



Payam -e- Noor University

Faculty of Literature and Humanities

Department of Foreign Languages

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Language
(TEFL)

**Investigating the Effect of Group versus Individual Reading on
Improving Writing Ability of Iranian EFL Learners**

Supervisor: Dr. Fatemeh Hemmati

Reader: Dr. Hasan Soleimani

By: Fatemeh Naderpour

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Abstract

This study attempted to investigate the impact of a three-month reading program in individual versus group training on some aspects of writing ability of Iranian EFL learners. It also took a further step to explore the effect of adding group work activity in reading program to find its possible impact on improving some aspects of writing ability. The present research had two experimental groups with no control group. The participants were 30 students studying in English Literature as EG1(experimental group1) plus GW (group work) and 35 students studying in English Language Teaching as EG2 both taking the course of reading comprehension (II) in the University of Mazandaran. The participants were first given a reading comprehension test of TOEFL from which 24 students were chosen as the participants of this study according to their marks. The EG1 read one graded reader each week at home, then discussed the summary or related topic in six groups of five in the class. The group members took notes on each other's talk including new vocabulary and language structure. At home, they wrote a summary of the book. Experimental group2 (EG2), on the other hand, read one book each week and wrote its summary at home without any discussion. Both groups were asked to write about a common topic one before and one at the end of the program as their pre/post test. Their writings were examined in terms of four writing aspects including: run-on sentences, vocabulary errors (word choice and word form), and overall accuracy. The results of t-tests revealed that adding group work to reading program was fairly effective in improving some of the above- mentioned writing aspects. They also showed how group versus individual reading can be a supplementary exercise in reading class for improving writing quality. Therefore, writing teachers can add some input-based activity in the class in order to gain more positive outcomes. This can also be employed in writing classes where integrating reading and writing can enhance the interrelationship between reading and writing and result in more improvement in some aspects of writing ability of students.

Key words: group reading, writing ability, group work.

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List of Abbreviations

EG1	Experimental Group 1
EG2	Experimental Group 2
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
GW	Group Work
GWG	Group Work Group
IH	Input Hypothesis
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
OA	Overall Accuracy
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
RO	Run-on sentence
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Science
WC	Word Choice
WF	Word Form

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Overview

Reading is one of the most important skills in language and further a key to research as it is widely recognized today. It's one of the most important skills in language acquisition and part of our daily life. We read for information and survival as we read for study and pleasure, and to read is to grasp language patterns from their written presentation, i.e. recognizing and understanding written language in the form of graphic signs and its transformation in meaningful speech.

In language learning, reading is a very important and active skill. Learning to read requires cognitive effort and a long process in first and second language (Grabe, 2006). Reading is a complex process involving the interaction of various cognitive, metacognitive, linguistic, and sociolinguistic elements. Benettayeb (2010) believes that reading is not an individual act, but it involves the interaction of the reader's general information, linguistic competence, visual and mental means, and socio-cultural reference. Generally, it is a key to language acquisition and learning.

Reading has been found to be very helpful and effective in increasing learners' language proficiency. A great deal of research has been carried out on the relationship between reading and improvement of different aspects of language learning such as vocabulary (Benettayeb, 2010; Gardner, 2004; Lae & Krashen 2000; Matsuka & Harish, 2010; Paribakht & Wesche, 1997; ;Rosszell, 2006), speed reading (Bell, 2001), reading comprehension (Bell, 2001; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Tanaka, 2007; Yamashita, 2008), attitude and motivation toward reading (Asraf & Ahmad, 2003; Lai, 1993; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Nishino, 2007), listening (Day & Bamford, 1982; Schieppegnell, 1984), affect (Powell, 2005), and writing (Hafiz & Tudor, 1990; Lai, 1993; Lee & Hsu, 2009; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Tsang, 1996).

Grabe (1991) also discussed some of the benefits of reading and notes that longer concentrated periods of silent reading build vocabulary and structural awareness, develop automaticity, enhance background knowledge, improve comprehension skills, and promote confidence and motivation. All of these studies have shown that there is a high correlation between reading and improving different areas of a language except in the writing skill. Of course, that is to say that success has not been attained in all aspects of writing through employing a reading program. Furthermore, just a small number of writing criteria have been examined through employing reading program. Some writing criteria examined in research studies so far include: fluency, accuracy, word count, range of language structure, expression, complex structure, general improvement, content, language use, etc (Abu Saleem, 2010; Han, 2010; Tsang, 1996). Thus, writing improvement via reading program, among the other language skills, needs more examination. In this study the probable effect of group versus individual reading on writing ability of EFL learners will be examined.

1.1.1 . The relationship between reading and writing

Unlike traditional belief, today reading and writing are considered as related activities (Langer & Fliha, 2009). Research and observation have indicated that there is a connection between reading and writing. This connection has been confirmed through the research of Bissex, Baghban, Calkins and Graves. In fact, reading is viewed as the basis of writing ability and supports it through meaningful input. They are usually considered as complementary processes. In other words, one way to help students become better writers is asking them to have lots of extended time to read books and other texts which they understand and enjoy. According to Plakans(2009) and Delaney (2008) a great deal of studies in L1 context provided enough evidence for this relationship but more research has to be done in L2 context.

Reading and writing share some constructs such as linguistic features, underlying knowledge, and the development process (Cecilia & Ojeda, 2005; Langer & Flihan, 2009). Abu Saleem (2010) proposed four common characteristics of reading and writing:

- 1) Reading and writing manipulate similar cognitive strategies.
- 2) Reading and writing are meaning-making activities.
- 3) Reading and writing have reciprocal relationship.
- 4) Reading and writing have similar processes of development.

Although reading and writing may support each other, there are some differences between the two abilities which make transferring reading to writing ability difficult. What can be learned from reading, according to Yoshimura (2009), is dependent on the characteristics of a specific reading task. Yoshimura suggested that some specific reading and writing tasks should be employed for better writing improvement. He proposed that using a checklist while reading, as one reading task, would improve writing.

1.1.2 . Adding individual and group element

Researchers have long believed that student-to-student interaction is important to second language acquisition (Gass, 1998; Long, 1983; Mackey, 1999; Pica, 1994; Swain, 1995 cited in Jacobs, 2004). Manning and Manning (1984, cited in Jacobs, 2002) stated that peer interaction in L1 setting has led to improvement in reading comprehension and considerable gains in attitude variable. As Jacobs (2002) stated, adding group work to reading is of some important advantages among which are:

- a) enthusiasm for reading can be increased.

b) more proficient students can help other ones.

c) peers can share what they have read in different ways such as speaking, writing, or drawing.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

In our schools, group reading is almost not known and students are not familiar with the principles and rationale behind applying group reading program especially those studying a language in the language institutes. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, little study has been administered around the topic of group versus individual reading in Iran. Moreover, a survey in literature reveals that writing improvement via group reading program is an issue less taken by the researchers and there are some unanswered questions in this domain. This fact inspired the researcher to work on the impact of individual versus group reading on improving writing ability of Iranian EFL students.

In other words, the impacts of group reading on writing ability of learners have been the topic of research long ago. However, complete success has not been achieved in all aspects of writing. According to Han (2010), due to an absence of conclusive evidence of the effect of reading in groups on improving writing, there is a need for more research to investigate how group versus individual reading would be more effective in writing enhancement of the EFL learners.

Additionally, students' cooperation in reading has been proved to have some benefits (Jacobs & Gallo, 2002) such as: enthusiasm for reading can be increased, more proficient students can help other ones, peers can share what they have read in different ways, and students can be a source of reading material for one another. Group work, as an effective activity, will be employed in the reading program in the present study. Manning and Manning

(1984, cited in Jacobs & Gallo, 2002) have accompanied reading with peer interaction in L1 setting which has led to improvement in reading comprehension and considerable gains in attitude.

In L2 setting, the impact of group work on increasing students' motivation to read has been investigated by Heal (1998) which yielded successful results. Due to the positive impacts of employing group element on motivation and reading comprehension in reading program in the given studies, and according to the fact that group/pair work have been found to be influential in writing improvement of learners (Lundstorm & Baker, 2009; Storch 2001, 2005), the present study intends to add group work to the reading program to explore the possible effects it might have on improving some aspects of writing (run-on sentences, vocabulary errors such as word choice and word form, and overall accuracy) which seems to need investigation in Iranian language learning context.

1.3. Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate the probable impact of individual versus group reading on the writing ability of Iranian EFL learners. Accordingly, the following research questions are raised:

1. Is there any significant difference between the writing performances of students who read to write individually versus those who read to write in groups?
2. Is there any significant difference in EFL learners' writing ability regarding selected aspects i.e., run-on sentences, vocabulary errors including word form and word choice, and overall accuracy after individual versus group reading?

In order to investigate the above mentioned research questions, the following null hypotheses are proposed:

1. There is not any significant difference in EFL learners' writing ability after individual versus group reading.

2. The use of group versus individual work does not have any impact on some aspects of writing ability of the learners i.e. WF (word form), WC (word choice), RO (run- on sentences) and OA (overall accuracy).

1.4. Conceptual Framework

In Krashen's viewpoint (1982), comprehensible input is enough for acquisition to occur. Long's (1983) Interaction Hypothesis, was the first challenge over Input Hypothesis. It suggested that mere input is not enough; interaction among learners in negotiation around meaning through clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks, and repetition makes input more comprehensible, meaningful, accessible, and more useful. These changes to the input play an important role in second language acquisition. In the interaction hypothesis, Michael Long (1983) proposes that while both input and output are necessary for second language acquisition, in order to gain a greater understanding of how this works, more attention will be paid to the interactions learners engage in. Following Long's hypothesis, the present study intends to investigate whether group work activity and interaction among learners would lead to better acquisition (writing ability in this research) or not.

1.5. Objectives and Significance of the Study

The basic theoretical assumption behind the use of reading in second language learning comes from the idea that learners need large amounts of comprehensible input in their new language in order to make progress toward overall command of that language (Krashen, 2004). In this way, reading extensively benefits not only reading proficiency but overall language proficiency as well. Numerous research studies in both L1 and L2 (e.g. Hafiz &

Tudor, 1990; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Nation, 1997) have consistently shown the benefits of reading for learners' language development. These investigations have looked at both language learning and the affective dimension of language learning, primarily attitude and motivation.

Reading in EFL setting has also received increasing attention over the past decade for improving different language areas such as listening, range of vocabulary, and some aspects of writing. Writing, as one of the most important, challenging, and problematic skills in language learning, requires more attention. In fact, success has not been attained in all aspects of writing by employing reading program. Thus, the researcher intends to examine the improvement of some aspects of writing through reading program to bridge the mentioned gap. Krashen (2004) states that: "Reading is good for you. The research supports a stronger conclusion; however, reading is the only way, the only way we become a good reader, develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammar, and the only way we become good spellers" (p. 23).

Therefore, there is a need for more research to investigate how reading would be more effective in improving the writing ability of EFL learners. On the other hand, peer interaction has been found to be influential in writing improvement (Lundstorm & Baker, 2009; Storch, 2005). Lundstorm and Baker (2009) believed that learners' participation in an activity would encourage interaction and group/pair work would provide opportunity to use the language. Grammar, vocabulary, organization, and some aspects of writing (mechanics, proposition) were improved by peer interaction. Adding group element to reading program has been found to be effective in L1 and L2 settings (Heal, 1998; Manning & Manning 1984, cited in Jacobs & Gallo, 2002).

So reading plus group work might lead to improvement in writing. Run-on sentences and vocabulary errors (word choice and word form) will be examined in the present study. Studying the first three samples of participants, the researcher noticed that some errors are more obvious than others and occur more frequently. Thus, these three writing aspects plus overall accuracy for the sake of comparison between the two experimental groups have been selected in the present study for more careful examination. To the knowledge of the researcher, little research has been conducted in Iran around the effects of group reading on writing. To this end, the present study intends to shed more light on the use of group work in reading to explore the issue further and find out more about the uses such combinations might have for the reading classes.

To summarize, the present study would benefit:

1. Reading teachers to employ a good, effective teaching approach.
2. Writing teachers to add some input-based activity in the class in order to gain more possible positive outcomes.
3. Language teachers in institutes and even schools to get familiar with such a program and employ it in their classes.
4. University students to get familiar with the rationale behind group reading and the probable effects of it.

1.6. Definition of Key Terms

1.6.1. Writing ability: In the present study, the writing ability is operationally defined as the overall accuracy of students' writings regarding their error free sentences in terms of the use of run-on sentences (sentences easily coordinated with and) and their accurate word choice (spelled correctly but wrong word) and word form (wrong form of an

appropriate word or an incorrectly spelled word). The basic characteristics of good, effective writing are described in (Nordquist, 2009):

Good writing has a clearly defined purpose.

The information is clearly connected and arranged.

The words are appropriate, and the sentences are clear, concise, and correct.

In this study, the last feature was examined to discover whether the treatment was effective or not. Four aspects of writings have been investigated in the present study including run-on sentences, word form, word choice errors, and overall accuracy.

1.6.2. Group work: Douglas Brown (2001) defined group work as a technique in which two or more students work on a task that involves "collaboration and self-initiated language".