

Improving Students' Reading Comprehension through Text Structure Strategy Instruction

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Abstract – The present study focuses on teaching reading as a process, which involves an application of reading strategies such as text structure training in order to facilitate comprehension of expository passages. The overall aim of the research is concerned with the improvement of methods of teaching reading comprehension at universities in Iran. There were 50 semester three students participating in the present research. Expository text structures were instructed during the intervention program. Data was analyzed through independent sample t-tests and paired t-tests to investigate the effectiveness of the training program. Results revealed that participants in the experimental group who were received the text structure training outperformed the participants in the control group under traditional method of teaching reading.

Keywords: reading strategy, expository text, reading comprehension instruction

I. INTRODUCTION

At every educational level, reading is a powerful tool for academic success because it provides students with access to information (Alderson, 2000). Reading skills are an important tool for students to become academically successful. It appears that effective reading comprehension can take place only if readers actively interact with the text (Flowers, 2010, p.1). An important goal of literacy teaching is to awaken pupils' interest in language and literature and also give them a lasting positive attitude towards reading. Since reading is a meaning-making task, the conscious actions taken by readers to enhance understanding of the text refer to as reading strategies, which are essential to any efficient reading (Yang, 2006, P. 338). The aim of literacy teaching is to support the development of pupils' ability to read, interpret and use different texts, which leads to their fluency in reading.

Grabe's (2009) definition of fluency posits, "Fluency in reading is the ability to read rapidly with ease and accuracy and to read with appropriate expression and phrasing. It involves a long incremental learning process, and text comprehension is an expected outcome of fluent reading" (p. 291). Grabe's definition implies that reading fluency and reading rate are synonymous. Anderson's (2008) definition of reading fluency leads teachers to inquire in regards to appropriate rate and adequate comprehension. Comprehension is a perplex process involving different factors to play their roles in comprehending a reading passage.

Reading comprehension is a complex process: the reader constructs meaning by interacting with text using his or her previous knowledge and experience and the information that can be found in the text. The more background information related to the text the reader possesses, the easier it is for him or her to understand the text. When reading the text he or she activates the previous knowledge about the topic. Moreover, each text is unique as regards the structure of the text, its genre, vocabulary, and language. Several factors influence a reader's interaction: how easy the text is to read, how accurately it follows the conventions of its genre or structure, the language it is written in, and even the type and the size of font (Blair-Larsen & Vallance, 2004, p. 37; Pardo, 2004, p. 272–275). The mental process behind reading comprehension is an important aspect to teaching usable strategies to students because it allows the instructor to analyze which techniques will be most beneficial to learners. van den Broek and Kremer (2000) point to two textual qualities that influence a reader's comprehension level: content and structure. Amongst all reading strategies, awareness of text structure is of a paramount significance for the reader to know in order to be a successful reader. Identifying text structure is one of the influential reading strategies that is categorized as –while reading strategy. Applying this strategy would pave the way of expository text comprehension for the learners in reading classes.

In essence, reading strategies are the things that skilled readers do to ensure that they understand what they read. Anderson (1991, p.460) describes strategies as –deliberate cognitive steps that learners can take to assist in acquiring, storing and retrieving new information, while Paris, Wasik and Turner (1991, p.692) describe strategies as –actions selected deliberately to achieve particular goals. The simple fact is, skilled readers rely on more than processing skills alone (Koda, 2004, p. 204); teaching reading strategies enables teachers to look beyond processing competence in teaching reading and instead towards comprehension. Comprehension is a strategic process in which readers use cues from the text in conjunction with their existing knowledge of the text subject to make predictions, monitor the predictions and construct meaning from the text. In other words, comprehension is a –fluid process of predicting, monitoring and re-predicting in a continuous cycle (Block & Duffy, 2008, p. 29). Literacy is socially constructed and that the reading process comprises an interaction between reader, text and (socio-cultural) context. Reading comprehension results from –an interaction among the reader, the strategies the reader employs, the material being read, and the context in which reading takes place (Edwards & Turner, 2009, p. 631).

Much research exists on the benefits of comprehension strategy instruction. Studies have shown that reading strategy instruction improves comprehension, for example Palincsar and Brown (1984), Guthrie (2002), Stahl et al., (2004), Scharlach (2008), Spörer, Brunstein & Kieschke (2009) to name a few. Combining strategy instruction with other reading instruction methods have also proven to be of value, for example in a study by Wigfield et al., (2008) investigated the benefits of combining concept-oriented reading instruction with reading strategy instruction and traditional reading instruction. Literature has shown that students require special skills to be effective readers of expository texts. Expository texts can be challenging to read for students with no strategy to their reading.

In reading comprehension instruction, reader strategies serve as a significant element in aiding students to individually increase their own comprehension of text. According to Roe

and Ross (2006), reader strategies are adjustable approaches to reading that change depending on the textual context. This kind of strategy is dependent upon the student and requires him or her to think critically about how to approach the text in order to decode and retain information (Roe & Ross, 2006). To interact with expository text and have success, students need specific instruction that demonstrates how they can read nonfiction books to facilitate comprehension and this would achieve through main idea detection.

When identifying main ideas in expository text, students find the essential information in the reading passage (Roe & Ross, 2006; Akhondi et al., 2011). According to Tompkins (2007), “students learn the difference between the big ideas and the details” through this strategy (p. 205). If students apply this method while reading, they learn to easily recognize and remember the most important information while not exerting energy over the details that are less important. After reading, the student can then summarize and explain the main points in the text without getting overwhelmed by the minor details. Summarizing involves the reader deciding what the critical information is, shortening it, and then explaining it using his or her own words (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2003). Recognizing expository text structures can also help students in summarizing.

According to Dymock (2005), students who understand text structures have more success with comprehension and “explicit teaching of text structure awareness has a positive effect on comprehension” (p. 180). The five major structures of expository text are outlined by Tompkins (2007): description, sequence, compare/contrast, cause/effect, and problem/solution. McNeil (1987) notes that cause and effect structures show the relationship between two events; while comparison and contrast structure demonstrate the similarities and differences among concepts, and a problem and solution structure shows a question and how it is answered. Tompkins (2007) notes that when students can identify the expository text structure used in the reading passage, they can use that type of relationship to discover the main ideas. Identifying the main ideas during reading directly correlates with a student’s ability to summarize the information after reading. These are two related strategies that affect one another in a reader’s ability to comprehend text.

Research concerning the effects of text structure on comprehension and recall suggests a developmental aspect as indicated by the ability of more mature readers to perceive and use this strategy more efficiently. In a study by Englert and Hiebert (1984), for example, sixth-grade readers were more aware of text structure than third-grade readers were. McGee (1982) found the same effects with third- and fifth-grade readers and with adults, sixth-grade, and fourth-grade readers. It was also found in these three studies that text structure recognition correlates with reading ability, as well as with grade level. It is concluded from the previous studies in the field that more mature students likewise tertiary level students would benefit from the text structure training and awareness more than students at lower levels of education.

Other studies indicate that recognition of text structure helps in the identification and recall of significant ideas, and that instruction given to students in how to use this strategy has had positive effects on comprehension and recall. Meyer, Brandt, and Bluth (1980) found that students who were aware of text structure tended to chunk, or organize, the information

as they read it. Furthermore, an abundance of research indicates that students who use text structure as a reading strategy ask themselves relevant questions about the material being read (Gersten et al., 2001).

A. Research Question

In order to investigate the effectiveness of the expository text structure strategy training on students' improvement of reading comprehension, the following research question was formulated: If specific reading strategies such as text structure are taught, will students demonstrate an increase in their comprehension of the expository passages?

II. METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research question posed in the current research, a quasi-experimental pre-test post-test design was selected and the efficacy of the strategy instruction had been measured through quantitative method applying strategy use questionnaire and reading comprehension tests; moreover, qualitative follow-up interviews and the researcher's observation and note taking triangulated the source of data collection and data analysis.

A. Participants

There were 50 semester three students majoring in English in this study. These students were mostly female aged between 19-23 years old. Of course, age and gender were not the variables of interest in the present research. The type of sampling was non-probability purposive sampling because the researcher was interested in training the students who were majoring in English and had already some considerable amount of exposure to academic reading texts.

B. Instruments

Two instruments were used in the current study included a strategy questionnaire and a reading comprehension test.

1. Strategy questionnaire. Questionnaires on strategy use are best used as opportunities to help increase students' strategy awareness (Baker, 2002, p. 86) and to assess their strategy use (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002, p.225). In the light of this, the strategy questionnaire was used with the intention of evaluating the extent to which students, according to their self-reports, were using strategies covered in this study during reading and which kinds of strategies were used the most or least. It was also used in a pre-posttest design to determine whether the strategy intervention had any effect on the students' self-report about strategy use.

2. Reading comprehension test. In order to test reading comprehension, for each session of test taking, an expository reading passage of 700-900 words was selected from the textbook, Active Reading 3 in which all of the passages are informational texts. The selected

passages contained paragraphs consisting of almost 100 words for each paragraph. The researcher assumed that the participants would be able to read and answer questions on the passage comfortably within 30 minutes because as mature university students they are expected to read about 200-250 words per minute (McNair, 2011, p.1). Thus, the text passage conforms to the level of the students' required reading.

3. Expository passages. In order to test reading comprehension, for each session of test taking, an expository reading passage of 700-900 words was selected from the textbook, Active Reading 3 in which all of the passages are informational/expository texts. The selected passages contained paragraphs consisting of almost 100 words for each paragraph. The researcher assumed that the participants would be able to read and answer questions on the passage comfortably within 30 minutes because as mature university students they are expected to read about 200-250 words per minute (McNair, 2011, p.1). Thus, the text passage conforms to the level of the students' required reading. All of the reading passages used for the training program were selected from Active Reading 3 that are expository passages and appropriate for text structure instruction in reading classes.

C. Procedure

Phase 1 of the research started with the researcher presenting and explaining the aims of the present study and its potential importance to the participants. They took the proficiency test before the actual data collection session started. Then, the reading strategy questionnaire was distributed to the participants. The questionnaire was administered at the first session of collecting data before the comprehension test being administered. The rationale behind using strategy questionnaire before the comprehension test (pretest) was the importance of assessing the level of the participants' strategy use based on *self-reports* before assessing their reading performance, which reflects their ability to apply some of the strategies. Participants were encouraged to ask the researcher questions if they did not understand the items in the reading strategy questionnaire. The administration of the sequence of the instruments proceeded smoothly. It was however observed that participants spent a long time on the comprehension test. This suggested slow reading rates and lack of ease in reading expository texts.

Phase 2 of the research started with some follow-up interviews right after the strategy use questionnaires were completed by the respondents. The participants for attending the follow-up interview were selected randomly from the students' classroom list from the two groups of intervention and control. There were 10 students attending the interview as it was not possible to interview all the 50 participants due to the time constraints. The follow-up interviews for the reading strategy questionnaires were conducted to investigate the participants' reading strategies in detail. In a follow-up interview, the subjects were asked to clarify and elaborate on their answers from the reading strategy questionnaires. The follow up interview was audio taped for further analyses of what they had said regarding the strategy use.

Phase 3 included collecting data for the pre-test which is the expository reading comprehension test and embarking on conducting the intervention, i.e., training students on

reading strategy use. As it was mentioned before, there were seven strategies selected to be used for students' training on strategy application. These strategies include activating prior knowledge, identifying text structure, and predicting which belong to the *before reading* phase and monitoring which will be checked while students are reading the passage, *during reading* phase; moreover, the three stages of clarifying, questioning, and summarization (identifying main ideas) are checked in the *after reading* phase.

Phase 4 is the intervention phase in which the students received the training on when, why, and how to use reading strategies to pave the way for comprehension of expository passages. A strategy intervention program is meant to equip students with reading strategies that they can apply while reading to better understand what they read. The researcher taught reading strategies for six weeks, two sessions each week, and one hour of training in each session. All the reading passages were selected from *Active Reading Book 3* in which all of the passages are informational/expository texts. There are three stages to follow in each intervention session including before reading, during reading and after reading in which these stages are explained in detail in the following section.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The collected data on reading comprehension pre- and post-tests were analyzed through some statistical procedures using SPSS software. Independent sample t-tests and paired-sample t-tests were applied to analyze the data for the present study. Results are depicted in Tables as follow.

Table 1: Independent Samples Test (pre-test)

Group	N	t	df	sig.	Mean
Intervention	25				67.85
Control	25				65.76
Total	50	5.42	48	.103	
$\alpha=0.05$ 95% confidence interval					

As it can be understood from the Table 1, there was a no significant difference between the two groups of intervention and the control, $t(48) = 5.42$, $p = .103$, at the beginning of the research. Another indicator of the sameness for the two groups is the Mean of their performance on the comprehension test which is 67.85 for the intervention group and 65.76 for the control group. This is the optimal situation whereby the researcher liked to start the research treatment (strategy instruction) for the intervention group and follow a traditional method of teaching reading for the control group. After the intervention program was accomplished, an independent sample t-test was applied at the posttest level to compare the

participants' performances in the two groups of control and experimental to prove the effectiveness of the training program. Results are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2: Independent Samples Test (posttest)

Group	N	t	df	sig.	Mean
Intervention	25				84.52
Control	25				71.96
Total	50	2.31	48	.020	
$\alpha=0.05$ 95% confidence interval					

Although both groups showed an increase in their performance mean score, the students in the intervention group tended to consistently show higher scores than the control group. The results showed that Mean of the performance on the reading comprehension posttest is significantly different from each other; growth for the intervention group from pre-test to posttest (Mean=84.52) and for the control group (Mean=71.96) resulted. Moreover, the results of the t-test revealed that there was a significant difference between the two groups, $t(48)= 2.31$, $p=.020$. In other words, the treatment enhanced reading comprehension of the students in the intervention group while the little growth observed in the control group was due to the frequency of the reading practice that they had received. Table 3 shows the results of the paired t-test for the intervention group to prove their progress from pre-test stage to the posttest.

Table 3: Paired Samples Tests (intervention & control)

Group	N	t	df	sig.	Mean
Pre-post (int)	25	-2.58	24	.000	-16.67
Pre-post (cont)	25	-9.34	24	.048	-6.2
$\alpha=0.05$ 95% confidence interval					

From Table 3, it can be interpreted that there was a statistically significant improvement in reading strategy use and reading comprehension performance, $t(24)= -2.58$, $p<.05$, of the students in the intervention group who received training on *when*, *how*, and *what* influential strategies to apply while reading. However, there was a weak statistical difference between the pre- and posttest of the students in the control group, $t(24)= -9.34$, $p<.05$, which is not practically significant and that little growth in the Mean score of the control group is the result of extended reading during a specific period.

IV. CONCLUSION

Following the intervention, the two groups improved on their performance in strategy use and their reading comprehension performance, but the improvement made by the control group was statistically significant but practically insignificant whereas the improvement by the intervention group in all the reading strategies examined in the study was statistically and practically significant. This improvement is attributed to the intervention. The comparison between the students' self-assessment and their performance on the reading test showed inconsistencies. To put it another way, students in the two groups claimed that they use most of those strategies included in the questionnaire but they were not actually able to apply those strategies while they were reading. The researcher did not set out to examine this as the main research objective but it was emerged due to the triangulation of the data.

The results also revealed that the students in the intervention group outperformed the participants in the control group in all of the sub-categories of the reading strategies mentioned in the questionnaire. Remarkable progress was found in the two strategies of identifying main ideas and summarization. These two strategies were the least strategies used by the participants at the pretest stage but after the intervention accomplished, students gained mastery of applying these strategies in their reading. Therefore, they were able to produce comprehensive summaries and scaffold the structure of the text in an organized way. Being capable of keeping track on the most important ideas in the text helped students in the intervention (experimental) group to squeeze main and major ideas of the text; thus, they were able to read faster, write good summaries, and interact in the reading class much better comparing to the participants in the control group taking traditional method of reading. An example of the students' progress in summary writing and identifying main ideas in the intervention group is described in this section to present a clear image of the strategy intervention effectiveness in reading classes. For instance, 42% of the students liked summary writing before the intervention while the number increased to 83% after the experiment accomplished. The reason behind this improvement is the text structure awareness strategy in which they learned how to extract important ideas from the text and got more familiarity with the appropriate signal words to each of the five expository text structures; therefore, they did not feel embarrassed to write a good summary. This is what students in the qualitative sample mentioned in their interview with the researcher. Another proof of their progress in summary writing is the inclusion of main ideas in their summaries. Before the intervention, at the pre-test stage, only 62% of the students were able to keep track on the important ideas in the reading passage and include them in their summaries while it is increased to 87% after the intervention. The results of the retrospective analysis of strategy use also demonstrated the transfer of strategies. The students sampled in the treatment group used the reading strategies they had been taught in class, when reading English texts.

Findings of the present study for the research question that was investigating the effectiveness of teaching reading strategies such as text structure training to improve reading comprehension performance are in line with plenty of previous studies in the field of reading.

The current research proved that students in the intervention group outperformed their counterpart in the control group in reading comprehension performance after the intervention accomplished. This finding concurs with those of previous studies, which have discovered that the use of language learning strategies improved language performance (Bruen, 2001; Carrier, 2003; Clement, 2007; Macaro, 2001; Nakatani, 2005). Similar studies in reading strategy use (Cromley & Azevedo, 2006; Phakiti, 2003; Zhang & Wu, 2009) have also revealed that scores on the reading comprehension measure are significantly correlated with students' accurate use of reading strategies. This study examined teaching students a repertoire of strategies to improve reading comprehension and it was revealed that reading strategies would make the students well-equipped in reading classes and pave the way of comprehension while they are struggling with expository passages.

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