

Enhancing Reading Comprehension through Short Stories in Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract—Incorporating literature in language classes had many ups and down. In hay days of Grammar Translation Method, literature was the core source of foreign language learning. However by the emergence of Direct Method literature has been generally out of favor. In recent years literature came back to language classes. Literature has been discovered as a valuable and interesting material for improving students' language ability (Premawardhena, 2005). It has been found that if appropriate literary texts are chosen it would "be an effective tool for stimulating and achieving language learning and equipping learners with relevant linguistic and socio-cultural competences" (Sell, 2005, p. 92). This study tries to test using literary text in improving reading comprehension ability of Iranian foreign language learners. A group of 26 students majoring in English at the Islamic Azad University Babol Branch and Amol Branch has been sampled for the purpose of this study. The students were then divided into two groups—the control group and the experimental group. Both the groups were administered identical Pre-Test and Post-Test which consists of selected reading passage from different TOEFL books. Contrary to the previous researches the result of the present study shows that the experimental group did not show a significant improvement over the control group. So the using of literary texts seems unsatisfactory for Iranian EFL learners'.

Index Terms—literary text, reading ability, short story

I. INTRODUCTION

There was a great debate on the use of literature in language classes. The use of literature in language classes is not new. The use of literature in foreign languages dates back to nineteenth century where literature was one of the essential materials in Grammar Translation Method. Students were supposed to translate the literary texts to their native language. Learners only focused on the surface level such as the meaning of vocabulary or the grammatical structures. They do not care about the literary value of texts. However with the emergence of Audiolingual Method and its emphasize on spoken language, literature was no longer used in language classes (Erkaya, 2005). Sell (2005) also mentioned that communicative approaches reject the use of literature in language classes due to unrealistic nature of literary text. They claim literary text is not relevant to everyday life. Besides, these approaches emphasize on speaking and listening skills where literature "is a matter of reading writing, or writing to be read" (p. 87). In recent years, literature again turned back to foreign language classes. However the use of literature in language classes has really changed from that of Grammar Translation Method. Literary texts are no longer used for translation. In the past as Hismanoglu (2005) mentioned literature was ultimate aim of language teaching. Literature today is used as a source of authentic material in language classes. Hismanoglu (2005, p. 54) stated the use of literature in language classes in recent years as the following:

"The use of literature as a technique for teaching both basic language skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking) and language areas (i.e. vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation) is very popular within the field of foreign language learning and teaching nowadays. Moreover, in translation courses, many language teachers make their students translate literary texts like drama, poetry and short stories into the mother tongue".

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A. Advantages of Using Literature in Language Classes

Numerous studies have discussed the benefits of using literature in language classes. For example Maley (1989, as cited in Hismanoglu, 2005) lists the following reasons for using literature in the language classroom:

1. Universality
2. Non-triviality
3. Personal Relevance
4. Variety

5. Interest
6. Economy and Suggestive Power
7. Ambiguity

Parkinson and Reid Thomas (2000, as cited in Sell, 2005) also made a list of ten reasons for using literature in the language classroom:

1. Cultural enrichment
2. Linguistic model
3. Mental training
4. Extension of linguistic competence
5. Authenticity
6. Memorability
7. Rhythmic resource
8. Motivating material
9. Open to interpretation
10. Convenience

Although scholars named many advantages for using literature in foreign language teaching, but as Chiang (2007) mentioned there are four major reasons for incorporating literature into English language teaching. First literature is used as an authentic source in language classes. As Hismanoglu (2005) mentioned literary texts are primarily written for native speakers, they are not written for pedagogical purposes. Sell (2005) criticized standard FL textbooks for abnormal and non-authentic language. She also mentioned that textbook topics are inappropriate to the foreign language learners. They rarely address the real issues that learners will face them in real-life. Textbooks are full of fiction and unreal materials. Second studying literature can provide learners with the opportunity to practice the language skills. Teaching literature helps improving all four skills. According to Hismanoglu (2005) in comprehending literary text students should be familiar with both syntactic structure and discourse. Literary text needs greater effort for comprehending. So it will help learners to become more creative. McKay (2001) argues that literary texts can be ideal for all the four language skills. In reading comprehension tasks literary texts can stimulate interest and closer reading of the texts, as well as integrating the four skills during reading practice. He also maintains that literature can improve listening skills. For example as a listening task an unheard short story can be read aloud to the students and then teacher can ask students questions about comprehending the story. Stern (2001) points out that literature can be used as a model and subject matter for writing tasks. He also referred to literature as an ideal source for speaking skills by generating discussions about different elements of literary texts such as characters, plot and themes. Third, literature can improve cultural awareness. As Sell (2005, p.90) mentioned "teaching literature provides learners with a truly cultural competence, equipping them with culturally-apposite pragmatic and socio-psychological components around which to build effective identities which will enable their socialization in the target culture and enhance the effectiveness with which they participate in that culture". He also mentioned that literary text not only can make language learners familiar with English culture, but also by using famous literary text from other languages it can also increase awareness of different cultures. Fourth, literature increase interaction. Chiang (2007, p. 170) mentioned "Literary texts are often rich is multiple layers of meaning, and can be effectively mined for discussions. While literature has the potential to be a tool of great use in L2 classrooms, its potential can be best realized when readers are encouraged to develop personal responses to the reading from multiple aspects and to share them in discussions".

B. Benefits of Using Short Stories

Various advantages have also been proposed for the use of short stories in the language classes. Short story like other literary texts can raise cultural awareness, linguistic awareness, motivation, and etc. Short stories is claimed to improve all four skills. Murdoch (2002) indicates that "short stories can, if selected and exploited appropriately, provide quality text content which will greatly enhance ELT courses for learners at intermediate levels of proficiency" (p. 9). Lao and Krashen (2000) also conducted a survey in Hong Kong found that the group who read literary texts showed improvement in vocabulary and reading. According to Erkaya (2005) reading literary text can lead student to be critical thinker. He points out that when students read they interact with the text and interpret what they read and this analysis makes them to be more creative and critical. Young (1996) discussed two advantages of using short stories for raising critical thinking in students as the following: "because they are entertaining, students' pervasive apprehension is reduced, and they learn from the beginning that critical thinking is natural, familiar, and sometimes even fun. Second, the stories put issues of critical thinking in an easily remembered context" (p. 90). According to Erkaya (2005) short stories motivate students to continue reading so that they can solve the problem. And since it is interesting for students they would not easily get frustrated. Arigol (2001) as cited in Hismanoglu, (2005) listed the following advantages for pedagogical advantages of short stories over other literary texts:

- Short stories makes the students' reading task easier because it is simple and short
- Give learners a better view of other people and other cultures
- Requires more attention and analysis
- offers a fictional and interesting world

- helps students to be more creative and raise the critical thinking skills
- raise cultural awareness,
- reduce students anxiety and helps them feel more relax
- is good for multicultural contexts because of its universal language

C. Reading Comprehension

Effective reading is essential factor of success in learning another language. Reading is the most important instrument for academic settings (Anderson, 1994). Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) believe that the ability to read in a second language is the most important way for autonomous language learning. Alptekin (2006, p. 494) defined reading:

“as an interaction of the reader’s text-based and knowledge-based processes. In processing texts, readers combine literal comprehension, based on lower-level cognitive processes of reading such as lexical access and syntactic parsing, with inferential comprehension, based on higher-level cognitive processes such as the text base of comprehension (to understand what the text says) and the situation model of interpretation (to understand what it is about)”.

Traditionally as Chastain (1988) mentioned reading was viewed as a passive skills because readers do not produce anything; however readers are in constant interaction with reading passage and their background knowledge. Traditional approaches to reading deal with the meaning of words as isolated concepts and have nothing to do with the social dimension of reading.

The view towards teaching reading comprehension has dramatically changed in the past decades. Uso-Juan and Martinez-Flor (2006) discussed the following significant views regarding teaching reading comprehension. In 1960’s where environmentalist ideas was dominated decoding skills were emphasized, and learners’ reading skills were only limited to making sense of printed words. With the emergence of Chomskyan theories which explain language learning on a cognitive basis, reading skills were not limited to the decoding skills. Reading comprehension research focused on reading as a thinking process where the reader reconstructs the intended meaning of the author. Readers are not treated as passive one, but they are cognitively engaged in processing the author’s intended meaning. However interactivist view not only pay attention to the role of cognition in comprehending a reading passage, but also believed that readers construct the meaning of the texts within a culture. So learners with different socio-cultural beliefs would interpret a text differently.

There is a general belief that L2 reading is related to L1 reading. Reading ability that is learned in L1 is transferable to L2 (Williams, 2006). Cummins (1991, as cited in Cubukcu, 2008) introduced the idea of “interdependence” in second language acquisition. He argued that if a threshold level is gained in L2 the learner can easily transfer his L1 reading ability to the new learning context. In fact he believes L2 learning ability is depended on L1 learning ability. However, as Williams (2006) mentioned the dependence of L2 reading on L1 reading can easily be rejected by referring to minority groups or immigrants who learned to read in their L2 for the first time. So, poor reading ability cannot be related to L1 bad reading habits. Researchers believe differences in reading comprehension are due to two important factors: L2 language knowledge and metacognitive awareness of reading strategies (Guo and Roehring, 2011). Many studies have shown the importance of L2 vocabulary knowledge in improving reading comprehension ability in foreign language learners (Qian, 1999; 2002). L2 syntactic awareness is also claimed to affect reading comprehension at two levels: low-level syntactic awareness and high-level syntactic awareness. Low-level syntactic awareness refers to the ability to understand the grammatical structures of language within sentences. High-level syntactic awareness refers to greater conscious awareness of language which encompasses two different abilities: (1) the ability to identify and formulate the rules of syntax and (2) the ability to control knowledge of syntactic rules (Layton et al., 1998). Studies on metacognition and reading comprehension reveal the strong relation between the use of metacognition and reading comprehension. In a study conducted by Sen (2009) in turkey revealed that the reading skills of the students who used metacognitive strategies are improved to a greater extent than those who did not used these strategies. Metacognition according to Sen (2009) refers to “awareness in the individual of his/her systematic thinking about his/her own learning process” (p. 2301). According to Bernhardt and Kamil (1995) metacognitive awareness is transferrable from L1 to L2 reading. As mentioned by Pressley et al. (1995) metacognitive strategies enable readers to pay attention to controlling, monitoring, and evaluating the reading process. Cubukco (2008) referred to different studies which demonstrated the use of metacognitive strategies in expert readers. In fact metacognitive strategies seem to be an essential factor in successful comprehension.

D. Literature and Reading

Reading is one of the most important skills for mastery of a foreign language. Some scholars believe that ability to read is the prerequisite for autonomous learning (Celce-Murcia et al. 1995). Most learners in EFL contexts have little or no opportunity to contact with native speakers, so reading literary text will give them the opportunity to have a better interaction with foreign culture and people. Besides literary texts are too amusing that keeps learners to continue reading and the more learners read the more input they receive. In fact literary texts can be used as a valid and authentic source for increasing the amount of comprehensible input students receive. According to Krashen (1982) students should be provided with enough comprehensible input which is also interesting so that reduces students’ anxiety. And since literature is rarely used for pedagogical purposes it can be a good authentic source for language learners. Sage (1987 as cited in Hismanoglu, 2005) called the use of short stories as a useful technique in language classes. He pointed

out that since short stories are short; it helps both teachers and students to easily cover it. Besides, since stories are about universal problem, it may relate to students' own situation, in this case students would definitely get more involved in the story and try to put more time and effort to comprehend it. In addition, as mentioned by Hismanoglu (2005) class discussions about the story will help students to think critically.

III. RESEARCH QUESTION

One of main objective of the textbooks in Iran according to Dahmardeh (2009) is to teach reading comprehension. Although Iranian students have to study English for about seven years before entering university they have lots of problem in comprehending reading passages. Based on the literature review, it is believed that incorporating literature could improve reading skills in the intermediate stages of language learning. Due to the facts above and the advantages of using short stories for improving reading ability the following research question has been conducted:

Can using short stories improve the Iranian EFL learners' reading ability?

IV. METHOD

A. Subjects

26 female, adult, Persian speaking university students, majoring in English at the Islamic Azad University, Babol Branch and Amol Branch participated in this study. These students were all studying English as a foreign language, their ages ranged between 19 to 24 years. There were two groups of students: Group A (experimental group), and group B (control group).

B. Instrument

An identical Pre-tests which consists of selected reading passage from different TOEFL books were given to both groups. Students of group A (the experimental group) were taught the book "Discovering Fiction" by Judith Kay and Rosemary Gelshenen. The book is a collection of simple short stories. The materials used for the control group were selected from different reading books, internet, magazine, etc. At the end of the semester both groups were given an identical Post-Tests which consists of five selected reading passages from different TOEFL books.

C. Procedure

A group of 26 students majoring in English at the Islamic Azad University Babol Branch and Amol Branch has been sampled for the purpose of this study. The students were then divided into two groups – the control group and the experimental group. Both the groups were administered an identical Pre-Test which showed a uniformity in the results with very little variation that shows the two groups are have similar reading ability. Both the groups were instructed by one of the researcher for a full semester in the reading courses designed for them. The materials used for the control group were selected from different reading books, internet, magazine, etc. and the experimental group was using short stories. At the end of the semester both groups were given an identical Post-Tests which consists of five selected reading passage from different TOEFL books.

D. Design

It should be noted that this study is a descriptive one. According to Best and Kahn (2006) argue that descriptive research seek to find answers to "analysis of past events or the already existing conditions" (p. 133). It describes and interprets what exist. Because the researchers had no control over what has already happened to the subjects of the present study an Ex-Post Facto design was needed.

V. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

An independent t-test is run to compare the mean scores of the experimental group, and control group on the pretest of reading test in order to probe their reading ability prior to the administration of the treatment. The t-observed value is .097 (Table 1). This amount of t-value is lower than the critical value of 2.06 at 24 degrees of freedom.

TABLE 1:
INDEPENDENT T-TEST PRETEST OF READING COMPREHENSION BY GROUPS

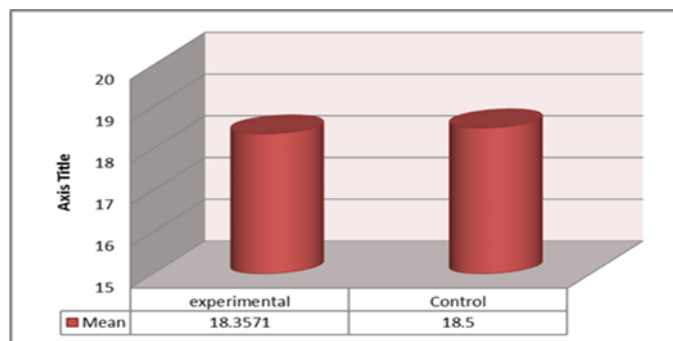
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.060	.809	.097	24	.924	-.14286	1.47243	-3.18180	2.89609
Equal variances not assumed			.096	21.943	.924	-.14286	1.48992	-3.23323	2.94752

Based on these results it can be concluded that there was not any significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups' on the pretest of reading comprehension. Thus it can be concluded that the two groups enjoyed the same levels of reading ability before the administration of the treatment. Table 2 displays the mean scores for the experimental ($M = 18.370$) and control ($M = 18.50$) groups on the pretest of reading.

TABLE 2:
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS PRETEST OF READING

Reading	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	14	18.3571	3.47756	.92942
Control	12	18.5000	4.03395	1.16450

Graph 1 displays the mean scores of the two groups on the pretest of reading.



Graph 1: Pretest of Reading by Groups

The experimental and control groups enjoy homogenous variances on the pretest of reading. As displayed in Table 1, the probability associated with the Levene's F of .06 is .80. Since the probability is higher than the significance level of .05, it can be concluded that the experimental and control groups enjoy homogenous variances. That is why the first row of Table 1; "Equal variances assumed" is reported.

In order to test the research question that whether using short stories can enrich Iranian EFL learners' reading ability an independent t-test was run to compare the mean scores of the two groups on the posttest.

In order to probe the effect of short stories on the improvement of the reading ability of the students an independent t-test is run to compare the mean scores of the two groups on the posttest of reading. The t-observed value is 1.08 (Table 3). This amount of t-value is lower than the critical value of 2.06 at 23 degrees of freedom.

TABLE 3:
INDEPENDENT T-TEST POSTTEST OF READING COMPREHENSION BY GROUPS

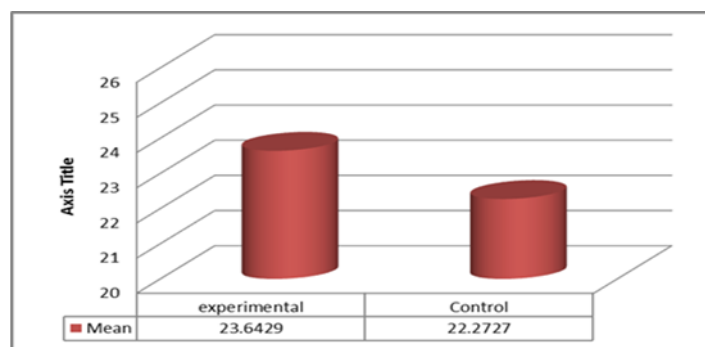
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.613	.217	1.086	23	.289	1.37013	1.26130	-1.23907	3.97933
Equal variances not assumed			1.122	22.996	.273	1.37013	1.22100	-1.15573	3.89599

Based on these results it can be concluded that there is not any significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups' on the posttest of reading comprehension. Thus the null-hypothesis as using short stories cannot enrich Iranian EFL learners' reading ability is supported. Table 4 displays the mean scores for the experimental ($M = 23.64$) and control ($M = 22.27$) groups on the pretest of reading.

TABLE 4:
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS POSTTEST OF READING

Reading	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	14	23.6429	3.45537	.92349
Control	11	22.2727	2.64919	.79876

Graph 2 displays the mean scores of the two groups on the posttest of reading.



Graph 2: Posttest of Reading by Groups

The experimental and control groups enjoy homogenous variances on the posttest of reading. As displayed in Table 3, the probability associated with the Levene's F of 1.61 is .23. Since the probability is higher than the significance level of .05, it can be concluded that the experimental and control groups enjoy homogenous variances. That is why the first row of Table 3; "Equal variances assumed" is reported.

VI. CONCLUSION AND LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

There is a long debate on the use of literature in language classes. Although many scholars advocate use of literature in foreign language teaching, incorporating literary texts in language classes is not without problem. For instance Thiongo (1986, as cited in Sell 2005) mentioned that by using famous English literary text and exposing learners to the English culture, we are imposing a kind of "cultural imperialism" toward our learners. Hismanoglu (2005) also mentioned the following problems which language teachers faced in teaching literature:

"First, there are very few pedagogically-designed appropriate materials that can be used by language teachers in a language classroom. Second, there is a lack of preparation in the area of literature teaching in TESL/TEFL programs. Third, there is the absence of clear-cut objectives defining the role of literature in ESL /EFL. Many instructors try to include literature in their classroom, but lack the background and training in that field" (p.65).

This study found that all respondents showed improvement after the reading course. However the result of the present study shows that the control group and experimental group did not show a significant difference in their posttest, that is, the experimental and control groups enjoy homogenous variances. As it is obvious different factors can affect learners' reading ability. Literary texts as Sell (2005) mentioned usually require a greater amount of inferencing than other texts. As Hajimeibodi (2008) mentioned comprehending a text is largely influenced by students' background knowledge. For comprehending a text learners should be able to understand the meaning of sentence both at the surface level and discourse level. So learners' should be familiar with different reading strategies. As Cubukcu, (2008) mentioned poor readers are less aware of effective strategies. For successful comprehending the reader should use many strategies to recreate the author's intended meaning. Other factors such as student's language proficiency, interest, sex, age, etc is also important in comprehending a text (Hismanoglu, 2005)

The results of the research found no satisfactory reasons for teaching literature in Iranian context. However since the size of the sample was small, the results cannot be generalized to Iranian context. The research was conducted only in two university classes. Therefore, the generalizability of the results is also limited by the small scale of the study. Other variables such as the cultural and educational background of the students can affect the findings of this study. Further research is recommended to validate the findings of the current study.

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