

The Effect of Implementing Information-gap Tasks on EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension Ability

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Abstract – This thesis attempt to measure the effect of the implementation of the information-gap tasks on the student's reading comprehension abilities. In order to address this issue, a quantitative study conducted on two randomly selected intact classes at Mohadese School in Kermanshah. Classes assigned as experimental group and control group. It was hypothesized that the students taught according to the information-gap tasks would score higher in the post-test than in the pre-test and that there would be statistically significant differences at the confidence level of.05 between the post-test mean scores of the experimental group and the control group. At the end of the experiment, a post-test was assigned to both groups to determine whether the information-gap tasks had positively affected the students' reading comprehension abilities. The experiment lasted for sixteen sessions. The study has revealed that: (1) the information-gap tasks had a positive effect on the students' reading comprehension ; (2) the experimental group obtained higher scores in the post-test than in the pre-test, making the difference between the pre-test and post-test scores statistically significant.

Keywords: information- gap tasks, reading comprehension ability, Iranian EFL classroom

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, an increasing number of teachers in all subjects have been looking for ways to change the traditional forms of instruction, in which knowledge is transmitted from a dominant teacher to a class of silent, obedient, passive learners. They have sought ways to make the classroom more student-centered and have investigated the different ways in which students can play more active roles in processing and discovering knowledge.

Given the fact that language acquisition is influenced by the complex interactions of a number of variables including activities, materials and evaluative feedback, Task -based Language Teaching (TBLT) has a dramatic, positive effect on these variables (Ellis, 2003, p.30).

According to Nunan (1989), in Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL), learning is fostered through performing a series of activities as steps towards successful task realization.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Allwright (1981) was one of the first who argued for the effectiveness of tasks as a stimulus to learning. He questioned the need for language instruction and emphasized the need for language use.

One of the well-documented published researches on task-based language learning is Prabhu's procedural syllabus. In 1979, Prabhu started a five-year project in Bangalore with a small number of elementary and secondary English classes. Prabhu (Prabhu, 1987; as cited in Littlewood, 2004) believed that students may learn more effectively when their minds are focused on the task, rather than on the language they are using.

There were also some researchers like Nazary (2008) who did a research on Iranian university students and concluded that they have not a positive attitude toward the use of translation in class.

In SLA research, tasks have been widely used as vehicles to elicit language production, interaction, negotiation of meaning, processing of input and focus on form, all of which are believed to foster second language acquisition. Task-based learning (TBL) provides students with both a framework of structures, words and/or forms to be used and a good purpose/reason for doing the activities. That is why task-based reading activities may prove to be a good means of integrating the four skills and fostering effective language learning because such activities are done with the purpose of comprehending something, reaching a conclusion, and/or creating a whole picture of something within a pre-set frame (Nunan, 2005).

A. Definitions of 'Task'

Prabhu (1987) defined a "task" as an activity which requires learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allows teachers to control and regulate that process.

According to Willis (1998), tasks are activities in which the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome.

According to, Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001) a "task" is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective. In conclusion, while these definitions vary, they all emphasize the fact that a task is an activity that requires language learners to use the language through a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome. Moreover, meaning is the major focus rather than form.

B. Information-Gap

Information Gap is a kind of structured output task. These are like completing a task by obtaining missing information, conveying telephone message, and expressing an opinion.

According to Penny Ur (1996), the activities and tasks based on the information-gap principle make students participate actively in the process of learning. This will result in increasing students' motivation to learn English much more enthusiastically.

Larsen-Freeman (2000) claims that an information-gap exists when one person in an exchange knows something that the other person doesn't. If we both know today is Tuesday and I ask you, 'What day is today?' and you answer, Tuesday, our exchange isn't really communicative.

It is where two students or more work together where each has some parts of the answers to some kind of a problem or a question. They have to explain their part of the information to their partner so that they end up with all the information. Precisely, Information-gap tasks are those in which students exchange information in order to complete a required task.

C. Types of Information-Gap tasks

There are two types of information-gap tasks: one-way and two-way.

According to McKay and Tom (1999) as quoted in (The National Center for Family Literacy and Center for Applied Linguistics, 2004, p. 4, ch. IV) say, one-way occurs when one person holds information which other group member(s) do not have. An example of a one-way information exchange is one in which one person has a picture and describes it to his/her partner who tries to draw it. A two-way information-gap task, both learners have information to share to complete the activity e.g., both have some information about directions to a location, but they have to share the information that they have to complete the directions (Ellis, 1999, p. 95).

The purpose of this study is to determine whether teaching reading comprehension through information-gap task could be influential in EFL reading comprehension improvement.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research question and Research Hypothesis

Thus, this current study addresses the following research question:

Q1: Do information-gap tasks improve the students reading comprehension in Iranian English classrooms?

To reveal the purpose of this study, the researcher tried to find the confirmation or rejection of null hypotheses presented here:

HO1: There are statistically significant differences at (0.05) in the mean scores in the pre and post reading test of the experimental group and the control group.

B. Participants

In order to see the effect of information-gap tasks on reading comprehension ability of EFL learner's experimental method design was adopted. As shown in table3. 1, two groups of students, experimental group (receiving treatment) and control group (without treatment) have been selected quite randomly. In the next stage collected data of students' reading comprehension ability using reading test was analyzed.

To put research hypothesis to test t-test for independent groups was done through inferential statistics.

Profile of participants

Number	age	context of study	level
16 32	13-15	Mohadese junior school in Kermanshah	3 rd grade

C. Instrumentation and Data Collection

In order to measure student's reading comprehension abilities both in pre-test and post-test, five reading excerpts from (KHATE SEFID) were chosen.

Twenty items for all five passages were developed. Each item carried one point. The time allowed was 60 minutes. (See appendix A).

In this research quantitative data was collected. According to the pre-test and post – test scores, t-test was conducted to see if there was any significant growth in the participants' reading comprehension after receiving the task.

D. Procedure

The methodological design implemented for the current study consisted of pretest, treatment, and posttest.

As it was already mentioned, the participants were randomly assigned into two groups. One group served as the experimental group in which students received treatment and the other group served as the control group in which students received the traditional way of teaching. The pre-test was administered to both experimental group and control group to take their initial

knowledge of reading comprehension ability. The whole research project took place in almost sixteen one - hour sessions.

During the experiment in the control group, the students had the conventional learning, that is, the teacher introduced the new words and phrases, and the students began to translate the passages into Persian and answer the comprehension questions and exercises based on their understanding of the reading passage.

During the project in experimental group, the text represented to the students through two methods one-way and two-way.

The researcher familiarize the pairs with teaching methodology to apply in the class. They were told that each student in one group, e.g. student A will read a part of the text and another student, e.g. student B will read another part. They had to do their parts alone, and then in pairs they should exchange their ideas and try to answer the questions that existed in their books in pairs.

In the experimental group, the class time was divided into:

Pre-task

Task

Post-task

In the pre-task (preparation) phase, students were given a picture related to the topic of the reading. Then they were asked to express their opinions, agreements and disagreements. The students took part in activities that either helped them to recall words or phrases which would be useful during the performance of the main task.

In task phase, the learners performed the task in pairs. Student A had a part of reading that student B didn't have, and vice versa. They covered their parts alone, then after 10 minutes they worked in pairs and expressed their ideas to each other. Then they reported to the whole class how they did the task and what conclusions they reached. During this stage students worked in pairs to do the activities they were asked.

Post-task phase, which is also known as analysis stage, during which students noticed interesting features or patterns in the text. Meanwhile, the control group received no such treatment. They read their readings alone, and then they listened to the teacher or to the more capable students to read it for the whole class. They asked the meaning of the words that they did not know and finally answered the book's comprehension questions. All 16 treatment sessions incorporated the exact same method as the first treatment.

The experimental group's plans provided opportunities for pair work and a lot of interaction between pairs. Conversely, students in control group worked individually and shared their answers with the class. It should be mentioned that the teacher was the same for both experimental and control groups.

Post -test was done after the treatment. Students in both control and experimental groups were given the same texts as post-test. The time between pre-test and post-test was (one week) to reduce the test-retest effect and it lasting 60 minutes. On the basis of these tests the efficacy of information- gap tasks in reading comprehension was determined.

In this research quantitative data was collected. From a quantitative perspective, according to the pre-test and post-test scores, t-test was conducted to see if there was any significant growth in the participants' reading comprehension after receiving the task.

E. Scoring procedure

In this study the right/wrong scoring procedure was used. For the total test performance, scores are tabulated out of 20. One mark is assigned for every correct answer. A response received a score of '0' if it was wrong and '1' if it was correct.

F. Data Analysis

In order to analyze the pre -test and post -test, t- test independent sample and t-test paired sample were used.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study was an attempt to investigate the information-gap tasks on the student's reading comprehension abilities on EFL intermediate students in Kermanshah, Iran. To fulfill the purpose of the study, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequency counts) and inferential statistics (independent sample t-test) were applied.

The present study tried to answer the question raised about the effects of information-gap tasks on reading comprehension.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for two groups in post-test

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
control	16	5.00	8.00	13.00	11.0625	1.34009
experimental	16	6.00	8.00	14.00	11.1875	1.75950
Valid N (listwise)	16					

Table 1 provides useful descriptive statistics for two groups. The data include the mean, the standard deviation, and the range. As you can see the mean for experimental group is 11.18, while the mean for control group is 11.06.

Table 2: 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
control	Equal variances assumed	1.31	.26	-.226	30	.823	-.12500	.55293	-1.25	1.004
	Equal variances not assumed			-.226	28.0	.823	-.12500	.55293	-1.25	1.007

Table 2 indicates the output of the Independent Pair t-test analysis and whether there is any significant difference between the means of two independent groups in pre-test. Since you can see in this table the significance level is 0.82 ($p=0.82$) which is above 0.05, therefore, there is not statistically significant differences between groups, i.e., the null hypotheses could not be rejected.

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

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
control	16	4.00	11.00	15.00	13.3750	1.20416
experimental	16	5.00	14.00	19.00	16.3125	1.49304
Valid N (list wise)	16					

Table 3 shows useful descriptive statistics for two groups. The data include the mean, the standard deviation, and the variance. As you can see the mean for experimental group is 16.31, but the mean for control group is 13.37.

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

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		z	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
reciprocal	Equal variances assumed	.815	.374	-6.12	30	.000	-2.937	.4795	-3.916	-1.958
	Equal variances not assumed			-6.12	28.7	.000	-2.937	.4795	-3.918	-1.956

Table 4 provides data about the output of the Independent Pair t-test analysis and whether there is any statistically significant difference between the means of two independent groups in post-test. Since you can see in this table the significance level is .000 ($p=.000$) which is below 0.05, therefore, there is statistically significant difference between groups. Therefore, the null hypotheses could be rejected. It means that task-based instruction with important topic was effective.

V. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, results reveal that using information-gap tasks as a method to improve students' reading comprehension ability had a significant impact on improving students' reading proficiency.

Some experts have discussed the advantages of applying information-gap tasks. Hess (2001) confirmed that information-gap tasks can provide a comprehensive feedback from the learners, such as a wide diversity of opinions, references, and values, many different experiences and styles of learning. Then, he also adds that information-gap tasks can foster a learner-autonomous learning style.

Information-gap tasks can maximize students' opportunities to speak during the English lesson and provide the potential benefits of student-student interaction. In order to elicit information and opinions from the teacher and friends, the students needed to interact among them.

Information-gap is an activity which resembles real life situations and requires students to pool out information from their peers. In other words, it makes those students who do not have

any information on a particular subject or a particular situation obtains it from those students who know it.

Tasks can be very helpful in accelerating students' language learning development because they preserve situational and interactional authenticity to a large extent, can engage learners in using language pragmatically rather than displaying language, and require learners to employ cognitive processes such as selecting, classifying, ordering, reasoning, or evaluating information in order to carry out a task.

In the application of TBLT, students liked the task-based texts; their involvement in class activities dramatically increased because they loved the topics; their communicative abilities and skills improved, and finally their willingness to talk in English increased.

The results revealed that the experimental group performed much better than the control group. So it was concluded that implementing information-gap tasks in Iranian English classroom does affect positively the students' reading comprehension abilities; when each student has part of the information that another student does not have, they try to fill the gaps of their understanding by sharing their ideas and to solve the problems they face in answering comprehension questions, and the students who are exposed to these tasks will be able to read in English much more efficiently than those who are not.

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