In the Name of God
the Beneficent,
the Merciful

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The Effect of Using the Internet on the Reading Comprehension of Advanced Iranian EFL Learners and Their Attitude toward English Language Learning

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DEDICATION

This language project is dedicated to my beloved wife Monireh for her constant support and encouragement of my academic pursuits.

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I would specially like to thank my wife who made this endeavor possible

Abstract

This study was conducted to investigate the effect of computer – assisted language learning (using the Internet) on advanced English learners' reading comprehension as well as their attitude to language learning. To do this, two homogenous groups of male students from Kharazmi English Institute of Birjand, selected on the basis of random sampling, participated as subjects in 2 groups of 40, a control group and an experimental group. In order to achieve the homogeneity between the two groups in terms of language proficiency, a Nelson test was administered. To make sure that the two groups did not differ significantly at the outset of the study, a reading comprehension pre-test was also administered to both groups. The control group proceeded with the traditional method of language teaching, using the text books and some printed texts taken from the Internet. They used no computer in class; while the experimental group took advantage of computer to download the relevant texts and materials. Finally, a post-test was given to both groups to determine the influence of the treatment. The t-test results came up with the t-observed value much greater than the t-critical value at the .05 level of significance. Therefore, the study showed that computer-assisted language learning can have a better effect on students' reading abilities and attitudes compared with the traditional language teaching.

Key words: Reading Comprehension, CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), Attitude.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

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1.1 Overview

Notions of reading comprehension have changed dramatically over the decades. Theories of learning have shifted dramatically during the 20th century. We have moved from a behavioral perspective, which dominated the field from the turn of the century to the sixties and seventies, to a holistic or interactive approach, which began in the late seventies, and continues to shape our thinking about reading comprehension today. However, As Verhoeven and Perfetti (2008, p.295) have made it clear:

> For many years, reading comprehension was based on a concept of reading as the application of a set of isolated skills such as identifying words, finding main ideas, identifying cause and effect relationships, comparing and contrasting, and sequencing. Put it other way, teaching reading comprehension was viewed as a mastery of these skills.

Comprehension instruction followed what the study called mentioning, practicing, and assessing procedure where teachers mentioned a specific skill that students were to apply, had students practice the skill by completing workbook pages, then assessed them to find out if they could use the skill correctly. As studies review shows (Mayer, R. E., 2001; M. A., & Carpenter, P. A. 1992), instruction did little to help students learn how or when to use the skills, nor was it ever established that this particular set of skills enabled comprehension.

Then, constructivist tradition in reading research, begun by Bartlett early in the century and reinitiated about fifteen years ago, began producing new insights into discourse comprehension as part of the “cognitive revolution”. Constructivism, which provides a

coherent framework for studying the reading process, portrays the reader as building a mental representation from textual cues by organizing, selecting, and connecting content.

On the other hand, during the last decades, the influence of technology on our life in general and language learning in particular has been tremendous. As a matter of fact, technology has become part of our everyday lives. Today you rarely can find a language class in which technology doesn't play any roles. Audio and visual aids are used frequently to facilitate the process of learning and to create an authentic second language environment in which students feel more comfortable.

A significant base of research, developed over many years, is available to inform educators about effective approaches to teaching people to read (Beers, K. (2002, van Kleeck, A., Woude, J.V., & Hammett, L. (2006), Leu, D.J., Jr., Kinzer, C.K., Coiro, J., & Cammack, D.W. (2004). However, research on the use of multimedia digital technologies to enhance reading instruction is in its infancy. This reflects the fact that the technological capabilities that appear to have the most potential in helping people learn to read, such as computer speech recognition, have only recently become sufficiently affordable and available for widespread use.

Given the above assertion regarding the scarcity of studies conducted to investigate the role of computer in facilitating reading process, this study was conducted to shed light in this regard.

This study also aims to investigate the effect of computer-assisted reading comprehension on the students' attitude to language learning.

1.2 Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study

Technological advances continue to expand possibilities for using computers to support reading instruction. Initially, CALL (Computer-assisted Language Learning) was implemented in the 1960's and 70's when the audio-lingual method was widely used. This provided students with drills and practice. In this phase, the computer was used as a tutor, presenting drill exercises without feed-back component, i.e. not including interactive components.

Computers offer engaging, interactive activities for general and targeted practice. They give immediate corrective feedback, and some programs provide incentives for progress to higher levels of difficulty. Teachers can also use programs to track students' progress.

On the other hand, Communicative approaches to language teaching and learning recognize the importance of linking language learning, practice and use of computer technologies. However, in Iran few, if any, studies have been conducted on the role played by CALL in the quality of reading comprehension in the context of language learning and teaching. Thus, this study can shed light in this respect.

It goes without saying that the use of technology such as computer and the Internet can make the classroom atmosphere different in that many classroom activities may look different from those in traditional classes.

As Iacob (2009, p. 142) maintains:

> There are some very important advantages regarding the use of multimedia programs in teaching a foreign language. First of all, it should be considered the fact that the combination of the learning paths leads to a greater success in the acquisition of the new language. Students are greatly involved visually, as in multimedia materials.

Thus, some advantages are envisioned for the use of computer in language classrooms. This is also true for the context of Iran as well.

To this end, this study aims at finding the effect of computer technology in language classes, in particular reading comprehension. Moreover, it explores the effect of computer use in class on the learners' attitude towards language learning. By doing so, the study is expected to pave the way for more studies in the same direction.

1.3 Significance of the Study

Reaching out for opportunities for additional language reception or production beyond what learners get in the classroom is considered as one of the responsibilities of both learners and teachers. One of these additional language opportunities is using the Internet for different purposes including strengthening the reading ability of students.

On the other hand, using computers in ESL classroom is important for both teachers and learners. Computers can handle a range of activities and carry out programmed functions at amazing speed. They can check exercises after they are done, move students gradually from easier to more difficult exercises according to their levels and abilities. When students fail to answer questions correctly or perform activities, the computer can simulate, drill, or explain the phenomenon in a way that makes it easier for the learner to understand (Hoffman, 1996). However, technology, especially computers, has not yet gotten to the point where it can make a real difference in language instruction in ESL classroom.

Besides, it is generally believed that using the modern technology can help language learners to develop a more positive attitude towards learning the language. However, the effect of using such technologies in real Iranian language classrooms has not been researched broadly. Therefore, this study can shed some light on this new and important area of research.

1.4 Research Questions and Hypotheses

The following questions are posed:

*1-**Does using the Internet have any significant effect on the reading comprehension of advanced Iranian EFL learners?***

2-Does using the Internet have any significant effect on advanced Iranian EFL learners' attitude toward language learning?

Based on the research questions two null hypotheses were suggested:

1-Using the Internet does not have any significant effect on the reading comprehension of advanced Iranian EFL learners?

2-Using the Internet does not have any significant effect on advanced Iranian EFL learners' attitude toward language learning?

1.5 Limitations of the Study

All the participants in this study were male students. Thus generalization of results to all advanced Iranian English learners may not be appropriate. Another limitation is concerned with attitude to English language. As with all questionnaires devised for measuring psychometric abilities, students' attitude may be affected by some momentary factors such as their current mood or emotions.

1.**6 Definitions of the Key Terms**

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension can easily be defined as "the ability to derive understanding from written texts"(Grabe, 1999, cited in Kaplan, p.51).

Attitude

According to Tuckman (2002), attitude is beliefs that people hold about themselves, their capabilities, and the factors that account for their outcomes.

Computer-assisted language learning (CALL)

A form of computer-based learning which carries two important features: bidirectional learning and individualized learning. It is not a method. CALL materials are tools for learning.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Related Literature

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2.1 Overview

Reading is one of the most complex and uniquely human of cognitive activities. Our understanding of the processes and factors involved in text comprehension is quite impressive, "but it also is fragmented, with a proliferation of ‘‘mini-theories’’ for specific components that in reality are intertwined and interact with one another"(Overstreet, 2006, p.214).

Alderson (2000) has advised that “anybody who wishes to assess reading must have at least some idea of what reading is, and therefore of what the main findings of research are” (ibid.: 32).Traditionally, reading comprehension was believed to mainly entail the learning of vocabulary and the aggregation of meanings (Anderson 1994), and classic language teaching methodologies therefore concentrated on the teaching of bottom-up (from the page) aspects of comprehension such as word recognition and grammar (Zimmerman 1997). However, following subsequent research into the influence of background knowledge on comprehension, top-down (from the reader’s mind) explanations of comprehension such as schema theory (Bartlett 1932; Goodman 1967; Schank & Abelson 1977; Mandler 1984; Anderson & Pearson 1988) became popular. Teaching methodology then shifted focus to providing and activating background knowledge through the use of pre-reading activities and advanced organizers (Ausubel 1963; Wallace 1992), and on encouraging learners to guess meanings and understand from context (Grellet 1981; Coady 1993; Nuttall 1996).

As a matter of fact, just like teaching methodology, reading theories have had their shifts and transitions, starting from the traditional view which focused on the printed form of a text and moving to the cognitive view that enhanced the role of background knowledge in addition to what appeared on the printed page. They ultimately culminated in the meta-cognitive view which is now in vogue and is based on the control and manipulation that a reader can have on the act of

comprehending a text. Psychological research has greatly enhanced our understanding of the cognitive processes, mental structures, and textual properties that contribute to successful reading by identifying numerous factors that influence comprehension (e.g., the reader's background knowledge, the difficulty of the text, individual differences in reading skill, and so on) (Plass, J.L., Chun, D.M., Mayer, R.E., & Leutner, D. (2003), Johnson, A., & Heffernan, N. (2006)).

On the other hand, the design of computer-based lesson templates based on L2 reading research to facilitate comprehension of authentic texts and retention of vocabulary has been the subject of much interest (Ariew, 2006; Cobb & Stevens, 1996; Lyman-Hager & Davis 1996; LeLoup & Ponterio, 2005; Martı´nez-Lage, 1997), particularly as the use of CALL authoring software increases and as the availability of authentic materials on the World Wide Web expands exponentially.

In the following sections, background and definitions of reading comprehension will be discussed. Then the role of technology and computer in reading comprehension will be presented. Finally the attitude to language learning and its relationship to computer-assisted language teaching will be discussed.

2.2 Views of Reading

2.2.1 Traditional View

According to Dole et al. (1991, p.87),

> In the traditional view of reading, novice readers acquire a set of hierarchically ordered sub-skills that sequentially build toward comprehension ability. Having mastered these skills, readers are viewed as experts who comprehend what they read.

Thus we can conclude that this method implies the following: