

In The Name Of God
The Compassionate The Merciful



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**The effects of pre-reading activities on reading
comprehension of EFL high school students**

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پیوست

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Abstract

“The effects of pre-reading activities on reading comprehension of EFL high school students”

The researcher conducted this study to investigate the effects of using two kinds of pre-reading activities (pre-teaching vocabulary and pre-questioning) on EFL high school students' reading comprehension. In short, in this study attempt was to find reasonable answer to the following question:

“Is there a significant difference between the mean scores attained by the experimental group and those attained by the control group on reading comprehension tests that can be attributed to the pre-reading activities?”

To carry out this study, approximately 40 third-grade high school students were chosen among 62 students from two classes. One class was randomly considered as control group and another class as experimental group. The Experimental group was instructed and tested through employing the Pre-teaching Vocabulary and Pre-questioning as two Pre-reading strategies and control group was taught in the normal way without being exposed to pre-reading activities. Three multiple-choice achievement tests were used to compare the mean scores of the two groups. The data collected from the achievement tests was analyzed statistically to find any differences between the Control and Experimental Groups. To do this, a two-sample t-test (independent samples t-test) was run using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 16.0 for Windows). T-test analysis of the three achievement tests indicated that the Experimental group did significantly better ($p < .05$) than the Control group on all three tests.

Key words: Reading comprehension, Background knowledge, Schemata,
Pre-reading activities

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Chapter one: Introduction

1.1. Introduction

“We don’t see things as they are; we see things as we are.” –Anais Nin

Reading is a process involving the activation of relevant knowledge and related language skills to accomplish an exchange of information from one person to another (Chastain, 1988). It requires that the reader focus attention on the reading materials and integrate previously acquired knowledge and skills to comprehend what the writer has written.

Reading is not a passive activity in which readers are filling up their brains with knowledge and information. On the contrary, it is an interactive activity in which readers are actively connecting the new information they are reading with their prior experiences and knowledge (Carrell, 1984; Swaffar, 1988). The product of this combining of experiences and areas of knowledge – the meaning – is unique to each individual reader (Carrell, 1984; Swaffar, 1988). As Jane Tompkins stated; “Meaning has no existence outside of its realization in the mind of the reader” (as cited in Swaffar, 1988, p. 123). Meaning is not found in the text, rather it is found in the reader (Carrell, 1984). Schema theory research provides strong evidence for the effectiveness of pre-reading activities that include both providing the outline for reading the text and teaching cultural key concepts. According to Chastain (1988), pre-reading activities motivate readers to read the text and when they are motivated – prepared for the reading activity – they complete the activity better and with less effort and are eager to participate in the activity since they have gained confidence.

Other L2 experts have suggested that using pre-reading activities makes texts

easier for students to comprehend (Grabe & Stoller, 2001; Holmes & Roser, 1987; Taglieber, Johnson, & Yarbrough, 1988). The goals of pre-reading instruction for English language learners (ELLs) can be categorized into five areas (Grabe & Stoller, 2001). First, it should serve to activate prior knowledge and give students and teachers an opportunity to assess whether this prior information is accurate or not. It should also build background by providing specific information about the topic to be read. Pre-reading instruction should aim to build topic interest. It also helps ELLs know what to expect from the reading as well as model strategies that students can use independently later (Grabe & Stoller, 2001).

1.2. Statement of the problem

Reading comprehension is one of the main purposes of EFL teaching and learning. There are two main outlooks on reading (Madden and Nebes, 1980). The first, a product-oriented approach to reading, assumes meaning exists in the text itself, and it is text-based factors that determine meaning. In this view pre-reading activities rely mostly on clarifying the meaning of difficult words or complex structures. Whereas, for the second, process-oriented approach to reading, meaning is obtained through a successful interaction between the reader and the text, and it is inside-the-head factors that play an important role in comprehension (Bernhardt, 1984).

Accordingly, background knowledge will be of primary importance for EFL readers, and schema-based pre-reading activities should be used for activating and constructing such background knowledge.

Although a lot of research on reading mechanisms has been conducted since the 1970s, the dominant style in English reading high school classes is based on Grammar-Translation Method in Iran. The majority of my students were found to

resort to bottom-up strategies and the priority of the class was to translate each sentence. In spite of the vast amount of reading research, it is undeniable that here in Iran bottom-up reading style still dominates. It is often the case that the majority of class time must be allocated to literal translation. It means that the significance of the interaction between students and texts is belittled by the majority of my own observed students. For these reasons, it is vital for teachers to present some activities to shift student decoding or bottom-up reading style to the more interactive and top-down way of reading.

1.3. Significance of the study

Reading is often referred to as the most important of the four language skills for EFL learners (Gu, 2003), as it enables students to gain exposure to the target language and receive valuable linguistic input to build up language proficiency (Erten & Razi, 2003). However, mere exposure to reading material does not always suffice to gain linguistic knowledge. Readers as language learners need to go through an active process rather than simply decoding the graphic representations. Anderson (1999) explained reading as follows:

“Reading is an active, fluent process which involves the reader and the reading material in building meaning. Meaning does not reside on the printed page...synergy occurs in reading, which combines the words on the printed page with the reader’s background knowledge and experiences” (p. 1).

Interactive models are currently accepted as the most comprehensive descriptions of the reading process, which combine elements of both bottom-up and top-down models. In interactive models of reading, reading is viewed as a kind of interaction that occurs between the reader and the text (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983). The

meaning, as an outcome of the interaction between the reader and the text, not only resides in the text itself, but also lies in the interaction between the reader and the text (Grabe, 1991). Therefore, everything in the reader's background knowledge has a significant role in reading comprehension (Alptekin, 2003; Karakaş, 2002; and Erten & Razi, 2003). Comprehension failures or deficiencies may occur at the pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading stages. The present study emphasizes the significance of pre-reading activities on the readers' background knowledge activation that provide students with a particular purpose for reading, help them predict the content of the text, facilitate comprehension, and motivate students to read.

1.4. Research questions and hypothesis

In this study attempt is to find reasonable answer to the following question:

“Is there a statistically significant difference between the mean scores attained by the experimental group and those attained by the control group on reading comprehension tests that can be attributed to the pre-reading activities?”

Based on the above research question the following null hypothesis is formulated:

Research H0:

There is no significant difference at ($\alpha=.05$) between the mean scores attained by the experimental group and those attained by the control group on reading comprehension tests that can be attributed to the pre-reading activities.

1.5. Definition of key terms

1.5.1. Reading comprehension

Grabe and Stoller (2002: 9) define reading as “the ability to draw meaning from the printed page and interpret this information appropriately”. Or, Reading

comprehension is defined as the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language.

1.5.2. Background knowledge

The terms background knowledge and prior knowledge are generally used interchangeably. For example, Stevens (1982) defines background knowledge quite simply as “what one already knows about a subject (p. 151).” Biemans & Simons’ (1996) definition of background knowledge is slightly more complex, “background knowledge is all knowledge learners have when entering a learning environment that is potentially relevant for acquiring new knowledge (p. 6).”

1.5.3. Schemata

Schemata are large, complex units of knowledge that organizes much of we know about general categories of objects, classes of events, and types of people (Anderson, 1980).

1.5.4. Pre-reading activities

These activities are made up of preliminary questions, presentation of background knowledge, and introduction of key or unknown vocabulary (Aline, 1992; Andrade, 1997; Fukuo, 1990 and Andrade, 1997) which have the following benefits:

- (1) To provide students with a particular purpose for reading;
- (2) To help them predict the content of the text;
- (3) To facilitate comprehension;
- (4) To motivate students to read.

Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

2.1. What is reading comprehension?

In broad terms, comprehension is the ability of readers to get meaning from text. “Getting meaning” is a two-level process. On the first level, readers identify individual words and their meanings, as determined by the immediate context, to arrive at a literal understanding of what the author has written. On the second level, readers interpret the entire grouping of words they have just read, considering the relationships of these words to each other and to any relevant prior knowledge they may possess. It is at this second, higher-order level of meaning construction that analytic, evaluative, reflective comprehension occurs (Pressly, 2002).

Almost all the definitions of reading comprehension generally have at their core some variation of constructing meaning from text. Durkin (1993), for example, defines comprehension as “intentional thinking during which meaning is constructed through interactions between text and reader.” In the Literacy Dictionary, Harris and Hodges (1995, p. 39) define it as “the construction of the meaning of a written text through a reciprocal interchange of ideas between the reader and the message in a particular text.” These definitions have at their core the idea that meaning resides in the deliberate thinking processes readers engage in as they read. The meaning they get from their reading is influenced both by their relevant prior knowledge and experiences and by the kind of text they are reading and its content (National Reading Panel, 2000).

The RAND group defined comprehension as: “the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language. It consists of three elements: the reader, the text, and the activity or purpose

for reading” (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002, p. 11). According to this definition, the elements of reader, text, and activity are interrelated and are shaped by the larger social and cultural context in which the reading occurs.

2.2. A Contemporary View of the Reading Process

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. Practitioners of the interactive model view reading as a cognitive, developmental, and socially constructed task that goes beyond understanding the words on a page. In the past, reading was considered a relatively static activity. Meaning was imbedded in the text, and the reader's job was to understand what was being transmitted via the words on the page.

2.2.1. The Cognitive-Constructivist View of Reading

The Cognitive-Constructivist view of reading emphasizes that reading is a process in which the reader actively searches for meaning in what he or she reads. This view also emphasizes that this search for meaning depends very heavily on the reader's prior knowledge or schemata that he or she draws on in that search for meaning, and that the active contribution of the reader is significant enough to justify the assertion that the reader actually constructs the meaning he or she arrives at. The following three topics describe three key components of the cognitive-constructivist model; the cognitive orientation, schemata, and construct.

2.2.2. The Cognitive Orientation

The earliest and strongest influence behind this view comes from cognitive psychology, the psychological orientation that became the main point of view of American psychology beginning in the 1960s (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). Cognitive psychology can perhaps be best understood in comparison to behaviorism, which was the dominant psychological orientation in the United States from about 1930 to about 1970 and which had a huge effect on the reading instruction of that period and continues to have some influence today.

Behaviorist psychologists viewed people as rather passive respondents to their environment and gave little attention to the mind and its role in learning. In the behaviorist view, reading was a rather passive process in which the information on a page of text was somehow absorbed by the reader as her eyes scanned the page.

Beginning in the 1960s, behaviorism began to be replaced by the cognitive orientation. Cognitive psychologists view the mind as central to learning and the study of learners' thought processes as a central focus of their work. They also view learners as active participants, who act on rather than simply respond to their external environment as they learn. In the cognitive view, reading is very much an active process in which the meaning the reader gleans from a text is heavily influenced by the cognitive work that he or she puts into the reading process. Both the beginning reader, who we might observe carefully sounding out words, and the accomplished reader, who appears to be effortlessly absorbing the contents of the material being read; are in fact actively engaged in making meaning from the text.

2.2.3. Schema

The concept of schema is closely related to the cognitive orientation. In fact, schema theory is one of the central concepts of cognitive psychology. Schema theory is concerned with knowledge, particularly with the way knowledge is represented in our minds and the importance of prior knowledge to learning something new. As described by the theory, knowledge is packaged in organized structures termed schemata. According to Rumelhart (1980), schemata constitute our knowledge about "objects, situations, events, sequences of events, actions, and sequences of actions" (p. 34).

2.2.4. Constructivism

Constructivism emphasizes the fact that comprehending a text is very much an active, constructive process. The author of a text, like the architect who draws a blueprint, has created a representation of her ideas. The reader, like the builder, must take this representation and construct something. Much like the builder must construct a house, the reader must construct meaning. Constructivists often use the phrase "making meaning" to emphasize the reader's active role in comprehending texts. Students cannot just passively absorb meaning from texts. They must actively engage with the text, consider what they are reading, and link the information they are getting from the text with ideas, topics, and events they already know.

2.3. A review of research and practices of reading comprehension

Instruction

A major goal of reading comprehension instruction, therefore, is to help students develop the knowledge, skills, and strategies they must have if they are to become proficient and independent readers. However, although decades of research have revealed a great deal of information about how readers get meaning from what they

read and about the kinds of instructional activities and procedures that are most successful in helping students to become good readers, recent classroom observation studies indicate that students in typical elementary school classrooms still receive little in the way of effective comprehension instruction (e.g., Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Hampson, & Echevarria, 1998; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002).

Prior to the 1970s, comprehension was generally considered to be—and was taught as—a set of discrete skills for students to practice and master (National Reading Panel, 2000). In a landmark study of reading comprehension instruction conducted in the 1970s, Dolores Durkin revealed that in most elementary classrooms, typical instruction focused on specific skills (e.g., identifying main ideas, distinguishing fact from opinion, cause and effect relationships) thought to be important to comprehension and followed what she called a mentioning, practicing, and assessing procedure. That is, teachers mentioned a specific comprehension skill that students were to apply, such as identifying main ideas; had students practice the skill by completing workbook pages; then assessed them to find out whether they could use the skill correctly (Durkin, 1978–79). Durkin concluded that such instruction did little to help students learn how or when to use the skills, nor did it promote comprehension.

During the decade of the 1970s, a group of psychologists, linguists, and computer scientists began to focus research attention on how the mind works—how people think and learn. A goal of this new research movement, called cognitive science, was to produce an applied science of learning.

In the field of reading, a number of cognitive scientists focused their attention on how readers construct meaning as they read and they started to look for better

comprehension instruction. At first, researchers focused attention on the higher order reading processes used by good readers to construct meaning as they read. What they found was that good readers achieve comprehension because they are able to use certain procedures—labeled comprehension strategies by the researchers—to relate ideas in a text to what they already know; to keep track of how well they are understanding what they read; and, when understanding breaks down, to identify what is causing the problem and how to overcome it (e. g., Brown, Bransford, Ferrara, & Campione, 1983; Levin & Pressley, 1981).

From these studies an entirely new concept emerged about what reading is. According to the new concept, reading is a complex, active process of constructing meaning—not skill application (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991).

The act of constructing meaning is:

-interactive— it involves not just the reader but also the text and the context in which reading takes place (Heilman, Blair, & Rupley, 1998).

-strategic— readers have purposes for their reading and use a variety of strategies and skills as they construct meaning (Baker & Brown, 1984).

-adaptable— readers change the strategies they use as they read different kinds of text or as they read for different purposes (Dole et al., 1991).

Currently, research on comprehension instruction is mainly based on a cognitive view of reading process, which stresses the constructive nature of comprehension. Research shows, during this constructive process, the prior knowledge readers bring to the text and the strategies they employed to foster meaning are two determining factors of reading comprehension. Therefore, strategy instruction has been the most

active topic in the research on comprehension instruction in the last few years (Williams, J. P., 2002).

2.4. Models of reading

Wallace (2001) discusses the development of reading models and examines the role given to the reader in these models. According to her, the role of the reader changed in the 1980s and 1990s. Reading was accepted as a passive skill in early accounts, then the role of the reader changed and was “typically described as ‘extracting’ meaning from a text” (Wallace 2001: 22). Lately, reading has started to be described as interactive rather than simply being active. Wallace defines the bottom-up model reader as passive, the top-down model reader as active, and interactive model reader as interactive.

2.4.1. Bottom-up Model

Bottom-up models assume that the text is singularly important and that the reader processes text by first recognizing lower-level units and then repeatedly synthesizing lower-level units into more complex units. In this view, the reader might first perceive letters, then synthesize several letters to form words, then synthesize several words to form a phrase, and so on. Processing operates in a single direction, from the text to the reader.

According to Grabe and Stoller (2002), the reader goes through a mechanical pattern by creating a piece-by-piece mental translation of the information in the text (Anderson 1999) where the interaction between the reader and the text includes little or no inference from the reader’s own background knowledge. Anderson states that, in this piece-by-piece mental translation process, the reader is expected to recognize letters at first; then recognize the words, and in the end the reader gets the meaning

intended by the writer by combining the words that the reader recognized earlier. In other words, the bottom-up process of reading is defined as a serial model where the reader begins with the printed word, recognizes graphics stimuli, decodes them to sound, recognizes words, and decodes meanings (Paran, 1997; Alderson, 2000).

2.4.2. Top-down Model

Contrary to bottom-up models, in top-down models the reader is expected to bring her background knowledge to the text. Top-down models assume that the reader is singularly important and processes text by first hypothesizing about the content of the text and then selectively sampling the text to confirm or disconfirm her hypothesis. Grabe and Stoller (2002) stress that top-down models assume that reading is primarily directed by reader goals and expectations, that is, why top-down models characterize the reader as someone who has a set of expectations about the text information and samples enough information from the text to confirm or reject these expectations.

In this view, the reading process begins with the highest level unit possible meaning in the mind of the reader; and deals with lower-level units, for example, words, only to a limited extent. Processing operates in a single direction, but in the top-down perspective that view is from the reader to the text.

2.4.3. Interactive Model

The criticism against bottom-up and top-down models led the theorists to develop a new approach: the interactive model. The interactive model of reading, on the other hand, serves as a reminder that both the reader and the text play important roles in reading. In this model (Rumelhart, 1977), processing is neither exclusively top down nor exclusively bottom up. Instead, the reader arrives at understanding of a text by simultaneously synthesizing information from a variety of sources. These include