Investigating the effect of drawing inferences in EFL learners reading comprehension ability by using recall of short stories

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Abstract: Drawing inference is one of seven strategies in reading comprehension. Proficient readers use their prior knowledge about a topic and the information they have gleaned in the text thus far to make predictions about what might happen next. When teachers demonstrate or model their reading processes for students through think aloud, they often stop and predict what will happen next to show how inferring is essential for comprehending text. In this study, two fairly homogeneous groups of EFL learners were selected (N=46) in Arak University. They were studying in English translation. After taking a reading comprehension test to ensure that their reading comprehension differences are not significant, they were randomly assigned to attend a short-story course in two different sections, one serving as the experimental and the other as the control group, both studying the same short stories, and both being taught by the researcher as their instructor of the course. By using T-test and ANOVA, the researchers found that in recall test which administered two weeks later, the learners who can drawing inferences significantly outperformed the other learners in reading comprehension test.

Keywords: Drawing Inferences, L2 Reading Strategies, Cognitive Reading Strategies, Short Story

1. Introduction

Reading comprehension has been defined in many ways over the years. Zhang, 2008 suggests that the overriding purpose to reading is to get the correct message from a text – the message the writer intended for the reader to receive. Pearson, 1985 states that the idea of reading has changed and moved from what was considered a receptive process to what is now an interactive process (see Pourhosein Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011).

According to Block & Duffy (2008, p. 21), comprehension is a strategic process; that is, good readers proactively search for meaning as they read, using text cues and their background knowledge in combination to generate predictions, to monitor those predictions, to re-predict when necessary, and generally to construct a representation of the author's meaning.

As Phakiti, 2006 has mentioned: when individuals are reading, their reading processes would range from lower-level to higher-level processing (see Alderson, 2000; Kintsch, 1998; Pressley & Afflerback, 1995).

Royanto, 2012 reported that reading is an important skill that must be mastered by students since they are young, because it helps the students to widen their knowledge and to communicate with others and also to continue their studies. Some research findings show that Indonesian students reading skill is limited.

1.1. Reading Strategies

At first, it is worth to mentioning the role of strategy use in reading comprehension. So, strategy is a plan developed by a reader to assist in comprehending and thinking about texts, when reading the words alone does not give a full meaning to the reader.

Comprehension strategies offer hope for struggling students. Improving reading comprehension can have a positive impact on a child's academic performance. Strategies and training offer an effective plan of attack. We train an individual's cognitive skills based on an assessment that pinpoints what areas a child struggles in. Whatever age

your child is, it's important that their skills develop in all aspects of reading comprehension because problems in any area can adversely effect the whole reading process.

While recent reading strategy research has moved away from its ESL base into EFL settings, much of the focus remains on comparing reading practices of less versus more proficient readers. These studies often imply that pedagogic intervention in English classes can help "correct" poor readers' strategic knowledge, enabling them to deal effectively with the academic reading they will face later (see Malcolm, 2009).

Sen, 2009 noted that reading is the most fundamental tool for learning for students. Learning and implementing special reading strategies and specializing in the implementation of such strategies enable not only a more efficient use of time but also an easier and more sustained period of reading. Increasing brain power at the time of reading is directly related to developing strategic reading skills.

As Martínez, 2011 has mentioned: reading strategies include skimming, scanning, inferring, activating schemata, recognizing text structure, using mental imagery, visualizing, generating questions, monitoring comprehension, evaluating strategy use, etc. (see Anderson, 1991; Carrel, 1989; Block, 1986; Cohen, 1990; Pressley, 2002; Zhang et al., 2008). As Cohen,2007, Paris, 2002, Zhang, 2003 and Grabe, 2004 point out, strategies themselves are not inherently good or bad, but they have the potential to be used effectively or ineffectively in different contexts. Moreover, metacognitive awareness of reading strategies is recognized as an important aspect of skilled reading (see Carrel, 1989 & 1998; Cohen, 2007; Hudson, 2007; Wenden, 1998; White, 1999; Zhang, 2008).

Norouzian and Mehdizadeh, 2013 noted that a common assumption in strategy use is that effective strategy use helps students self-direct and control their own learning processes inside and outside the classroom. Self-direction is significant for the learners' language development as it reduces their reliance on teacher, and enables them to take responsibility for their own learning and develop more confidence, involvement, proficiency (Oxford, 1990), empowerment (Grenfell & Harris, 1999), and autonomy (Benson & Voller, 1997; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989).

Reading strategies are techniques or conscious actions taken to improve understanding and solve difficulties encountered in reading. Reading strategies include reading aloud, paraphrasing, guessing, re-reading the text, visualizing the information, asking oneself questions, translating, and using a dictionary. The successful use of reading strategies benefits learners' reading comprehension (Huang, Chern, & Lin, 2009).

As Kashef, 2012 described about the important role of strategies: they are "conscious and flexible plans that readers apply to particular texts and tasks". According to such a definition and also to the concept that language learning and reading are skills and therefore "teachable" through training, many studies have focused on teaching strategies explicitly to improve the students' reading comprehension. Metacognitive strategies have also been emphasized as useful strategies for effective reading. In other words, successful readers are both aware and flexible in the use of different reading strategies needed to accomplish a task.

One of the most important strategies in reading strategy is drawing inferences. So, in drawing inferences, you are really getting at the ultimate meaning of things – what is important, why it is important, how one event influences another, how one happening leads to another. Simply getting the facts in reading is not enough – you must think about what those facts mean to you.

1.2. How Is Drawing Inferences Viewed?

Drawing inferences refers to information that is implied or 'inferred'. This means that the information is never clearly stated. In fact, writers often 'tell' the readers more than they say directly. They give them hints that help readers "read between the lines". Using these clues to give readers a deeper understanding of their reading is called 'inferring'. By 'inferring', readers go beyond the surface details to see other meanings that the details suggest or imply (not stated). When the meanings of words are not stated clearly in the context of the text, they may be implied – that is, suggested or hinted at. When meanings are implied, readers may 'infer' them.

Smith, 2008 said his opinion about inferences in this way: "Inferences are evidence-based guesses. They are the conclusions a reader draws about the unsaid based on what is actually said. Inferences drawn while reading are much like inferences drawn in everyday life".

Power, 2013 said her opinion about drawing inferences: "Proficient readers use their prior knowledge about a topic and the information they have gleaned in the text thus far to make predictions about what might happen next. When teachers demonstrate or model their reading processes for students through think-alouds, they often stop and predict what will happen next to show how inferring is essential for comprehending text".

Below are some tips and examples for drawing inferences which have been suggested by Smith, 2004.

1.3. Tips for Drawing Inferences

1. Make sure your inferences rely mainly on the author's words rather than your own feelings or experience. Your goal is to read the author's mind, not invent your own message.

2. Check to see if your inference is contradicted (proven wrong) by any statements in the paragraph. If so, it is not an appropriate or useful inference.

3. If the passage is a difficult one, check to see if you can actually identify the statements that led you to your conclusion. This kind of close reading is a good comprehension check. It will also help you remember the material.

1.4. Research Hypotheses

Therefore the following hypotheses are formulated:

H1: There is significant difference between learners in reading comprehension ability.

H2: Practice of Drawing Inferences as a generative study strategy by EFL learners bring about any variation in their reading comprehension of narrative texts.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

In this study, two fairly homogeneous groups of EFL learners were selected (N=46) in Arak University. They were studying in English translation .Both groups were female. So , the initial sample of study were consisted of 60 female students.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. English Proficiency Test (Transparent)

This test was composed of multiple choice cloze passage, which consist of 30 questions in grammar and vocabulary and 20 questions for reading comprehension; totally it contained 50 questions.

2.2.2. Background Question

In order to elicit some information about age, gender, their parents economical state have been asked

2.2.3. The Reading Comprehension Pre-Test

To have enough evidence on the participants' reading ability, the researcher gave them the reading comprehension section of a Michigan test.

2.2.4. The Recall Test

Five days after administering the reading comprehension test, both groups of participants were given a multiple-choice, recall test, composed of 30 items, on the content of the stories. They were asked the events, the settings, the characters and finally they asked them to explain about the end of story.

2.3. Procedure

First the researcher administered English proficiency test (Transparent), from 60 students; then 46 female students were selected as a total number of subjects. In next phase, background questionnaire have been taken to participants which consisted of some questions about age, gender name of university, their parents economical state. The Reading Comprehension Pre-Test was administered in this phase. So, the researcher gave them the reading comprehension section of a Michigan test.

As part of the course materials one short story was selected as the materials for the research project, after randomly assigning the participants to two different groups. The experimental group, in addition, was being provided with some strategies in how to inference the end of short story; however the control group didn't receive any treatment. So, the experimental group was instructed how to inference the end of short story. The control group, however, did not receive any training with respect to drawing inferences and was not told to practice as the experimental group did. In this section, five days after presenting the new materials, both groups were asked to take a reading comprehension, multiple-choice test, composed of 42 items, on the stories discussed in the classes.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Results of the Reading Comprehension Test

As it was mentioned earlier, the two groups of the participants were given a reading comprehension test. The result of this pre-test has shown that there were no significant differences among the students in their reading comprehension ability. Having scored the test papers, the researcher computed the arithmetic mean (or simply, the mean) for each group (see Table 1, below). As there were totally 42 items in the test, assigning one point to each correct item would add up to a maximum of 42 points. In order to compare the means, a T-test was run to see if the means were significantly different (see Table 2,below).

Table 1: *Results of the reading comprehension test on the short story*

Group	N	Mean	SD
A(experimental)	24	5/85	2/31
B (control)	22	6/15	2/25

N=number of participants   SD=standard deviation

Table 2: *Results of the t-test to compare the means on reading comprehension test*

df	Tobs.	Tcrit.	P value(α)
N-1=45	3.97	2.064	0.002

df=degree of freedom   Tobs.=observed   Tcrit.=critical

According to Table 1, Table 2, there isn't significant difference between two groups in pre-test reading comprehension ability because p<0/05. So the first hypothesis *(There is significant difference between learners in reading comprehension ability)* was rejected.

3.2. Results of the Recall Test

Five days after presenting the short story to two groups of participants, both groups have given reading comprehension, multiple-choice test, composed of 40 items, on the stories discussed in the classes. Thus, assigning one point to each correct item would add up to a maximum score of 40. The mean score on the recall test for each group was separately computed (see Table 3 below). Then, for the comparison of the obtained means, a T-test was run (see Table 4 below).

Table 3: *Results of the recall test on short stories*

Group	N	Mean	SD
A (experimental)	24	27.52	2.10
B (control)	22	23.92	3.01

N=number of participants   SD=standard deviation

Table 4: *Results of the T-test to compare the means on recall test*

df	tobs.	tcrit.	p value (α)
N-1=45	4.90	2.064	0.01

df=degree of freedom   tobs.=observed   tcrit.=critical

As indicated in Table 3, Table 4 there is significant difference between two groups in recall test because p>0/05, so the second hypothesis (*Practice of Drawing Inferences as a generative study strategy)* was accepted.

4. Conclusion

As it was mentioned, there were no significant differences in reading comprehension between the groups at pre-test, while there were significant differences among them in recall test.

So, in line with pedagogical objectives and orientation of the study, the first research hypothesis was rejected because both groups were equal in reading comprehension test; however, the second hypothesis was accepted because students in experimental group who were exposed to teaching short story by drawing inferences outperformed in recall test than control group.

In one study which has done by Samadi & Maghsoudi (2013) on gender-based reading, they concluded that all subjects performed equally in comprehending genderless-based texts.

In general, several reasons may be the source of students' difficulty in reading comprehension. Factors such as lack of appropriate reading strategies, lack of background knowledge related to the topic of the target language or lack of attitudes toward reading are examples of source of that difficulty. Moreover, there are few teachers who are familiar with the recent strategies to provide some effective opportunities for their students (see Soleimani & Nabizadeh, 2012).

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