In the Name of GOD

Task-Based Reading vs. Text-Based Reading, Their Effects on Proficiency Level

Thesis submitted in partial fullfilment of the requirments for the Degree of Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

English Department
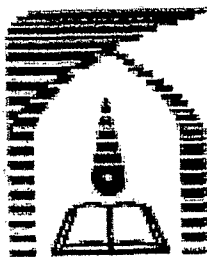**Faculty of Humanities**
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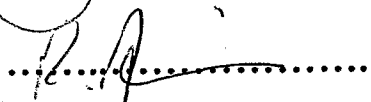WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS

BY

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ENTITLED

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BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This study aimed to find out whether task-based and text-based reading methods result in different degrees of success at elementary and intermediate levels in Iranian EFL classrooms. To achieve the objective, 60 students at Simultaneous Interpretation and Publishing Institute took part in this study. The selection of participants took place on the basis of their scores on homogeneity tests. The participants were assigned to 4 groups (2 elementary groups and 2 intermediate groups). These groups took pretests consisting of both task-based and text-based reading comprehensions. During a period of six weeks, the 4 groups worked on 12 texts through different reading methods (task and text-based reading instructions. Finally, these groups took the post-tests. The scores of the 4 groups (2 elementary and 2 intermediate groups) were compared by independent t-tests.

The result showed that there is a meaningful difference in the achievement scores of EFL learners at the intermediate level of proficiency, receiving task-based and those receiving text-based reading instruction. It indicates that the mean score of the task-based group is higher than the text-based one. On the other hand, the result showed that there is not any meaningful difference in the achievement scores of EFL learners at the elementary level of proficiency, receiving task-based and those receiving text-based reading instruction. Therefore, it could be concluded that task-based reading instruction is more effective for EFL learners at intermediate level.

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CHAPTER I

Background and Purpose

1.1. Introduction

Readers read for a variety of purposes. They sometimes read to merely get the main idea and sometimes read to locate specific information. Commonly, readers read a text to obtain information as it is presented, but they may also be expected to synthesize information from multiple texts, or from a longer chapter or book, in order to take a critical position with respect to the information. Most often, readers read for general comprehension or pleasure, with the intention of being entertained or informed. In academic setting, almost all these purposes for reading come into play (Grabe, 1999). Considering comprehension as a general indication of reading ability, the reader is required to draw information from text and combine it with present information and expectations. Each instructional setting defines somewhat different goals, for reading achievement, purpose of reading and uses of text resources (Grabe, 2001). Sometimes, the priority of reading is given to the text and the

relationship between form and meaning. Focusing on reading instruction, we can consider this procedure as two different processes, text-based reading and task-based reading.

Stubbs (1980) argues that written English has a semantico-grammatical base. This means that it is possible to deduce both the semantic field of words and the grammatical class to which they belong from their systematic visual patterning rather than from symbol to sound relationships. The term bottom-up is used for approaches to reading which emphasize text-based features, namely, at word and sentence level. Contrary to this, Wells (1991) noted that proficient readers may draw on what he calls epistemic literacy which involves the ability not merely to understand the events of narratives, but to engage with their implication, to move beyond the text to make critical and cognitive links with the reader's own life experience. In a similar vein, Hassan (1996) and Carter (1997) refer to reflection literacy, to include the ability to reflect on and monitor our own ongoing processing of text.

In the domain of text-based research, a large body of reading research is concerned with the ability to decode words along with other particular skills. Adams (1990) offers a complete review of this research, which shows a strong link between phonemic awareness, the ability to process words rapidly, and reading achievement. It is helpful to turn to research on textual features other than grapheme-phoneme correspondence and

beyond word-level and sentence-level structure. Chapman (1983) discusses the difficulties which cohesive ties in the texts would cause the L1 speakers, which could be more serious for the L2 learner. The other line of research in this field considers reading as a process beyond the written text. Goodman (1967) and Smith (1971) view reading as a language activity as well as psychological process. They argue that language is best seen not as the matching up of visual symbol to sound realization in a linear manner, but as a process heavily mediated by the reader's ability to make prediction as he or she progresses through the text.

The strategies of early L2 learners were considered in a series of studies by Hosenfeld (1977) who asked successful readers to report their own reading strategies. Readers reported that they skipped inessential words, guessed from the context, read in broad phases and continued reading text when they came across a new word. Text-based reading is based on pre, during and post reading instruction phases. Pre-reading instruction phase helps students access background information that can facilitate subsequent reading, provides specific information needed for successful comprehension, stimulus students interest, sets up students' expectations and models strategies that students can later use their own. During-reading instruction guides students through the texts, often focusing on understanding difficult concepts, making sense of complex sentences,

considering relationships among ideas or characters in the text, and reading purposefully and strategically. Post reading instruction extends ideas and information from the text while also ensuring that the major ideas and supporting information are well understood. In general, the students are to perform the following functions with adequate competence for academic and non-academic purposes:

1. Extracting explicit and general information.
2. Analyzing for logic, overall organization, and viewpoint
3. Appropriately selecting and using text-level reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, outlining and paraphrasing.

For intermediate to advanced students, text-based reading involves practice with more complex sentence structure, the structure of the whole texts and cross-text features of texts such as reference and cohesion. Nuttall (2001) further exemplifies text-focused activities which involve the matching of diagram to text structure or the reconstruction of rhetorical structure or responding to some referential or inferential questions. In academic setting, it is a new trend of reading that is used to carry out further language and content learning tasks. These activities take on greater significance as students proceed to higher language proficiency levels Grabe (2001). Task-based reading involves providing

pre-reading tasks (such as brainstorming, semantic mapping, true-false or agree-disagree tasks), as well as while-reading tasks (such as margin prompts, encouraging the linking or cross-referencing of one part of a text to another, or encouraging first skim reading followed by closer, more focused ones) and post reading tasks such as summary writing, report writing and outlining. There is clear evidence that summary writing and outlining improve both reading and writing abilities (Grabe, 2001).

1.2. Statement of the problem

Many foreign language students consider reading as one of their most important goals. To help them meet this goal, language teachers usually face issues regarding the most effective methods of teaching. Teaching reading to non-native speakers of English involves certain problems and challenges at all levels of instruction. With the introduction of task-based teaching of reading and the good deal of theoretical and empirical research done on the subject, one may wonder if this method could boost the reading comprehension skills of Iranian EFL learners better than the text-based method. Related challenges include classroom procedure, teaching materials, and the proficiency level which would best lend itself to task-based reading. Regarding the stated problem, the objectives and research questions of this study are as follows.

1.3. Objective of this study & Research Questions

The present study is intended to examine whether task-based and text-based reading methods result in different degrees of success at elementary and intended levels in Iranian EFL classrooms. Therefore, the research questions are:

1- Is there any meaningful difference in the achievement scores of EFL elementary learners, receiving task-based and those receiving text-based reading instructions?

2- Is there any meaningful difference in the achievement scores of EFL intermediate learners, receiving task-based and those receiving text-based reading instructions?

This study aims at testing the following two null hypotheses:

1- There is no meaningful difference in the achievement scores of EFL elementary learners, receiving task-based and those receiving text-based reading instructions.

2- There is no meaningful difference in the achievement scores of EFL intermediate learners, receiving task-based and those receiving text-based reading instructions.

1.4. Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Obviously, no research study seems to be impeccable, and this study is not an exception.

1- The present study is limited to investigate the reading comprehension of Iranian elementary and Intermediate EFL learners; as a result, it cannot be generalized to learners in other countries.

2- This study did not take the age of learners into account.

3- The age of participants ranged from 18 to 30, so the result cannot be generalized to other learners either below 18, above 30.

5- Only 30 intermediate and 30 elementary learners participated in this study.

6- The participants were homogenized only according to their language proficiency.

1.5. Significance of the study

A search in EFL textbooks shows that most types of reading comprehension exercises are limited to multiple choice items, vocabulary work and true-false statements that require students to supply a synonym or antonym for the given words or simply refer to the text to find the answers. These exercises have their own advantages: they make it easy for teachers to check whether their students have understood the text. Also, these exercises have only one correct answer and are easy to mark.

However, there are reasons why they should not be used as the only kind of reading activity in the classroom. First, as Davies (1995) mentions, they encourage passive reading behavior: to find the answer to a question, students just have to locate the information in the text. Second, such exercises do not encourage students to read between the lines or question the accuracy and source of the information contained in the text Tomitch (2000). Third, these activities only refer to parts of the text, not to the text as a whole and finally, most of them are neither fun nor challenging, especially for young learners.

Many language teachers, material developers, and researchers agree upon the value of tasks in FL teaching/learning contexts. However, they differ in the use of tasks in EFL classes. On the one hand, some methodologists have treated tasks as units of teaching and have developed task-based courses and on the other hand they have incorporated tasks into traditional language-based approaches to teaching.

The finding of this study could be useful to Iranian EFL teachers, as it introduces some reading activities suitable to learners at elementary and intermediate proficiency levels, and provides empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of task-based and text-based reading methods.

1.6. Definition of the key terms

The definitions of the terms used in this study are as follow:

EFL Learners: Learners who learn English as a foreign language in their own countries. That is, English is only a subject that is taught in schools, not a medium of instruction in education. In the EFL setting, English is taught to enable learners to communicate with the foreigners, but is not used as a language to communicate within the country.

Intermediate Level: A vague curricular territory which needs to be investigated and often depends on institutes and schools and the textbooks they use. According to Brown (2002), intermediate learners have progressed beyond novice stages, that is, they have a basic understanding of the English language as well as some grammar skills.

Task: A communicative task is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right (Nunan, 1989). A task is an activity in which: meaning is primary. There is some sort of relationship on the real world, task completion has some priority, and the assessment of task performance is

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in terms of task outcome (Skehan, 1996). A tasks is (1) a classroom activity or exercise that has a) an objective obtainable only by the interaction among participants, b) a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction, and c) a focus on meaning exchange, (2) a language learning endeavor that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, and/or produce the target language as they perform some set of workplans (Lee, 2000). A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective (Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001). Tasks are activities that call for primarily meaning-focused language use. In contrast, exercises are activities that call for primarily form-focused language use (Ellis, 2003).

Principles of task-based learning

- Ensure an appropriate level of task difficulty.

- Ensure that the task is interesting and relevant to the students' needs.

- Establish clear goals for each task-based lesson.

- Ensure that students adopt an active role.

- Encourage students to take risks and make decisions.

- Ensure that students are primarily focused on meaning when they perform a task.

- Provide opportunities for focusing on form.

- Require students to evaluate their performance and progress.

Reading approach: A programme or method in foreign language teaching, in which reading comprehension is the main objective. In a reading approach (a) the foreign language is generally introduced through short passages written with simple vocabulary and structures (b) comprehension is taught through translation and grammatical analysis (c) if the spoken language is taught, it is generally used to reinforce reading and limited to the oral reading of texts.

Reading comprehension strategies: sequences of procedures readers are encouraged to use in order o help understand texts, as the SQ3R technique (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review)