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The Effectiveness of Strategy-based Reciprocal Teaching Approach on Iranian EFL Students' Reading Comprehension

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ABSTRACT

A number of studies have demonstrated that the reading strategies implemented by students affect their comprehension. However, research on reciprocal teaching in which the strategies are explicitly taught, in Iranian EFL context is nearly rare. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of strategy-based reciprocal teaching on Iranian adult EFL students' English reading comprehension and also its effects on the students' meta-cognitive awareness. This research involves an experiment on two groups: the experimental group and the control group, for which two tow different teaching methods of strategy-based reciprocal teaching and traditional grammar-translation method instruction are employed respectively. Both groups are made of nine students of intermediate level. The experiment also involves an English reading test for pre-test and post-test, a meta-cognitive awareness questionnaire to be completed before and after the instruction, and reading materials for strategy-based reciprocal teaching and traditional grammar-translation instruction. The quantitative analyses of the English reading comprehension test and meta-cognitive awareness questionnaire are conducted through descriptive statistics, independent sample t-test and paired test. Results of this study reveal an equal improvement of students' English reading comprehension of both groups and better meta-cognitive awareness in the experimental group. To sum up the significance of this study is in exploring and testing the effectiveness of strategy-based reciprocal teaching on Iranian EFL students' English reading comprehension and meta-cognition.

Key words: reading comprehension, meta-cognition, reciprocal teaching, strategies, traditional teaching

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title **page**

1. Introduction…… 1

1.1. Preview……. 2

1.2. Purpose of the study……..... 3

1.3. Significance of the study……..… 3

1.4. Definition of key terms……...……..….4

1.5. Research Questions……....5

1.6. Summary…….…… 6

2. Review of Literature…… .7

2.1. Reading Comprehension…….…… 8

2.2. Direct Instruction of Strategies…….. ..9

2.3. Reciprocal Teaching …….. .10

2.4. Theoretical rationale of reciprocal teaching……11

2.4.1. Expert Scaffolding…….…….…….……..11

2.4.2. Thinking aloud……13

2.4.3. Cooperative learning……..13

2.4.4. Proleptic teaching……14

2.5. Four Strategies of Reciprocal Teaching ……..……...14

2.5.1. Predicting……14

2.5.2. Clarifying……..15

2.5.3. Questioning……...15

2.5.4. Summarizing……....16

2.6. Research on Reciprocal Teaching……..17

2.7. Meta-cognition…….....19

2.8. Research on meta-cognition……...19

2.9. Summary……...20

3. Method……21
3.1. Participants……...22
3.2. Instruments……...23
3.2.1 English reading comprehension test……23
3.2.2. Meta-cognitive awareness questionnaire……24
3.2.3. Reading materials for reciprocal teaching and traditional teaching……..24
3.3. Procedures……25
3.3.1 Pre-test in English Reading Comprehension and Meta-cognitive Awareness Questionnaire……...26
3.3.2. Strategy-based Reciprocal Teaching and Traditional Teaching Sessions in English Reading……27
3.3.3. Post-test in English Reading Comprehension and Meta-cognitive Awareness Questionnaire……31
3.4. Data Analysis……...31
3.5. Summary……..31

4. Results…… 32
4.1. The Effects of Reciprocal Teaching on Students' English Reading Comprehension……...33
4.2. The Effects of Strategy-based Reciprocal Teaching on Students' Meta-cognitive Awareness……...36
4.2.1. Students' Reading Confidence……..36
4.2.2. Students' Perception of Reading Difficulties……...38
4.2.3. Students' perceptions of repair strategies……40
4.2.4. Students' perceptions of effective reading strategies……...42
4.2.5. Students' perceptions of a good English reader……..45

5. Discussion and Conclusion……48
5.1. Discussion of the major findings……...49
5.1.1. The effectiveness of the strategy-based reciprocal teaching on students' reading comprehension……...49

5.1.2. The effects of the strategy-based reciprocal teaching on Iranian students' meta-cognitive awareness……...52

5.1.2.1. Meta-cognitive awareness of reading confidence……...52

5.1.2.2. Meta-cognitive awareness of reading difficulties…….53

5.1.2.3. Meta-cognitive awareness of repair strategies…….53

5.1.2.4. Meta-cognitive awareness of effective reading strategies……54

5.1.2.5. Meta-cognitive awareness of a good English reader……55

5.2. Pedagogical Implications……...57

5.3. Limitations of the study……...58

5.5. Conclusion…….59

References……60

Appendixes……..... 64

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.3.1 Procedure of the Study……26

LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1.1: The pre-test in both control group (CG) and Experimental group (EX)……...33

Table 4.1.2: The post-test in both control group (CG) and Experimental group (EX)……...34

Table 4.1.3: Paired sample t-test of experimental group……...35

Table 4.2.1: Pre-test and post-test in both groups' reading confidence……37

Table 4.2.2: Pre-test and post-test in both groups' perceptions of reading difficulties…….39

Table 4.2.3: Pre-test and post-test in both groups' perceptions of repair strategies……..41

Table 4.2.4: Pre-test and post-test in both groups' perceptions of effective reading ……...43

Table 4.2.5: Pre-test and post-test in both groups' perceptions of a goof English reader ……45

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter consists of five parts. The first part is concerned with the background of the study. The second part addresses the purpose of the study. The third part discusses the significance of the study. And finally the fourth part provides definitions of the key terms. The last part presents the research questions of the study.

1.1. Preview

English learning has become a popular tendency in Iran recently. As a result many people are learning English in different language institutes. Considering the undeniable importance of English language as whole, reading has been a crucial skill in Iran for the reason that high school and college courses are particularly and excessively based on reading passages. Although Iranian English education at school and college is reading based, the total reading ability of students is not at a satisfactory level of proficiency. Therefore it's an obvious fact that Iranian students' reading education needs to be enhanced. The traditional grammar-translation method has always been the dominant method to teach reading comprehension in Iran, while in developed countries new methods have been employed to achieve better results. Today, the strategies to teach reading play a key role in schools and institutes in developed countries, and teachers by implementing an effective teaching approach play a critical role in English reading instruction.

Introducing a modern approach like reciprocal strategy-based method to teach reading in Iran could help Iranian EFL students develop a higher level of reading comprehension proficiency, as many empirical studies have already proven the effectiveness of strategy-based reciprocal teaching in promoting reading comprehension (Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Rosenshine & Meister, 1994; Taylor & Frye, 1992).

1.2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of the present study was to explore the effects of the strategy-based reciprocal teaching on English reading comprehension and meta-cognition of Iranian EFL students. Much research has also proven that strategy-based reciprocal teaching had positive effects on poor readers and young learners (Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Rosenshine & Meister, 1994; Taylor & Frye, 1992). However, little if not any research on strategy-based reciprocal teaching has been carried out on EFL students in Iran. Therefore the researcher explored the effectiveness of strategy-based reciprocal teaching to promote English reading comprehension on Iranian English language students. It was hoped that this research would encourage English language teachers to use this modern method in their classroom.

1.3. Significance of the study

The significance of the study lies in terms of its attempt to find a suitable modern instructional method to aid Iranian students in promoting their reading comprehension. If it was found through the present study that the strategy-based reciprocal teaching could enhance the Iranian EFL students' reading comprehension and meta-cognitive reading awareness, even better than the current traditional method employed in Iranian English reading classes, then this modern method would be the best teaching approach in Iranian classes to support more effective reading and to facilitate students' independent reading through a refined control of their own reading process.

As for the teachers, the findings of this study might help them define clearer guidelines and, thus, gain better skills at adapting the reciprocal teaching approach to their own English classrooms in a way that facilitates their students' goal of becoming better readers.

1.4. Definition of key terms

Key terms of this study including *reading comprehension*, *meta-cognition*, and *reciprocal teaching* are briefly described below.

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is defined as the reader's understanding of the text. Readers may evaluate their level of understanding of a text during the reading process. Reading comprehension could be recognized into two different views: behavioral/task analysis view and the cognitive view (Alfassi, 1998). From a behavioral point of view, reading comprehension could be seen as a set of sub-skills. Reading comprehension could be promoted by practicing those sub-skills. Enhancement plays a vital role in this concept. From the cognitive viewpoint, readers use their prior experience and existing knowledge to foster and maintain comprehension.

Meta-cognition

Meta-cognition could be defined as the study of self-monitoring, self-regulation, human awareness and consciousness. Brown, Armbruster and Baker (1986) stated that meta-cognition plays an important role in reading. Effective readers have a higher level of meta-cognition; they can manipulate their reading process and use appropriate reading strategies to aid in comprehension. On the contrary, poor or novice readers have a lower level of meta-cognition and use inappropriate reading strategies.

Reciprocal teaching

Reciprocal teaching is a teaching approach which employs problem-solving activities in order to enhance reading comprehension. Palincsar and Brown (1984) defined four comprehensive discrete strategies employed to facilitate students' reading comprehension: predicting, clarifying, questioning, and summarizing. During the reciprocal teaching, readers acquire and implement those four strategies flexibility in order to promote reading comprehension.

Traditional Teaching

Traditional teaching is regarded as the teacher implemented Grammar-Translation Method in class to teach students the rules of grammar and the foreign language vocabulary. Students are taught to translate from one language into their mother tongue. Also, reading and writing are important skills that the teacher emphasizes. The role of teacher in the classroom is that of the authority, with the students as the followers. Written tests provide the major measurements to evaluate students' performance (Larsen-Freeman, 2000)

1.5. Research Questions

The primary research questions to be addressed in this study are:

1. Does strategy-based reciprocal teaching improve Iranian EFL students' English reading comprehension, compared to traditional teaching?
2. Does the strategy-based reciprocal teaching outperform the traditional grammar-translation method to promote Iranian EFL students' English reading comprehension?

3. Does strategy-based reciprocal teaching increase Iranian English language students' meta-cognitive awareness of English reading compared to traditional teaching?

Based on the above-mentioned questions the following hypotheses were formed by the researcher:

1. It is expected that the strategy-based reciprocal teaching would be an effective means to improve Iranian EFL students' English reading comprehension.

2. It is expected that the strategy-based reciprocal teaching would yield more successful result than the traditional grammar-translation method

3. It is expected that the strategy-based reciprocal teaching would elevate the students' meta-cognitive awareness

With these questions and hypotheses in mind, it would appear that the study of reciprocal teaching might pose a fruitful and important issue in understanding Iranian students' reading comprehension and meta-cognition.

1.6. Summary

English proficiency is regarded as an important language skill. One important issue that needs to be considered is that Iranian EFL students' reading abilities is not satisfactory. For teachers, improving students' reading competence is an urgent issue. In addition, some key terms in this study were briefly defined and research questions and the hypotheses were expressed.

The next chapter presents reading comprehension and its development, the importance of direct instruction of strategies in reading comprehension, the principles and theoretical framework of reciprocal teaching, as well as the role of meta-cognition in reading comprehension.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter consists of four parts. The first part discusses reading comprehension and its development. The second part addresses the importance of direct instruction of strategies in regard to promoting reading comprehension. The third part describes the principles and theoretical framework of reciprocal teaching. The last part explains the role of meta-cognition in reading comprehension.

2.1. Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension means that when readers receive information from written texts, they need to decode these data into meaningful messages, so that they can understand the reading materials and achieve the purpose of reading. Bogdan et al. (1990) proposed that reading comprehension encompasses four key concepts: transmission, translation, interaction, and transaction.

In the transmission of reading comprehension, readers only focus on the meaning and follow the author's intent. This notion was prevalent until the late nineteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century, the concept of translation of reading comprehension grew in perceived complexity. In this regard, readers try to develop skills for deriving meanings from the text and to discover the implications of the text. Alfassi (1998) shared the same ideas in behavioral and task analysis; reading comprehension could be described as a skill which consists of many sub-skills, such as finding the main ideas. Sequencing events, and predicting outcomes.

During the 1970s, the interactive aspect of reading comprehension had a strong influence. In this stage, it is significant for readers to use their prior knowledge and experiences to interpret the meaning of the text. Correspondingly, from cognitive perspectives, Alfassi (1998) proposed

that active readers construct meanings from the text by integrating prior experience with the new information. Meanwhile, readers use strategies to foster, monitor and maintain their comprehension as well. In other words, without constructing meaningful messages, reading comprehension does not take place.

In the transaction step of reading comprehension, two conceptions are embedded: reader-response theory and post-structural theory. Reader-response theory refers to the readers' use of different background knowledge to interact with texts. Post-structural theory indicates that texts are open to various interpretations in terms of different contexts. That is to say, the transaction stage of reading comprehension encourages readers to apply their background knowledge and experiences to form new meanings.

It is of great importance that educational practitioners in Iran put more emphasis on students' interactive ability in reading comprehension. To train students to become good readers, direct instruction is one of essential strategies to enhance reading comprehension.

2.2. Direct Instruction of Strategies

In order to improve readers' reading comprehension ability, the direct instruction of strategy is one of the key factors; it clarifies that teachers need to teach students explicit reading strategies. Before reading, students are expected to develop some reading strategies so that they can apply them to solve difficulties or unfamiliar messages in reading. However, although explicit instruction is pivotal in reading comprehension, it is infrequently taught at the higher education level (Pressley, Woloshyn, Lysynchuk, Martin, Wood, & Willoughby, 1990). Hodge, Palmer and Scott (1992) revealed that college students who were inefficient readers did not

monitor their reading comprehension and seldom applied strategies when their comprehension failed. To foster self-monitoring and meta-cognition ability, it was recommended that instructors give adult readers direct strategy instruction which could be learned, internalized and utilized during the reading process (Aarnoutse, Van Den Bos & BRandGruwel, 1998).

Based on the previous study, it is apparent that under the teacher's guidance, explicit strategy instruction could lead adult readers to successful learning and reading performance. Once readers acquire and know how and when to use strategies, they have the ability to deal with any reading difficulties while reading. Among various direct instructions of strategy, reciprocal teaching not only provides readers with an explicit instruction in the strategies used in reading but also enriches their reading comprehension.

2.3. Reciprocal Teaching

Reciprocal teaching is an instructional method in which students in small groups learn to promote their reading comprehension through the guidance of comprehension-fostering and comprehension-monitoring strategies (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). These strategies comprise predicting, clarifying, questioning, and summarizing. Reciprocal teaching consists of two different teaching approaches. Rosenshine and Meister (1994) contended that reciprocal teaching could be divided into two forms: *reciprocal-Teaching-Only* (RTO) and *Explicit Teaching before Reciprocal Teaching.* In the RTO approach, the teacher presents direct instruction on the use of each strategy during the dialogue between the teacher and students. However, in the ET/RT approach, the teacher offers explicit instruction on each strategy before dialogue occurs between the teacher and students. Although there is no fixed procedure for implementing reciprocal

teaching strategies, the differences in these two forms lie in how and when the four reading strategies are taught to students in the classroom.

During the reciprocal teaching, the teacher using dialogue as a medium for communication plays the role of learning leader, first by reading a passage and enabling students to comprehend the text by engaging in these four strategies. After the teacher demonstrates the use of each strategy, students within a small group take turns being the learning leader. Meanwhile, the teacher and the rest of the students adequately support the learning leader in handling the four reading strategies, through an interactive dialogue. The teacher gradually lessens the help when students learn to independently apply these strategies into a dialogue within their small group. Eventually, each student gains the competence to utilize reciprocal teaching strategies when reading (Brown & Campione, 1996; Palincsar, 1991; Palincsar & Brown, 1984).

2.4. Theoretical Rationale of Reciprocal Teaching

Reciprocal teaching is constructed upon various important theories, including: expert scaffolding, thinking-aloud, cooperative learning and proleptic teaching. The following sections present a deeper description and rationale regarding each theory.

2.4.1. Expert Scaffolding

Expert scaffolding is a teaching and learning framework which provides an interactive task for both the teacher and students under the teacher's presentation, assistance and support. Alfassi (1998) contended that during the initial instruction of reciprocal teaching, the teacher first

assumes the learning leader role by introducing how four reading strategies work in a text. In this early instructional stage students are observers and imitate the teacher's applications of these comprehension-fostering and comprehension-monitoring strategies. After the teacher models how, when and why to use these reading comprehension strategies, students within small group then take turns in teaching the four strategies to others through natural, interactive and purposive dialogues. The purpose of dialogue is to provide the teacher and students with discussions, questions and answers, and feedback that all take place during the problem-solving reading activities (Carter & Fekete, 2001).

Expert scaffolding constitutes guided practice whereby students in a small group can interact and share learning experiences with others, in order to aid students' to comprehension of the test by obtaining strategies; it enables students to cultivate self-monitoring and self-regulatory skills that are central to reading comprehension (Alfassi, 1998). Interestingly, expert scaffolding, described as guided practice, is constructed upon the theory of zone of proximal development (ZPD): appropriate support and scaffolding activities are given to students to achieve the goal of reading (Vygotsky, 1978). Moreover, dialogue represents social interaction that occurs between the teacher and students in reciprocal teaching. Upon acquiring four reading strategies, each student gradually assumes the responsibility of being "a teacher" and leads the rest of group members in reading, by flexibly engaging in these strategies. The role of a teacher in class shifts from teacher-centered to student-centered. In this teaching and learning model, reciprocal teaching could be regarded as a constructivist learning method.

2.4.2. Thinking aloud

Thinking aloud reveals students' reflection and familiarity with the strategies used. Oczkus (2003) claimed that during reciprocal teaching instructions, the teacher requires students to talk about each strategy; this activity demonstrates how the student is thinking. Besides, it offers other learners a learning opportunity to witness how learners with good comprehension, think. Depending on students' performance, a teacher could support deficient readers with suitable scaffolding to increase higher reading comprehension. By implementing thinking-aloud, a teacher fosters students' self-monitoring skill and leads them to successful reciprocal teaching in reading.

2.4.3. Cooperative learning

Cooperative learning plays a critical role in reciprocal teaching, whereby the instruction on expert scaffolding; thinking-aloud as well as meta-cognition are taught to students to construct meaningful learning, with all of these aspects implemented through cooperation (Oczkus, 2003). Cooperative learning is a core instructional model because a teacher delivers the opportunity for student-to-student learning. The cooperative learning groups in reciprocal teaching contain heterogeneous students whose language proficiency differs. When a teacher teaches strategies, each of the students has the chance to practice and interact with others. Besides, higher level readers within groups could assist and support lower level readers' learning. Such cooperative learning situation could make up for a teacher's inability to pay attention to every learner during whole-class instruction.