

The Effects of Decision-making Tasks (Opinion-Task) on Improving Iranian EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension

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Abstract – The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of decision making task on improving Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension. To accomplish the purpose of the study, two intact groups were randomly selected as a control group (N=15) and an experimental group (N=15) of the study. Reading comprehension test was administered as the pretest of the study. After that, the experimental group received a special treatment of task-based instruction including decision making while the control group received traditional reading comprehension instructions. The treatment lasted 12 sessions or about two months. A parallel test of reading comprehension was administered as the posttest of the study. The results of the pretest and posttest in data analysis through statistical procedure of Independent pair T-test confirmed the superiority of the experimental group to the control group, resulting in the conclusion that decision-making task has a significant effect on improving Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension.

Keywords: reading comprehension, task-based instruction, decision making task, parallel test.

I. INTRODUCTION

The role of tasks has received more support from some researchers in second language acquisition (SLA), who are interested in developing pedagogical applications of second language acquisition theory (e.g., Long & Crookes, 1992). An interest in tasks as the basic unit of second language teaching began when researchers turned to tasks as SLA research tools in the mid-1980s. SLA research has focused on the strategies and cognitive processes used by second language learners.

Richards and Rodgers (1986) argue that language learning depends not merely on providing students with 'comprehensive input' but in tasks that require them negotiate meaning and involve in naturalistic and meaningful communication (pp. 223-224). For the reasons mentioned, the researchers applied decision making task in order to detect its effect on Iranian EFL reading comprehension.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) refers to an approach based on the use of tasks as the central unit of planning and teaching in language teaching. Some of its advocates present it as a logical development of Communicative Language Teaching since it draws on several principles that formed part of communicative language teaching from the 1980s (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p. 223).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Research on Task

The use of tasks in SLA has been closely related to developments in the study of second language acquisition (Ellis, 2003, p. 21). For the past 20 years, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has attracted the attention of second language acquisition (SLA) researchers, curriculum developers, teacher trainers and language teachers. To a great extent, the introduction of TBLT into the world of language education has been a 'top down' process.

Whereas variability research was directed at examining learner production, another branch of SLA research in the eighties focused on the input which students were given and the kinds of interactions learners involved in (Ellis, 2003, P. 23). In this respect the work of Krashen (1981, 1985) and Long (1981, 1983, 1996) is prominent. Krashen's Input Hypothesis, claims that language acquisition is input- driven; That is, learner acquire an L2 incidentally and subconsciously when they are able to comprehend the input they are exposed to. He suggests that input becomes comprehensible when it is contextually embedded and fine- tuned to the learners' level of proficiency. Long (1981, 1983) has advanced Interaction Hypothesis, which places similar emphasis on the role of input claims that the best input for language acquisition is that which arises when students negotiate meaning in exchanges where a communication problem has happened.

B. Reading Comprehension

Celce-Murcia (2001) defines reading comprehension as 'the ability to read-taking general comprehension as the example-requires that the reader draw information from a text and combine it with information and expectations that the reader already has. This interaction of information is a common way to explain reading comprehension' (Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 188).

C. Decision-making Task

In teaching, thinking processes employed by teachers in planning, conducting and evaluating lessons or aspects of lessons, particularly when different instructional choices are involved (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 143). They argued that there are two types of decision making: First, pre-active decision-making or decisions that are made before teaching such as determining the content of lesson, or time planning, or doing similar tasks (Ellis, 2003, p. 244). Second, interactive decision-making or unplanned decisions made during a lesson, such as time pressure, number of participants, and input access (Ellis, 2003, p. 244).

In this research decision-making can be regarded as the cognitive process resulting in the selection of a belief or a course of action among several alternative possibilities. Every decision-making process produces a final choice that may or may not prompt action. Decision-making is the study of identifying and choosing alternatives based on the values and preferences of the decision maker.

D. Factors that Influence Decision-making

There are several important factors that influence decision making. Significant factors include past experiences, a variety of cognitive biases, individual differences, including age and socioeconomic status, and so on.

Past experiences can impact future decision making. Karlsson, and Garling (2005) indicated past decisions influence the decisions people make in the future. It stands to reason that when something positive results from a decision, people are more likely to decide in a similar way, given a similar situation. On the other hand, people tend to avoid repeating past mistakes (Sagi, & Friedland, 2007).

In addition to past experiences, there are several cognitive biases that influence decision making. Cognitive biases are thinking patterns based on observations and generalizations that may lead to memory errors, inaccurate judgments, and faulty logic (Evans, Barston, & Pollard, 1983; West, Toplak, & Stanovich, 2008).

Some individual differences may also influence decision making. Research has indicated that age, socioeconomic status (SES), and cognitive abilities influences decision-making (ed Bruin, Parker, & Fischhoff, 2007; Finucane, Mertz, Slovic, & Schmidt, 2005).

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

Thirty students who were studying English at Ofogh institute in eight different classes in Kermanshah were selected in this study. All participants were female, and differed in terms of age. They ranged from 16 to 19 years old. None of them had ever lived in a foreign country or traveled to an English speaking country.

B. Instruments

Three instruments were utilized to collect the data in the present study: (1) An Oxford Placement Test. The test measures a test taker's ability to communicate in English. The test is reliable (consistently grading test takers at the right level) and valid (having a strong theoretical basis). (2) Parallel reading comprehension tests as the pre-test and post-test of the study. Parallel test refers to two tests which measure the same construct and have the same mean and the same standard deviation (Bachman, 1990, p. 168). The tests were teacher made and the reliability of both tests was estimated by the researchers. Based on Coefficient Alfa the internal consistency of both the pre-test and post-test were .71 and .72, respectively.

C. Procedures

The present study was a quantitative research and a quasi- experimental design, because the researchers selected intact classes randomly but they did not choose all the sample participants randomly.

After selecting the whole population, the Oxford Placement Test was administered. Based on the result of this test, two groups (classes) whose scores were one standard deviation above or below the population mean were selected randomly as target subjects (i.e. sample) for the study. Afterwards, all the participants were given a pre-test of reading comprehension. The test was extracted from different sources e.g. online, select reading (intermediate). The questions were in the form of the multiple choices; the next phase of the experiment started with some treatment sessions that included decision-making tasks to the experimental group. In the present study, the participants were asked to select a belief or a course of action among several alternative possibilities and they also needed to justify their classmates that their choices were the best. In contrast, the control group received traditional reading comprehension instruction or reading and answering comprehension questions. After the treatment sessions came to an end, a parallel reading comprehension test (post-test) was given to the students in all groups in order to see whether there was any significant difference between students' scores before and after treatment or not (pretest and posttest). Finally, the results of both the pretest and posttest were compared for data analysis.

D. Lesson Design

The design of a task-based lesson involves consideration of the stages or steps of a lesson that has a task as its principle component (Ellis, 2003, P. 243). Ellis (2003) argues that a lot of designs have been proposed (for example, Prabhu 1987; Skehan 1996a; Willis 1996; Lee 2000). However, Ellis (2003) argued that they have all three principal phases in common: pre-task phase, during-task phase, and post-task phase.

The first phase or 'pre-task' stage is very important, since during this stage, the researcher introduces the topic, provides crucial vocabularies, and motivates students to the decision making task, i.e. main task. This stage creates an environment to facilitate meaningful activities in the classroom. Remember, tasks are not a substitute for interesting topics which engage learners' interest, but they can enhance that engagement and interest (Willis and Willis, 2007, p.11). During the next stage or the main task, the researcher provides them the necessary input and ask them to make a decision based on the information given. In one of the tasks that the researcher applied (the input was about different diseases; cold, sore eyes, backache, sore throat, etc.) students were supposed to decide on the best way to help one of their classmates because she caught a bad cold. Students started to make suggestions about the best way to help their classmate; first individually, then in pairs, and finally, they pool their ideas in small groups. Here are some of the suggestions they made: 'Take her to home and rest, make some soup for her, go to hospital and take some medicines for her, take her to the doctor, and etc. Finally they decide to call the patient's parents to come to the institute to take their daughter to hospital. Finally they were asked to read the text in order to compare their solution with that in

the text. For the post test phase (focus on form) the researcher gave a bird's eye view of how to make suggestions; For example using modals, imparative modes and negative questions.

Table 1: A framework for designing task-based lessons

Phase	Examples of options
A. Pre-task	Framing the activity, e.g. establishing the outcome of the task, planning the time, doing a similar task
B. During-task	time pressure, number of participants
C. Post-task	Learner report, conscious raising, repeat task

Note. Adapted from "Task-based Language learning and Teaching" by Ellis, 2003, P. 244.

IV. RESULTS

Data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. To analyze the data the researchers ran independent samples T-test using SPSS software, version 22 (IBM Corp., Released 2013) for this study. The descriptive statistics encompassed the means and standard deviations from the scores of students in the experimental group and the control group both on Oxford Placement test and reading comprehension pre-test and post-test. Inferential statistics comprised the application of an Independent sample t-test to test the null hypothesis at the .05 level of significance.

A. Research Question and Hypothesis

The present study tried to answer the question raised about the effects of decision-making task on reading comprehension.

Q1: Does decision-making task have any significant effect on improving Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension?

B. Research Hypothesis

H1. Decision making task has no significant effect on improving Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension.

C. Data Analysis

As mentioned above, this study started with 120 learners from whom 30 were sampled to be included in the control and experimental groups. The participants were female studying English in eight different classes at Ofogh Institute in Kermanhah. Some statistical analyses were run to prove the homogeneity of the participants: As can be seen the mean for the whole population is 35 and standard deviation is nearly 9. So, participants whose scores were one SD

above or below mean were selected, that is learners whose scores were between 26 to 44 were selected as the sample for the study.

Table 2: Mean of language Proficiency Test (Oxford Placement Test)

Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Range	Minimum	Maximum
35.2417	120	8.83746	36.00	19.00	55.00

D. Independent Samples t-test as the Pre-test

First of all, it is worth noting that Independent Samples t-test is used to determine whether there is any significant difference between the means of two independent groups. Since there were two groups in the present study, the researchers used Independent Samples t-test to compare the means of different groups.

Table 3: Descriptive data for two groups in pre-test

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
control	15	8.00	7.00	15.00	11.3333	2.76887	7.667
Experiment	15	6.00	8.00	14.00	11.1333	1.64172	2.695
Valid N (listwise)	15						

Table 4: Output of the Independent Pair t-test analysis for two groups in pre-test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Pretest Equal variances assumed	9.389	.005	-.241	28	.812	-.20000	.83114	-1.90251	1.50251
Equal variances not assumed			-.241	22.761	.812	-.20000	.83114	-1.92034	1.52034

Table 4 indicates the output of the Independent Samples t-test analysis and whether there is any significant difference between the means of two independent groups. Since you can see in this table the significance level is .812 ($p=.812$) which is above 0.05, therefore, there is not statistically significant differences between groups. Therefore, the null hypothesis could not be rejected. The other data indicated in the table was the degree of freedom between groups (28).

Table 5: Descriptive data for two groups in post-test

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
control	15	5.00	11.00	16.00	12.9333	1.94447	3.781
experimental	15	4.00	13.00	17.00	14.6000	1.40408	1.971

Table 6: Output of the Independent samples t-test analysis for two groups in post-test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means								
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
task	Equal variances assumed	7.056	.013	2.691	28	.012	1.66667	.61927	.39815	2.93518
	Equal variances not assumed			2.691	25.479	.012	1.66667	.61927	.39248	2.94086

Table 6 indicates the output of the Independent samples t-test analysis and whether there is any statistically significant difference between the means of two independent groups. Since you can see in this table the significance level is .012 ($p=.012$) which is below 0.05, therefore, there is statistically significant difference between groups. Therefore, the null hypothesis could be rejected. It means that task-based instruction with familiar topic was effective.

V. DISCUSSION

This study investigated the effects of decision-making task on reading comprehension improvement of Iranian EFL learners. The participants were 30 EFL learners studying English

at Ofoogh institute in Kermanshah. They were divided into an experimental group and a control group.

The research question addressed in the present study was whether decision-making task can lead Iranian EFL learners to greater increase in L2 reading comprehension or not. To analyze the data the researchers used pre-test and post test scores on reading comprehension test and he ran independent samples T-test using on SPSS software Version 22 (IBM Corp., Released 2013) for this study. Results displayed an increase in students' performance in reading comprehension due to the effect of task-based instruction with familiar topic.

One of the most important things about this task is that they promote learners' confidence by providing them with plenty of opportunities to use language in the classroom without being constantly afraid of making any mistakes (Willis & Willis, 2007, p.2). Once they have the stock of words they can begin to communicate. And once they begin to communicate, the teacher can help them shape their language so that it becomes more complex and more grammatical.

Regarding to the research question: "if decision-making task has any effect on reading comprehension improvement of Iranian EFL learners", the researchers found, the task was very effective for a few reasons: It influenced the amount of negotiation work that took place, since they were sharing a part of themselves with their partner. Furthermore, it provided them the opportunity to do the task a second time, which helps their confidence. Third it increased motivation and the researchers assumed that it provided safer environment for the learners. Forth it made students pay attention to the written text peripherally or subconsciously. The students enjoy the task because they were sharing a part of themselves with their partner and because it provided the opportunity for a laugh (let her die instead of calling her parents to take her to hospital).

VI. CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, according to the obtained results, the reading-comprehension skill in EFL students tended to improve through exposure to task-based input. Specifically, the decision-making task not only affected the reading comprehension of the participants and improved it but also the researchers assumes that this task corresponds to advanced level of language proficiency and it would be suitable for all participants at that level. The conclusion that may be made from the above statistics analysis is that the participants who were taught based on tasks generally tended to score higher in reading comprehension.

A. Limitation of the study

The first limitation is related to the sample size and characteristics of participants involved in this study. Because the study focused on 30 Iranian EFL learners from a simple institute, the findings of this study may not be generalized to other student populations living in other EFL contexts, in particular to students whose first language is not Persian.

Another limitation of this research study stems from the level considered for this study. In this study, students learning English in English institute at intermediate level were selected as participants. Therefore, the results may not be applicable to elementary level students,

Finally, reading comprehension is a construct that may be influenced by many factors. One of the variables that would be worthy examining is the role of background knowledge English language learners. Along with cultural factors, other variables may impact learners' grammar acquisition due to the influence of affective factors such as intrinsic or extrinsic motivation, self-esteem or self-advocacy and also some socio cultural factors.

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