

The Effect of Reading Processing Tasks on the Iranian IELTS Candidates' Reading Scores

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Abstract – The process of language learning is a complex process, associated with many factors. Due to the complexity of language learning process and its different dimensions, any elaboration should be narrowed down. Therefore, the present study aimed to see whether using reading comprehension tasks could significantly improve the students' reading comprehension ability or not. To this purpose, 72 English students were selected. After receiving the treatment and using reading comprehension tasks, their reading abilities were compared to those who had received the traditional teaching process. The results demonstrated that those students who had received the reading comprehension processing tasks performed significantly better than those who had received traditional reading approach in the control group. The findings of the study have some implications for language teachers as well as syllabus designers to improve reading ability of language learners.

Keywords: Reading Comprehension, Reading Processing Tasks, Task-based Language Teaching, Task, Traditional Reading, Second Language Acquisition

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, we have faced that in a majority of classrooms, reading instruction is mainly text-centered and does not provide direct comprehension tasks. In these classrooms, teachers typically use textbook questions to check students' comprehension and rarely teach students the strategies and skills necessary to comprehend what they have read (Durkin, 1978; Pearson, 1985).

A great number of textbooks still follow the traditional reading activity, and this traditional approach involves using the basic question/answer pattern, but does not provide explicit teaching of comprehension strategies. Therefore, in order to teach such strategies, reading comprehension tasks could be used. These tasks provide a better awareness of reading comprehension. Generally, the importance of using language tasks is mentioned by Fallahi, Malayeri and Bayat (2015):

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. (p.185)

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), also known as Task-based Instruction (TBI), focuses on the use of authentic language and asking students to do meaningful tasks using the target language. Such tasks can include visiting a doctor, conducting an interview, or calling customer service for help. Assessment is primarily based on task outcome - the appropriate completion of real world tasks- rather than on the accuracy of prescribed language forms. This makes TBLL especially popular for developing target language fluency and student confidence. As such, TBLL can be considered a branch of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

Prabhu (2001) popularized TBLT while working in Bangalore, India. Prabhu (2001) noticed that his students could learn language as easily with a non-linguistic problem as when they were concentrating on linguistic questions. Based on what was suggested by Nunan (1989), in Task-Based Language Learning, learning process is fostered and accelerated through performing a series of activities as steps towards successful task realization. Task-based learning focuses on the use of authentic language through meaningful tasks such as visiting the doctor or a telephone call. This method encourages meaningful communication and is student-centered.

Task-Based Language Teaching is the latest trend in SLA approaches. Although it has produced very positive results in certain contexts (e.g. small class sizes of immigrant children), like every method that has preceded it, TBLT is also revealing its weaknesses. Broady (2006) notes that TBLT may not provide sufficient "Interaction Opportunities" (P.6).

Bruton (2005) stated that task-based activities could improve learning process from different points including:

- acquisition of new grammar or vocabulary features
- all students are or will be motivated by TBLT
- Some students receive more guidance and will or cannot 'notice' language forms (grammar) or other elements of accuracy
- Students could translate and use a lot of their L1 rather than the target language in completing the tasks.

Renn (1999) states "It is widely accepted that reading is the process of constructing meaning from written words. As such, reading is a holistic act, taking place only when all of the necessary components are put together in a smooth, integrated performance" (p. 1).

The importance of using reading tasks is especially critical for English language learners, and high level of English language literacy, essential for even minimal academic achievement at any level, has been found to correlate with frequent and complex strategy use (Anderson, 1999).

While we know of the importance of second language reading strategies, there is still a gap in our knowledge about the effect of strategy instruction, especially for the IELTS learners. Little research has specifically aimed at investigating the IELTS learners in the use

of language reading strategies. The current study seeks to shed more light on this area to investigate if using particular language reading strategies in reading instruction can significantly affect reading ability of language learners.

1.1. Research Questions

1. Does outlining processing task have any significant effect on the Iranian IELTS candidates reading score?
2. Do embedded question processing tasks have any significant effect on the Iranian IELTS candidates reading score?

1.2. Research Hypotheses

1. Outlining processing task does not have any significant effect on the Iranian IELTS candidates' reading score.
2. Embedded question processing tasks do not have any significant effect on the Iranian IELTS candidates' reading score.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Modirkhamene and Bagherian Azhiri (2012) investigated The Effect of Multiple Intelligences-based Reading Tasks on EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension they mainly searched for innovative resolutions for EFL learners. The researchers proceeded to determine the most frequent multiple intelligences of the EFL learners so as to cater for well - designed tasks to obviate any obstacles to ideal reading. They highlighted dominant intelligences of EFL learners.

Xu (2009) investigated the effects of different reading tasks on L2 vocabulary acquisition their study was undertaken to test the Involvement Load Hypothesis. They examined the impact of tasks on vocabulary acquisition. It was designed to test and develop the involvement load hypothesis by examining the impact of different reading tasks on the L2 vocabulary acquisition. They found that reading tasks could facilitate L2 vocabulary acquisition. They also found that using new words in contextualized communication is an efficient means to extend and consolidate learners' vocabulary acquisition.

In addition to Tasks, reading tests could be effective for its instruction. Drawing on this issue, Scheriff (2012) investigated the effects of repeated readings on third grade students' reading achievement and attitudes. They investigated the effects of a reading strategy, repeated readings, on third grade students' reading achievement and attitudes. They found no significant differences for students receiving the repeated readings intervention compared to students who did not receive treatment. Additionally, data analysis revealed no significant differences in students' mean attitude reading scores between the control and experimental groups.

The process of meaning-making during reading comprehension varies from learner to learner. Several studies that treat L2 reading research and instruction include extensive reviews of background knowledge and the L2 reading process (Hudson, 2007; Koda, 2005),

Investigations are about the influence of background knowledge, also referred to as content knowledge, reader's schema and domain knowledge, on L2 reading date back to the 1980s with investigations that included ESL and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students of different instructional levels and language backgrounds (Hudson, 1982; Johnson, 1981; Pritchard, 1990). Researchers agreed that background knowledge significantly influences the comprehension of L2 reading materials.

In more recent years, research has examined the effects of passage content on L2 reading of languages other than English with participants from foreign language programs in the USA (Brantmeier, 2002, 2003; Schueller, 2009; Young & Oxford, 1997). As anticipated, results echo previous findings with English language learners. Given the prior research on the role of passage content in L2 reading, it is hypothesized that textual enhancement questions may aid the comprehension of domain specific texts.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

This study was conducted in two IELTS classes, randomly selected from some English language institutes in Tehran. All the participants had an MA degree. The participants' mother tongue was Persian. The average age of the participants was 25.5 years old, with an age range of 24-30. Prior to taking part in the research, the participants had passed some conversation courses. Also, they had studied English for three years in guidance school, and four years in high school. Besides, they had passed general English and English for specific purposes in universities. They were from different fields of study. The two groups were labeled as Group A (n= 35, control group) and Group B (n= 37, experimental group).

3.2. Materials

In order to measure the participants' reading proficiency, the two books of IELTS were used in the control group and the experimental group. Also two types of tasks, including outlining and answering embedded questions, were used in the experimental group. One sample of IELTS reading test was used as a pretest and posttest in this study.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

The two participating groups took a reading pre-test. A T-test was run on the scores obtained from the pretest. Later on, the teachers defined what reading proficiency tasks are. Next, the teachers introduced outlining and answering embedded question as reading tasks to the students of the experimental group.

Different types of outlining, used in this study, are Sentence outline, Topic outline, Outlines with prefixes, Bare outlines, Alphanumeric outlines, Thesis statements, Decimal

outline, and Integrated outline. After introducing the outlines to the experimental group, the teachers talked about the importance of using these outlines. The teachers also explained about embedded questions and the way to answer them. These reading strategies were taught and practiced by the participants of the experimental group for 8 sessions. However, no reading tasks were taught to the participants of the control group. Finally, a reading posttest was administered to the experimental and control groups.

3.4. Design and Data Analysis

The quasi-experimental design was used in this study. The dependent variable was the learners' reading ability, and the independent variable was use of reading processing tasks. Descriptive statistics, independent sample T-test were used in this study.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The pretest consisted of 50 multiple-choice items. One point was awarded for the learners who answered each item correctly. Therefore, the maximum score is 50 for each student. The pre-test was administered to make sure the participants in both groups were homogeneous in terms of their ability of the reading comprehension under investigation. Table 1 represents mean of both groups in the pretest.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the two Groups on Pre-test

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Control Group	35	14.09	3.82
Experimental Group	37	14.27	4.75

Figure 1 demonstrates the men score of the two groups on the pretest.

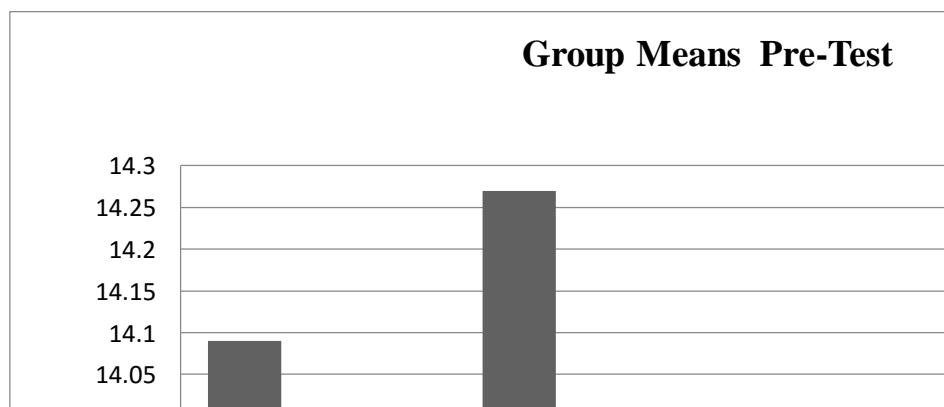


Figure 1. Group Means Pre-test

As can be seen from table 1, the mean of the control and experimental groups are 14.09 and 14.27, respectively. Hence, we can say that the two groups were homogeneous in

the beginning of the study. Firstly, the assumption of the homogeneity of variances between two groups of the participants was checked and satisfied via Levene's Test for Equality of Variances F (70) = .230, p=.569.

Table 2. Homogeneity of Variances

Homogeneity		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	
Groups		F.	Sig.
		.23	.569

Afterwards the independent samples T-test were conducted to see the potential significant differences in groups. Table 3 presents the results.

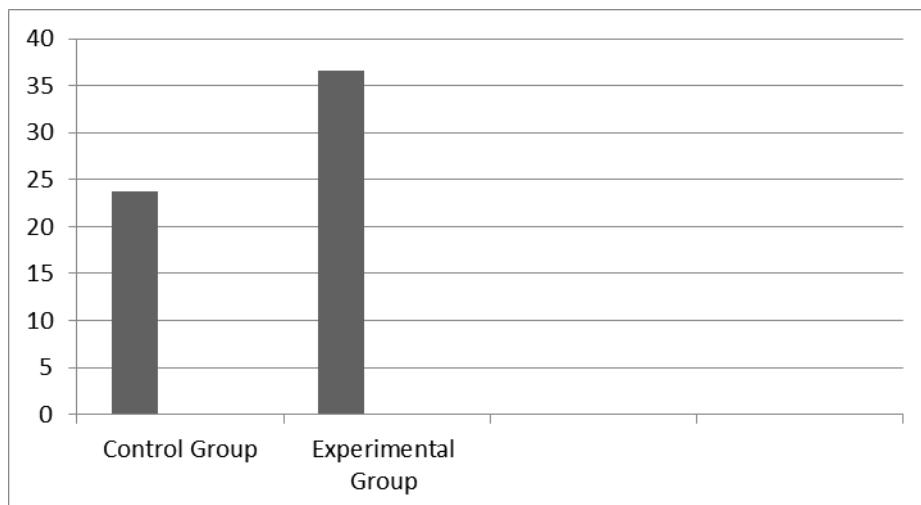
Table 3. Independent Samples T-Test on Pre-test

	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Equal variances Assumed	.013	.911	.485	70	.629	.08185
Equal variances not assumed			.486	69.9	.629	.08185

Table 3 indicates that there is no significant difference between two groups before teaching the reading tasks. The results of the post-tests, on the other hand, were put into SPSS, which appears below in Table 4.

Table 4. Students' Mean Scores on the Post-test

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Control Group	31	23.70	1.44207
Experimental Group	35	36.60	1.80196

**Figure 2. Group Means Post-test**

As can be seen in Table 4, the mean scores of the control and experimental groups are 23.70 and 36.60, respectively. In other words, the mean score of the experimental group was raised from pre-test to the post-test, which showed an improvement in reading comprehension. To determine whether reading task instruction significantly affected the learners' reading comprehension ability, an independent T-Test was run.

Table 5. Independent Samples T-Test on Post-test

	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	1.5	.818	-4.665	64	.000	-1.89032	.40525
Equal variances not assumed			-4.728	63.386	.000	-1.89032	.39982

Table 5 indicates that the experimental group performed significantly better than the control group. This means that the treatment (i.e. reading comprehension tasks) improved the students reading abilities significantly, so their scores differ significantly on the posttest.

Based on the results achieved from data analysis, the student who received reading tasks instruction significantly outperformed the students in the control group. The better performance of the students in the experimental group could be attributed to the cognitive process of reading comprehension, which is of significant importance. Reading comprehension is a skill that requires a lot of exercises, and the more the students get familiar with the reading tasks and strategies, the better they can process reading texts. These tasks have the potential to change the way language learners think. When language learners utilize such tasks, they can skim and scan more powerfully than those who are not familiar with these tasks and techniques.

5. CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The process of language learning is very complex, associated with many factors. Therefore, in the present study, the researchers investigated whether using reading comprehension tasks could significantly improve the students' reading comprehension ability or not. At the present study, 72 English students were selected. After receiving the treatment and using reading comprehension tasks, researchers compared the experimental participants to those who had received the traditional teaching process. Finally based on the statistical analysis, it became clear that those students who received the reading comprehension task performed significantly better than those in the control group.

This study was done due to the importance of reading in language learning process. It has its own contribution to language pedagogy. Firstly, it could increase students' comprehension in reading English texts. Secondly, it brings innovation in language instruction, specially reading instruction. Thirdly, having effective reading ability paves the way for successfully performing in different areas of language.

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