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ESP instruction: Traditional vs. an Eclectic Method in relation to Reading Comprehension of Iranian Agriculture Students

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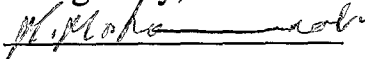
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Hereby we are submitting a thesis written by..................................

Entitled "..". We have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in the Field of English Language Teaching (ELT).

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Dedicated to

My wife, for her endless and unconditional love
My parents, for their encouragement and support

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ABSTRACT

Thesis Title: ESP instruction: Traditional vs. an Eclectic Method in relation to Reading Comprehension of Iranian Agriculture students

This study aimed at finding out the effect of two different methods of ESP instruction, namely, the traditional grammar translation method and a strategy-based eclectic method on improving university students' reading comprehension ability. The main assumption was that compared to the Grammar-Translation which is probably not an efficient method, an eclectic method that focuses on improving reading comprehension ability of the university students through the use of some necessary strategies and skills, seems to be more effective. The participants, within the age range of 18-22, included 72 male and female Agriculture students who were semi-randomly assigned to two experimental groups (i.e. eclectic vs. traditional) each consisting of 36 learners. Following a pretest, treatment (15 weeks, 2 sessions per week), and a posttest, the obtained data was analyzed using two-way ANOVA to examine the effects of the independent variables, while taking gender as a moderator variable. The results of the analysis showed that the eclectic method was significantly more effective compared to the traditional one in improving reading comprehension ability of the students, while no significant gender difference in the students' reading comprehension was found. The findings are discussed in relation to effective reading comprehension instruction through the use of learning and reading strategies in ESP teaching contexts.

Keywords: ESP instruction, traditional method, eclectic method, reading comprehension, learning strategies, reading strategies

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

1. 1. Background

Reading, which is claimed to be the main purpose of foreign language teaching in Iran (Rahmani, 2009; Bahmani, 2009), is a very important skill in learning a foreign language. Typically, in some Asian countries, the main purpose of education is for students to pass entrance examinations into high schools and colleges. Although reading comprehension is an essential part of those exams, abilities and strategies needed for reading complicated and longer texts included in higher levels of education are not teachers' and students' concern at this stage (Huang, 2006). Therefore, acquiring and mastering this skill seems complex to many learners and they often find it difficult to exploit this skill in their learning experience.

This applies to the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction in the Iranian context, as well. The problem emerges when students enter universities and their curricula focus on the content area of their specialization. Since, except English majors, most students do not have to take English courses after the first year of their studies, they begin to struggle with difficulties posed by complex English texts college professors assign them to read.

Traditionally, many university teachers like to use imported English texts designed for native speakers followed by lectures and discussions using students' native language (Huang, 2006). During such ESP classes, as Huang (2006) mentions, some more proficient students will acquire some necessary reading skills by themselves, while other less proficient ones will lose their confidence and interest in the course and as a result they will refer to the translation versions of their texts in order to pass the exams.

Pritchard and Nasr (2004) maintain several explanations why reading presents a difficulty to non-English students. First, the students are accustomed to simplified texts at pre-university level but at university level they are exposed to authentic materials which they find difficult. Second, their existing strategies are to comprehend their texts through intensive use of bilingual dictionary and dependence on teacher. The third reason may be due to the fact that, during the years of English study at school, they are heavily exposed to Grammar-Translation method in which rules, structures, vocabulary, and translation are highlighted. Thus, they

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may tend to dislike reading since this approach is boring (Chastain, 1988), and their skills are low level and not developed. In addition, their ESP teachers may not feel at ease because of the complexity of materials with which they have to deal. Furthermore, since there are no more required English courses after the first year in university, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors are often not available to assist students move from a text as a linguistic object to a text as a means of information reading mode, leaving students to struggle on their own (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998). As Huang (2006) state:

> In this challenging situation, some students, mostly those highly motivated and more proficient EFL learners, gradually acquire advanced-level reading abilities despite the fact that they do not speak or write English fluently. Other students, in the middle of their long and lonely endeavor, lose confidence, interest, and the impetus to keep up, and eventually turn to translated versions of their texts to survive exams and assignments (p. 2).

1. 2. Statement of the problem

Professionals in every field need to communicate and understand the written discourse in their specialty literature. This signifies the vital role that the ability in reading the target sources (mostly written in English) may play among professionals. But, according to a report from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1957, nearly two-thirds of engineering literature appeared in English but that more than two-thirds of the world's professional engineers were unable to read English. Work by Sahakian (1993) and Hussein (1999) indicates that under-performance in English continues to be a problem for workers in this sector. Yet, English is of particular importance for engineering and science students because it is the principal international language of science and is looked upon as an effective means for enabling those students to become familiar with professional texts written in English. (Pritchard and Nasr, 2004, p. 2).

Generally, in many second or foreign language contexts, which apply to the Iranian context as well, a prominent attention is given to reading. Particularly, in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, non-English major college learners are usually required to read content-area textbooks in English. In fact, the ability to read academic texts of their specialty area is what all that students need to acquire.

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The point is that they may face difficulties with tasks requiring skills and strategies for reading quickly and efficiently. Thus, coping with difficulties associated with this type of reading becomes part of everyone's college life. In the meantime, every EFL instructor is well-aware that successful comprehension does not occur automatically. Rather, it depends on directed cognitive and metacognitive efforts expressed through using multiple effective strategies (Alexander and Jetton, 2000). However, many second and foreign language readers are not often aware of the value of utilizing appropriate strategies during reading process probably because they do not receive any explicit instruction on the significance and application of reading strategies.

It is proposed that an effective reading instruction program requires the identification of complementary strategies that are modeled by an expert and acquired by the learner in a context reinforcing the usefulness of such strategies (Cubukcu, 2008). Unskilled readers can become skilled readers and learners of whole text if they are given instruction in effective strategies and taught to monitor and check their comprehension while reading (Cohen, 1998). This is also recommended by Fiorito (2005), who proposes that ESP should concentrate more on language in context and learning strategies than on teaching grammar and language structures.

It seems that these so-called ESP classes will not train the students with satisfactory reading abilities. Therefore, as Edwards (2000, p. 296) proposes, "practical studies of ESP course designs including alternative methods of ESP instruction that are derived from teachers' practical experiential knowledge and from the students' needs and objectives" seem warrented. As a result, conducting investigation on the possible effects of an eclectic method that focuses on various strategies to improve reading comprehension ability of the learners considering their functions in students' academic life seems to be a fruitful area. Accordingly, this study aims at exploring whether there is any difference between a strategy-based eclectic method compared to the commonly used grammar translation method as far as effective ESP instruction is concerned.

1.3. Significance of the study

Learning strategies have been highlighted in many second and foreign language studies. The exploration of language learning studies has developed our understanding of the processes learners use to improve their skills in a second or foreign language (O'Reilly & McNamara,

2007; Baker & Boonkit, 2004). The most general finding among the investigation of learning strategies was that the use of appropriate language learning strategies leads to improved proficiency or achievement overall or in specific skills area (O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford 1993). Similarly, Chamot (2004) argues that learning strategies can be taught effectively to second or foreign language learners. In this regard, it appears to be extremely important that teachers of a second or a foreign language should identify and comprehend the application of strategies. In this way, they will be able to equip their students for coping with difficulties in varied language activities.

In most common reading contexts, second or foreign language readers are likely to encounter unfamiliar words, syntactic structures or topics that require them to consciously or intentionally evaluate and examine alternative sources or use context clues (Phakiti, 2006). Therefore, readers, as Oxford (1989) recommends, need to be ready to observe and control themselves when they read. Otherwise stated, they should be well-trained to use such cognitive and metacognitive strategies while reading. It is also pointed out that what matters may not be so much what strategies learners use, but rather the knowledge of when, how and why a strategy should be used (Carrell, Gajdusek and Wise, 1998).

This is important in the context of formal educational system of Iran, where students' needs are usually defined as the ability to read technical texts of their fields of study and getting familiar with specific English in their majors. According to this definition proposed by the curriculum developers and policy makers of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, the main goal of ESP course should be developing students' reading comprehension skills in English to understand the technical materials they have in their fields. What is noteworthy is that, to the author's knowledge, ESP in the Iranian context is commonly taught through the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) (entitled "traditional method" in this study). What exists in the literature indicates that in GTM the students have to learn language grammar and vocabulary so that they can be able to translate the readings and do the exercises (Chastain, 1988). This, in turn, will lead to boring approaches, and unskilled readers, who are left to struggle on their own while reading (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Additionally, among the shortcomings of GTM, its lack of concern with cognitive principles (Chastain, 1988) that leads to the inability of students to develop some necessary skills and strategies required in reading comprehension could be the worst pitfall that decreases its efficiency for ESP programs.

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Therefore, in this Iranian context where reading comprehension is of prime important, designing, developing, and implementing a strategy-based method that focuses on when, how, and why a strategy is used seems to be of great significance.

The significance of this study can, therefore, be argued from two main aspects: (1) through the application of some appropriate strategies, it designs an eclectic method of instruction that makes use of a number of features of different methods (mainly focusing on strategy training) in an ESP context in an attempt to help students improve their reading comprehension ability; (2) as Oxford (1993) signifies, there are undoubtedly some factors (e.g. learners' variables such as age, gender, language proficiency, and motivation) that affect the choice of learning strategies. This study also tries to investigate the difference, if any, between male and female students in terms of their strategy use and reading comprehension improvement, while taking language proficiency and motivation as controlled variables.

1.4. Research questions and hypotheses

In order to achieve the goals of the study, the following questions are to be answered:

1. Is there any significant difference between traditional vs. a strategy-based eclectic method in terms of improving Agriculture students' reading comprehension?

2. Is there a statistically significant gender difference in reading comprehension of students as far as different instruction types are involved?

Correspondingly, the following hypotheses are formulated:

1. There is no significant difference between traditional vs. a strategy-based eclectic method in terms of improving Agriculture students' reading comprehension.

2. There is no significant difference between males and females in reading comprehension as far as different instruction types are involved.

1.5. Definition of key terms

This section defines all the key terms applied throughout this study as follows:

1.5.1 English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

While General English Language teaching tends to set out from a particular point toward an often indeterminate destination, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) aims to speed learners

through to a known destination. The emphasis in ESP is on going from one particular point to another definite point in the most time- and energy-efficient manner which leads to the idea that ESP is an essentially practical attempt (Basturkmen, 2006). In an academic context, ESP focuses on specific text types, or genres, that occur in target discourse communities, which is, the work or study-related areas the learners try to move into or improve in as a result of progress in their English language proficiency.

1.5.2 Traditional Method

As stated before in sections 1.3 and 1.4, ESP courses are generally taught through the old-fashioned GTM. However, in this study, the term "traditional method" is coined referring to this commonly preferred method and will be utilized throughout the study. Indeed, the traditional method encompassed explanations or providing equivalents for new words; translations of the reading passages, explanations of the relevant grammatical structures; and doing some exercises.

1.5.3. Eclectic Method

Eclectic method refers to a method which encompasses multiple techniques, tactics, and strategies applied in different methodologies to improve reading comprehension and performance of students. In fact, the students receiving instructions through the eclectic method were trained to read using some cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The students were also engaged in some other reading activities such as skimming, scanning, summarizing, etc.

1.5.4. Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is a complex activity, composed of at least three elements: the reader, the text, and the context. According to Nuttall (1996), reading comprehension is considered a process of decoding, deciphering, identifying, articulating, pronouncing, understanding and responding. Reading in a second language (L2) is complex, dynamic and multidimensional (Alderson, 2000). As Phakiti (2006) maintains, this is primarily because it involves interactions among the reader's interlanguage competence (e.g., incomplete, fragmented or not fully-developed linguistic, strategic, discourse and sociolinguistic competence), personal characteristics (e.g., learning and cognitive style, gender, motivation

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and volition, socioeconomic status, educational levels) and external contexts (e.g., topics, text characteristics, reasons to read, stakes of reading, time constraints).

The previous studies have mainly focused on understanding the nature of second and foreign language reading by investigating reader factors such as language proficiency, background knowledge, strategy use, motivation, and contextual factors such as text topic and content, text type and genre, text readability. However, the aim of this study is to focus on strategy use and their relationship to EFL reading comprehension.

1.5.5. Learning Strategies

Learning strategies are defined as "special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990, p. 1). In other words, they are specific actions or techniques that learners use to assist their progress in developing second or foreign language skills and "to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, and more effective and more transferable to new situations"(Oxford, 1990, p. 8).

1.5.6. Reading Strategies

Reading strategies are specific types of learning strategies that readers apply to accomplish their reading tasks. Reading strategies suggest how readers view interaction with written text and how strategies are related to text comprehension. They reveal ways in which readers manage to interact with written texts and how strategies are related to text comprehension. Reading strategies encompass skimming, scanning, contextual guessing, critical reading, inferencing and recognizing text structure (Imtiaz, 2004).

What is noteworthy here is that as Brown (1993) proposes strategies are "contextualized battle plans" which vary intra-individually so that each person may use different learning strategies in different times and situations and for different purposes. Thus, the strategies used by the subjects should be interpreted as those employed in an academic setting for the purpose of main idea construction of a reading text.

1.6. Organization of the thesis

In addition to Chapter One, Introduction, this thesis is composed of four other chapters.

Chapter two, Review of the Related Literature:

(1) includes discussion on

   a. the origin and characteristics of ESP instruction;

   b. different types of learning strategies and skills involved in reading such as scanning, skimming, guessing from the context;

   c. functions of different strategies and techniques in reading comprehension;

(2) detailed reviews of the previous studies that have been conducted on

   a. ESP instruction and reading comprehension;

   b. the effect of strategy use on reading comprehension of students;

(3) provides a conclusion.

Chapter Three, Method, which

(1) introduces the participants of the study and explains their selection;

(2) describes the materials and the instruments used in the study; and

(3) explains both traditional and eclectic method and their implementation in the classroom;

(4) elaborates on the procedures followed to collect and analyze the data.

Chapter Four, Findings and Discussion, which

(1) demonstrates the results and findings of the data analysis through required tables;

(2) interprets the findings in order to make the study understandable.

Chapter Five, Conclusion:

(1) discusses the conclusions of the study;

(2) discusses the pedagogical implications of the study;

(3) discusses the limitations of the study; and

(4) provides useful suggestions for further research.

The final parts of the thesis encompass:

References;

Appendixes; and

Abstract in Persian.