THE EFFECT OF SHORT STORIES ON READING COMPREHENSION ABILITY OF IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract

This study investigates the effect of employing short stories in EFL settings on reading comprehension ability of Iranian English language learners. To this aim, a group of 100 pre university students in Azad University of Mashhad took part in the study. They were divided into two groups of fifty students. During a course of 16 sessions of 1.5 hours, one group received instructional reading-based textbook called “A basic course in English for university students” which was usually used for pre-university students in this university. The other group received short stories as the texts to be covered in their classrooms during the course. At the end of the course, a reading comprehension test composed of both the reading passages similar to the pre-university text book and pieces of short stories as reading comprehension texts were given to the participants. It was followed by a questionnaire which was also administered to the participants to tap their personal feelings towards these two types of text. The results were analyzed using T-tests. It was found that the group which received short stories as their reading text out performed the other group.

Key words: Literature, short stories, reading comprehension ability

Introduction

Reading as an effective skill usually receives a special attention in Iran. This can be verified by examining high school books which are generally developed by focusing mainly on readings. Despite this fact, majority of Iranian EFL students are not that competent in reading comprehension and they usually admit having different difficulties in reading. In order to improve reading as an important skill, different researchers in different parts of the world, have determined the possible sources of the problems and have proposed different solutions to enhance students’ reading comprehension ability (Richards & Renanday, 2002).

In some accounts of reading, priority is given to the text and parts of texts (Wallace, 2002). When a person reads, he tries to relate the new information in the text to what is already known. (Rumelhart, 1980). Consequently, textual features play important role in activating prior knowledge which would lead to the comprehension. Some researchers claim that literature contains the type of text which would activate the background knowledge. This would facilitate reading comprehension ability of language learners. This study seeks to investigate the
effect of using short stories (as a part of literature) on the reading comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners.

Review of Related Literature

Due to the fact that reading is one of the most important skills, it is defined by Grellet (1981, p.7) as a medium of communication, the power to get information from the written language; it is also an active taught-arousing problem-solving process. In this process the reader must make an active contribution by drawing upon and using concurrently various abilities that he has acquired. It is also well documented in the literature that when a person reads, he tries to relate the new information in the text to what he already knows. The reader must make connection between what a text is about and external referential objects, ideas and people (Mikulecky, 1990). Therefore the reader processes the text in the light of established schemata: cognitive abilities, background knowledge, language knowledge, cultural values and beliefs. In addition usually the text provides new information to be processed: grapho-phonetic information, syntactic information, semantic information, illustrations and genre information (Mikulecky, 1990). All of the above factors could contribute to the fact that most of the EFL students face difficulties when reading the texts and consequently they cannot comprehend the texts completely (Bloom, 1956). As it was mentioned one way is to use literature to attract language learner’s interest, activate their background knowledge and improve their reading comprehension ability.

Teaching English through literature has become the fashionable phenomenon. On one hand, some believes that the teaching provide students with heavy, boring and somewhat redundant literature, which has no use to solve students’ problems. This provides no room for creativity. The student is taught literary terms and the meanings of words, and is finally asked to study the subject of literary piece, which is often considered a difficult task even for native speakers (Turker, 1991). The process of analysis, therefore, takes the form of repeating the material understanding mostly by memorization and at best, partly by rephrasing. As a results of these criticisms, Widdosson (1982) mentioned that although literature once played a significant role in language study, its prominence faded as linguistics became the focal point of language programs. Linguistics such as Topping (1968) argue that literature should be excluded from the foreign language curriculum because of its structural complexity, leak of conformity to standard grammatical rules, and remote control perspective (p.96). In other words, these linguists believe literature is not a useful stuff in language teaching settings and it is not of any value.

On the other hand, numerous teachers now believe that the heritage, whose fosters habits of "seeing feelingly on the one hand, and skeptically rationally on the other" (Oster, 1985, p. 75) should not be excluded from foreign language settings. They would be really beneficial for the students who are intellectually and emotionally, if not linguistically and culturally, ready to examine literary works (Turker, 1991, p.300).
Povey (1967) believes that the linguistic difficulty of literature has been exaggerated; readers do not require experiencing total comprehension to comprehend a text. In fact, literature with its extensive and connotative vocabulary and its complex syntax can develop LI language skills (Povey, 1967). Likewise the cultural benefits of studying literature can not be ignored, since literature reflects national culture and can consequently make students familiar with the aesthetic, moral and spiritual values of the nation and the rules of the social system (Adeyanju, 1978 cited in Turker, 1991). Meanwhile, Widdowson (1982) suggests that rather than limiting the focus of literary study to either language usage or cultural content, we should view literature as discourse and the study.

The role of literature in EFL Settings

Teaching foreign language literature to non-native-speaking university students is not always easy. In some cases, it provides a difficult situation for language learners to deal with. If such circumstances would not be controlled, it may be strange to believe that the students are learning anything of significance (Spack, 1985).

The idea of using short stories (sometimes accompanied by plays) may come as response to this situation. It helps students to deal with original texts, use the language creatively, improve their language level, loose themselves from the barriers of instructional texts, respond positively to the subject and learn some literature. In addition modern prose has been considered most appropriate at initial stages .It will be very difficult for students to approach Chaucer or Shakespeare at the beginning levels (Turker, 1991, p.301).

Maley (1989, p.12) lists some of the reasons for considering literature as a powerful resource in the language classroom .They are as follows:

1. Universality
2. Non-triviality
3. Personal Relevance
4. Variety
5. Interest
6. Economy and Suggestive Power
7. Ambiguity

Why use short stories?

There are many good reasons for using short stories in the classroom. Here are a few:

- Short stories are authentic .It makes students ready for the type of the language that students find outside the classrooms.
- Short story encourages interaction. Literary texts are often rich in multiple levels of meaning, and can be successfully used for discussions and communicating feelings or opinions.
- Short story and literature as a whole expands language awareness. Asking learners to examine sophisticated or non standard examples of language (which can occur in literary texts) makes them more aware of the norms of language use (Widdowson, 1975 as cited by Lazar 1993).
- By examining values in literary texts, teachers encourage learners to develop attitudes towards them. These values and attitudes relate to the world outside the classroom.
- Literature and as a result short stories are motivating. Literature has a high position in many cultures and countries. Therefore, students can experience a real sense of accomplishment at understanding a piece of literature. Also, literature is often more interesting than the texts found in course books.

**Research Questions**

1. Is there any significant difference between the effects of instructional texts and short stories on reading comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners?

2. Is there any significant difference between learners’ preferred type of text (instructional text vs. short stories) in EFL classrooms?

**Research Hypotheses**

HO1: There is no significant difference between the effects of instructional texts and short stories on reading comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners.

HO2: There is no significant difference between learners’ preferred type of text (instructional text vs. short stories) in EFL classrooms.

**Method**

**Participants**

A group of 100 pre university students in Islamic Azad University of Mashhad participated in this study. They were divided into four classes .In each class, there were 25 students. Their ages were between 18 – 30 years old and 36 of them were female and 61 male. Talking with them, the researcher found that none of them had ever been in an English speaking country. All learners have learned English as a foreign language in Iranian schools for about 7 years, three years at junior high school and then another four years at high schools. The participants did not display hesitation to take part in any of these groups. In addition, it is worth remarking that during this research the participants were really willing to help and they did their best in the process of data collection.
About 50 of these students took part in the regular classes conducted by the common pre-university course book (A basic course in English for university students written by Monshi Toussi, PhD), and 50 of them took part in classes where different short stories for pre-intermediate levels were used. I refer to the first group (with common instructional text books) as group A and the second group (conducted by the use of short stories) as group B.

Instructor

It should be mentioned that the instructor in all these classes were the same one. She was a PhD student of TEFL. She was 30 years old. She had a teaching experience of 10 years as an EAP and ESP instructor. She had already taught in Jahad English language institute, Mashad and Quchan Islamic Azad University and Tabaran non-governmental institute of higher education. She had also had 5 years of experience teaching reading module of IELTS Exam in Jahad English Language Institute.

Instruments

1. Text book: A basic course in English for university students written by Monshi Toussi, PhD (2008). This is a reading-based textbook organized around topics such as: English as the international language, Olympics, globalization, etc. As it is mentioned in the introductory part of the book, it is intended for pre-intermediate readers.
2. Short stories for pre-intermediate levels such as: Little Red Riding Hood, The Frog Prince, The Golden Goose, etc.

Since the two groups of textbook were written for pre-intermediate EFL learners, they were considered to be of the same level of difficulty.

3. Test: A final reading comprehension exam was used containing 10 multiple choice items. This exam includes both reading passages similar to the pre-university text book and pieces of short stories as reading comprehension texts.

The reading comprehension test was designed and developed by the researcher. To check the reliability of the test; it was pre-tested by its administration to a sample of students who took part in English for pre-university classes. The statistics displayed that the test was reliable (0.714) for the participants.

4. A questionnaire, taken from Berry (2000), containing the following two statements was also administered to the participants after reading one of the text types and answering the reading comprehension questions. The statements are as follows:

A) This text is very easy to understand.
B) This text uses the right kind of language for explaining the subject.

Using a five-point Likert scale to evaluate the responses of the subjects to the above statements, the students' reaction to the text in terms of its readability and appropriacy were also examined.

**Procedure**

The grade of all of the participants of this study in entrance exam of the university was below 30 percent, so they were homogeneous. We divided them randomly into two groups (four classes). They received the reading passages of different kinds during the course. The course took 16 sessions of 1.5 hours. During each two sessions, one unit composed of one instructional unit and reading comprehension activities were covered by the instructor in group A. Group B covered one short story and reading comprehension exercises during each two sessions. As a whole, 8 short stories were used during the course. It is worth mentioning that the two groups did not differ in the type of activities they received pre, while and after the reading text. The activities were mostly in the form of multiple choice items, fill in the blanks and discussion questions. At the end of the course, a final exam, a reading comprehension test composed of both the reading passages similar to the pre-university text book and pieces of short stories as reading comprehension texts were given to the participants. It was followed by a questionnaire to tap the personal feelings of the learners towards the two types of text.

**Data analysis**

In addition to descriptive data a comparison was made between the mean scores of each group. T-test was one of the statistical procedures which were used in this research.

**Table 1: Group A Descriptive statistics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Descriptive Statistics</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>ST: Score of Group A</td>
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</table>

**Table 2: Group B Descriptive statistics**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Variable</th>
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<tr>
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<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td>ST: Score of Group B</td>
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Table 3: Mean Comparison (T-test) of Group A & B

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Mean T</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>score</td>
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<td>18.313*</td>
<td>7.573*</td>
<td>95*</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
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</table>

Based on the results reported in the previous part, we found that, there was a significant difference (P=.00) between the performances of the two groups of participants on the two kinds of reading comprehension texts. Considering the descriptive statistics (Table 1&2), we found that group B outperformed group A.

Group B mean score was about 25 and group A mean score was about 18. The statistics indicated that Group B participant’s reading comprehension performance was better than the other group. According to these results, the null hypothesis (H01: There is no difference between the effects of using instructional texts and short stories on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL students.) was rejected.

A detailed comparison of these two groups displayed that; about 90 percent of participants’ grade in group B was higher than 20 and the maximum and minimum grades were 30 and 13. But the statistics demonstrated that just about 48 percent of participants’ grade in group A was higher than 20. Also the maximum and minimum grades were 27 and 3 which in comparison to group B are much lower. All of these results revealed that employing short stories in reading – based classes has a positive effect on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners.

In addition, the responses to the statements of the questionnaire were analyzed by using a five – point Likert scale. The mean for statements A and B were calculated according to the values assigned to each response (i.e. from 5 for "strongly agree", down to 0 for 'strongly disagree") and dividing by the number of subjects.

Table 4: Statement A: means Comparison (T-test) of two groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable (statement A)</th>
<th>Mean A</th>
<th>Mean T</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>18.313*</td>
<td>10.969*</td>
<td>95*</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
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</table>

Table 4 shows that there is a significant difference between the responses of the two groups on statement a (this text is very easy to understand). The mean of
answers of different groups to statement a shows that Group B mean is higher than the other group. It denotes that the participants of this group agreed more than the other group that their text was very easy to understand.

Table 5: Statement B: means Comparison (T-test) of two groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable (statement B)</th>
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<td>.063</td>
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Table 5 shows that there is not a significant difference between the performances of the two groups on statement b. It means that the two groups had more or less the same idea towards the statement of: "This text uses the right kind of language for explaining the subject".

The second hypothesis “there isn’t any significant difference between learners’ preferred type of text (instructional text vs. short stories) in EFL classrooms” was also rejected since there was a significant difference between participants considering the first statement. That is group B agreed more that this text was very easy to understand.

**Conclusion**

Therefore it could be concluded from the present study that employing short stories would increase reading comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners since it was found that the group which received short stories as their reading text out performed the other group.

However it is worth mentioning that when selecting the literary texts to be used in language classes, the language teacher should take into account needs, motivation, interests, cultural background and language level of the students. However, one main factor to take into account is whether a particular work is able to show the kind of personal involvement by arousing the learners’ interest and eliciting strong, positive reactions from them (Turker, 1991, p.302). Reading a literary text when it is meaningful and entertaining has a valuable effect upon the learners’ linguistic and extralinguistic knowledge. Choosing books relevant to the real-life experiences, emotions, or dreams of the learner is of great importance. Language difficulty has to be considered as well.

Collie & Slater (1990) believe that:

If the language of the literary work is simple, this may facilitate the comprehensibility of the literary text but is not in itself the most crucial
criterion. Interest, appeal, and relevance are also prominent. Enjoyment; a fresh insight into issues felt to be related to the heart of people's concerns; the pleasure of encountering one's own thoughts or situations exemplified clearly in a work of art; the other, equal pleasure of noticing those same thoughts, feelings, emotions, or situations presented by a completely new perspective: all these are motives helping learners to cope with the linguistic obstacles that might be considered too great in less involving material (p.6-7).

Finally, it could be also concluded that studying the attitudes of the EFL learners towards different types of texts and their effects on their teaching practices could lead to an interesting research. Meanwhile literature could be a rich resource to be considered by instructors and material developers in the field of language teaching.

REFERENCES

Monshi Toussi, M.T., & Sanati Far, M.S. (2008). A basic course in English for university students. Mashhad: Fedowsi University

