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REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF M.A IN TEFL**

Title:

**The Effects of Reciprocal Teaching vs. Think-Aloud on Reading  
Comprehension of Pre-intermediate Students in Iran**

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## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this dissertation represents my own work and that it has not been previously submitted to this University or any other institution in application for admission to a degree, diploma or other qualifications.

*Dedicated to*

*My lovely mother*

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# *Chapter– I*

## *Introduction*

## **Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Introduction**

Due to the rapid growth in ‘globalization’, accompanied by the worldwide spread of English, English is no longer used merely by those who speak it as a mother tongue (Crystal, 2003). English has established a firm status as a ‘lingua franca’ or ‘international language’ and is used daily in non-western socio-cultural contexts, even in the absence of native English speakers. Thus, it is not surprising to hear that English is currently used by many more non-native English speakers than native speakers (ibid).

Second Language Acquisition (SLA), as a sub-discipline of applied linguistics, is still a very young field of study (Ellis, 1990). While it may not be possible to identify its precise starting point, it is agreed that the late sixties marks the onset of an intense period of empirical and theoretical interest in how second languages are acquired (Ellis, 2005). Much of the research has been directed toward understanding and contributing to more effective instructed language learning. SLA is typically considered to be a process which is open to the influence of instruction. What is not fully understood is exactly how, and to what extent, the process can be influenced (Housen & Pierrard, 2005). Thus, its main focus is on the investigation of the effects and effectiveness of instruction.

Further, second/foreign language learning has one general goal, i.e. to achieve a native-like proficiency (Ellis, 2003). This main goal can be separated into three interlinked areas, namely accuracy, complexity and fluency. Skehan (1996) defines them as follows:

[A]ccuracy is concerned with a learner’s capacity to handle whatever level of interlanguage complexity s/he has currently attained. Complexity, and its attendant

process, restructuring, relates to the stage and elaboration of the underlying interlanguage system. Fluency, finally, concerns the learner's capacity to mobilize an interlanguage system to communicate meaning in real time. (p. 46)

Nowadays most of people like to learn English as a foreign language because of various reasons (Canale and Swain, 1980). Different reasons for learning English are such as living in a foreign country or studying abroad which has become an essential component of their lives for learning a second language. Therefore, many researchers made an attempt to find out some methods, strategies, and instructional materials to improve second language teaching.

## **1.2 Background of Study**

Reading involves a complex process. To comprehend, readers need to decode text and make interpretations. They generate meaning in response to the text by using previous knowledge and a range of textual and situational clues that are often socially and culturally shared. While constructing meaning, they use various processes, skills and strategies to foster, monitor and maintain understanding. These processes and strategies are expected to vary along with the situation and the purpose as they interact with a variety of texts (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1999, p.21).

In other words, even if students can decode words, they may still fail to make sense out of the text if they are unable to derive meanings from what they read. The researcher has experienced this phenomenon firsthand: many of her students have problems in getting main ideas and making inferences from their reading even though they may be able to locate answers for some factual questions. Their reading problem is getting more acute when they are promoted to higher forms and comprehension passages have become longer and more demanding. Despite the efforts they have made, they seem unable to make sense with the text. The harder they work on

their reading, the more frustrated they feel. Apparently, there is a need for equipping these struggling readers with effective reading comprehension strategies. They need strategies for clarifying problematic words and ideas they come across when reading. They need modeling and guided instruction in answering and asking comprehension questions. They need to be able to grasp the main ideas of a text.

To help students improve their reading comprehension, teachers play an important role. The reading instruction and activities students receive in class certainly have an impact on their reading achievement. In practice, what actually happens in a L2 reading lesson? Bernhardt (1991, pp.175-6) presents a very similar picture when she illustrates what a typical L2 reading lesson is like. She suggests that texts are often written with an aim to illustrate lexis, structures and syntactic features rather than for teaching comprehension. An L2 reading lesson usually begins with some pre-teaching of vocabulary and then follows by assigning reading selection for homework with a commitment to answering the comprehension questions set by the textbook author. Follow-up in class often takes the form of oral reading and then questions and answers, with a focus on students' pronunciation and grammatical accuracy. Exercises on grammatical elements of text are introduced either before or after studying the reading text. She argues that "the reading text is frequently seen as the buttress for lexical and syntactic learning – not as a provider of new content information for the student" (p.176).

The situation in Iran resembles very much to the above portrait of a L2 reading lesson, with reading largely taught by the question-and-answer procedure so students are geared towards extracting uncritical, factual information from the text rather than be encouraged to negotiate meanings of their own sense. The reading activities frequently employed in English class mainly involve phonics, answering comprehension questions in writing and learning new

vocabulary systematically from lists but student-oriented reading activities were rarely or never employed. It is found that group work, which provides opportunities for students to explore ideas intensively, was rarely used. Emphasis is highly placed on phonics, decoding skills, assessment of low order skills and teacher-centered instruction.

In fact, beyond teaching decoding skills, adding comprehension strategy instruction to reading can possibly be an effective approach to enhance the development of reading abilities. With respect to a few key research studies, Pearson and Duke (2002, p.248) have validated their claim that “comprehension improves when teachers provide explicit instruction in the use of comprehension strategies”. Their research work demonstrates that comprehension strategy instruction approaches, such as reciprocal teaching or transactional strategy instruction, not only facilitate students in gaining a better understanding of text but also improve their decoding skills.

So far, only a relatively small amount of research on comprehension strategy instruction has been conducted, particularly in the context of Iran. Besides, empirical research on effective reading instruction for second language learners has long been under-explored. Seeing this, the researcher has been inspired to carry out the present study with a view to exploring the effects of reciprocal teaching versus think-aloud on students’ English reading comprehension.

### **1.3 Purposes of the Study**

This research study is pedagogically focused and the aims of this study are to:

- a. Explore and experiment with reciprocal teaching and think-aloud approaches in EFL classroom context
- b. Investigate the effectiveness of reciprocal teaching versus the effectiveness of think-aloud strategies on improving reading ability.

c. Examine whether there are any differences between students' reading comprehension using reciprocal teaching in comparison to students' reading comprehension using think-aloud.

d. Investigate whether the increase in English reading ability of the experimental groups (both who received reciprocal teaching strategy and think-aloud strategy) is significantly higher than of the students in the control group.

#### **1.4 Statement of the Problem**

Learning a second language involves the manipulation of four main skills, speaking, writing, listening and reading which lead to effective communication, but of all of these four skills, reading is regarded as the most vital and necessary for students in both a classroom context and an extracurricular environment (Grabe and Stoller, 2002). Unfortunately, Iranian students do not have much opportunity to develop their English reading comprehension, since most of the time English language teaching emphasizes on linguistic knowledge such as grammar points and vocabulary. In addition, the findings of Kafipour, Gani Hamzah and Kumar Abdullah's study (2009) have revealed that Iranian students do not know how to solve problems when struggling with difficult texts or when lacking background knowledge. They do not know how to work through their reading difficulties to get the full meaning from the reading texts (Kafipour et al, 2009). These struggling students might not be aware of these difficulties, they might lack the proper repertoire of reading strategies and they might not know how to apply reading strategies effectively to improve their reading comprehension. Therefore, the researcher decided to teach (two) reading strategies to improve students' reading comprehension ability.

#### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

This study aimed to investigate whether reading strategies instruction based on reciprocal teaching and think-aloud strategies assist Iranian students in understanding reading texts. The significance of this study lies in terms of its attempt to find a suitable instructional method to aid Iranian pre-intermediate students in developing their reading skills. This research intended to assist students in their realization of the benefits of using reading strategies, of the kind of strategies available to them, and of the way to use.

As for the teacher the findings of this study might help them define clearer guidelines and thus gain better skills at adapting reciprocal teaching strategy or think-aloud to their own English classroom in a way that facilitates their students' goal of becoming better readers.

### **1.6 Research Questions**

This study addressed the following research questions:

- 1- Does think-aloud strategy enhance the English reading ability of the first experimental group?
- 2- Does reciprocal teaching strategy enhance the English reading ability of the second experimental group?
- 3- Which strategy (think-aloud versus reciprocal teaching) has better effect on reading comprehension?

### **1.7 Hypothesis of the Study**

- 1- Null hypothesis 1: Think-aloud strategy has no significant effect on reading comprehension.
- 2- Null hypothesis 2: Reciprocal teaching strategy has no significant effect on reading comprehension.
- 3- Null hypothesis 3: There is not a significant difference between the effects of



think-aloud and reciprocal teaching strategies on reading comprehension.

### **1.8 Operational Definition of Terms**

1. **Reciprocal Teaching:** refers to the reading instruction originally developed by Palincsar and Brown (1984). It consists of four main strategies: predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing. It occurs in the form of dialogues between teachers and students. At first, the students learn the four key strategies and practice them. Second, the teacher models the entire process step by step using structured dialogues. Third, the teacher gives the students a chance to get involved and coaches them on how to ask appropriate questions, write adequate summaries, and so on. Gradually, the teacher's role as a leader decreases. Finally, the students take on greater responsibility to carry out the whole process. In this study, reciprocal teaching is modeled on the same teaching procedures as the ones found in Palincsar and Brown as mentioned above.

2. **Reading Comprehension:** refers to the ability to understand the texts the students read and what the writers try to convey to them (Heim & Friederici, 2003).

3. **Reading Comprehension Strategies:** refers to the conscious and flexible plan that students apply and adapt to a text when they face problems while reading. Readers use reading comprehension strategies, both cognitive and metacognitive, to better understand reading texts and in order to learn to read independently (Allen, 2003).

4. **Cognitive Strategies:** refers to the mental processes and behavior which learners use to help improve their ability to learn, particularly those which they use with specific classroom tasks and activities. These cognitive strategies include: predicting, using background knowledge, guessing the meaning from context, summarizing, and creating visual images, or taking notes to help them learn new information (Oxford, 1990).

5. **Think-aloud:** Think-aloud (Davey, 1983) helps students understand the kind of thinking required by a specific task. The teacher models her thinking process by verbalizing her thoughts as she reads, processes information, or performs some learning task. Students see how the teacher attempts to construct meaning for unfamiliar vocabulary, engages in dialogue with the author, or recognizes when she isn't comprehending and selects a fix-up strategy that addresses a problem she is having. Ineffective readers especially benefit from observing what skilled readers think about while reading.

6. **Scaffolding:** Scaffolding is “a process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task, or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts” (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976, p.90). A teacher is providing scaffolding when he models the thought processes he uses in determining what is particularly important in an informational selection students are about to read. The teacher carefully monitors when enough instructional input has been provided to permit the student to make progress towards an academic goal, and thus the teacher provides support only when the student needs it.

7. **Cooperative Learning:** Johnson, Johnson and Holubec (1994, p.4) define cooperative learning as “the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other’s learning”. Besides, Slavin (1987, p.8) also defines it as “instructional methods in which students of all performance levels work together toward a group goal”. Groups of students working together have the potential to achieve well beyond the achievement of a student working by himself. Cooperative learning can promote learning through collaboration between groups of learners who generate questions and discuss ideas freely with each other where students sometimes take on teaching roles to help other students learn. It also fosters students’ interpersonal relationships and this can improve their ability to work with others. It echoes with

the belief that the best learning is often social and interactive, gives an opportunity to scaffold one another's work, and puts students in a position to respond to and elaborate on one another's thinking (Graves, Juel, & Graves, 2001).

## *Chapter - II*

# *Review of Literature*