study are compared.

In order to statistically investigate whether reading strategy instruction could raise the students' awareness of reading strategies; a paired t-test was run to compare the experimental group's scores obtained from the questionnaire employed in the initial survey with the scores obtained from the questionnaire used at the end of the instruction. The results of the paired t-test are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Paired t-test comparing the performance of the experimental group on the initial and final reading comprehension strategy use questionnaire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair 1</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>Sig.(2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial Survey</td>
<td>2.706</td>
<td>2.042</td>
<td>9.461</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Questionnaire</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the findings demonstrate, there is a significant difference between the experimental group's scores on the initial and the final questionnaires suggesting that the reading strategy instruction could enhance the awareness of the reading strategies among the students of the experimental group.

Interviews:

The analysis of the contents of the interviews carried out with the students during the instruction period revealed that all students were satisfied with the instruction of the strategies. Interviews revealed that students had never been taught reading strategies before. Although they had employed some strategies in their reading activities, this was done subconsciously. In fact, interviews showed that the strategy instruction was able to raise the students' awareness of reading strategies. All of the students believed that the reading strategy training they had received as part of the study was useful. Almost everyone stated that they felt their reading skills had improved as a result of instruction and that they were now more confident in their reading abilities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To sum up the final results of the study, this study attempted to seek answers to three research questions. The questions will be restated and the answers, based on the findings of the study, will be provided below.

Does strategy instruction significantly enhance the students' reading ability?

According to the results of the analysis shown in Table 3, the answer is negative. It could not influence their reading ability sufficiently and did not make statistically significant improvement in the students' reading ability. This is, to a great extent, in line with Shang's (2010) study in which the researcher did not find any relationship between strategies instruction or use and reading achievement.

Does strategy instruction significantly enhance the learners' awareness of reading strategies?

As Table 5 and Figure 1 indicate, the answer to this question is positive. Findings of this study pointed to a difference in the experimental group participants' consciousness of the reading strategies as shown by using the reading comprehension questionnaires at the initial and final stage of the experiment. Furthermore, the results obtained from the analysis of the interviews are consistent with those obtained from the statistical analyses. The findings of this part of the study seeking the effect of teaching reading strategies on raising the awareness of the strategies on the students' part are consistent with those carried out by Wright and Brown (2006), Al-Melhi (2000) and Carrell (1998). In all the mentioned studies, results indicate that the students' metacognitive awareness increased at the end of the awareness-raising programs.

Which strategies are used the most by learners?

The most frequently used strategies were:

- Reading the first line of paragraphs (3), using teacher's introduction to understand content (7), and guessing meanings based on the similarity to other words in TL (9).

Strategies used moderately were:

- Use of titles to predict text content (4), use of illustrations to understand content (5), guessing meanings based on cognates in English (8), guessing meanings from context (10), and writing main points in one's own words (12).

And the least frequently used strategies were:

- Reading text twice (2), reading questions first (6), using dictionaries (11), and reading text once (1).
CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results show that reading strategy Instruction can lead to the use of an extended range of reading strategies by the learners. However, the results pointed to the fact that learners’ awareness of strategies and their ability to use them while reading did increase, the reading strategy instruction was not able to enhance the students’ reading performance significantly based on the results of a reading comprehension test given to the participants at the end of the program. The findings of this study offer several pedagogical implications for teaching reading comprehension in EFL contexts.

Consciousness-raising can play an important role in teaching reading comprehension strategies as the findings suggest. Therefore, teachers can implement this technique in the process of teaching reading and help the learners make significant improvements.

Readers with various reading abilities, according to the results of the interviews, might benefit from an instructional procedure where they learn to monitor their comprehension and use the various strategies with the help of a teacher who models the steps of the instructional process, and where they discuss their strategies while reading the text.

REFERENCES


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