

TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION THROUGH SHORT STORIES IN ADVANCE CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

Currently many schools are concerned about how to address the needs of students who have difficulty reading and understanding extended text. This study examined the effects of short story instruction on 20 advanced-level tenth-grade students to show if the method had an impact on student reading comprehension. . To serve this purpose, an instrument was used in this study: a reading comprehension test. We have 2 groups. In one, students were exposed to a method of reading instruction over ten weeks. The other just get the traditional way of teaching reading comprehension .The data obtained from the instrument was analyzed using t- tests. The result showed that students in experimental group did better on the comprehension test than those in the control group.

Key words: Short stories, reading comprehension, learner-centered

INTRODUCTION

Reading is not just a single skill but a combination of many skills and processes in which the readers interact with printed words and texts for content and pleasure. Through reading, one can teach writing, speaking, vocabulary items, grammar, spelling and other language aspects. There are some essential goals of reading such as enabling students to understand the world, growing their interests, and finding solutions to their own problems. 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. As Richard and Rodgers stated “The goal of foreign language study was to learn a language to read its literature or to benefit from the mental discipline and intellectual development that result from foreign language study” . Students would translate literary texts from the second/foreign language to their native language. When this method was replaced by the other methods focused on structures and vocabulary, literature was no longer used. Thus, neither the Direct Method nor the Audio lingual Method utilized literature to teach second/foreign languages. In the seventies, methods such as the Community Language Learning, Suggestopedia, the Silent Way, Total Physical Response, and the Natural Approach did not utilize literature to teach second/foreign languages, and neither did the Notional-Functional Syllabus. For the past two decades or so, literature has been used for teaching of EFL/ ESL; however, it was not used as a way of the Grammar Translation method. Teachers get literature to reinforce the skills of language. Scher (1976) affirms that with students at the beginning and intermediate levels, instructors can use literary texts for “language practice, reading comprehension, and possible aesthetic appreciation” (Muyskens, 1983, p. 413).

Many researchers and educators have made their attempts to find more efficient ways of enabling the learners to become more proficient readers. Susan Louise Stern (1985), Yorio (1971), Mckinely (1974), Walsleben (1975), Gorman (1979), and Povey (1979) have all believed the effectiveness of the implementation of literature in the language class.

So it can be seen that content knowledge is the most important factor in the learning process of reading comprehension. So for a good source of content knowledge it can be mentioned literary texts, and of course the short story. Using the short story to enhance students' reading proficiency has another advantage. In the short story, the readers try to draw implications. Therefore, it makes students sensitive to the hidden and implied meaning. While in reading non-literary material students learn to read the lines and decode the meaning, in reading short stories they learn to read between the lines.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Reading Comprehension

Comprehension occurs in the transaction between the reader and the text (Kucer, 2001; Rosenblatt, 1978). In reading comprehension, the reader is supposed to draw information from a text and then combine it with information he has (Celle- Murcia 1996). Reading in second language is a complex and for reading comprehension learners must combine the skills to understand the text. There is another definition according to Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics as below:

Different types of reading comprehension are often distinguished, according to the reader's purposes in reading and the type of reading used. The following are commonly referred to:

- a. Literal comprehension: reading in order to understand, remember, or recall the information explicitly contained in a passage.
- b. Informational comprehension: reading in order to find information which is not explicitly stated in a passage, using the reader's experience and intuition and by inferring.
- c. Critical or evaluative comprehension: reading in order to compare information in a passage with the reader's own knowledge and values.
- d. Appreciative comprehension: reading in order to gain an emotional or other kind of valued response from a passage. (p. 306)

Chastain (1988) called reading is a receptive skill in that reader is receiving a message from a writer. The reading goal is to read for meaning or to recreate the writer's meaning. Reading to improve pronunciation, practice grammatical forms, and study vocabulary do not constitute reading at all because reading involves comprehension. When readers do not comprehend, they are not reading (p. 217). Chastain in that book also mentioned "the ultimate goal of reading comprehension must include other factors that convert a laborious problem-solving task in to viable skill. Language students have to learn to deal with linguistic material over which they have to control. They must learn to interact with the reading in productive fashion so as to determine meaning even when some of the words, ending, and patterns are not immediately meaningful. The goal is to reach a level at which they have confidence to overcome temporary or partial laps of understanding and to continue reading until they have understood the writer's general meaning (p. 218)

Benefit of Short Stories

Some materials such as textbook are needed to enhance reading skills, such as word analysis, structural analysis, dictionary use, and learning the meaning of words from the context. Short stories could be beneficial since literature has the quality of being universal and short stories will allow the teacher to deal with human problem. Arigol (2001 as cited in Hismanoglu, 2012 in Khatib& Nasrollahi) listed the following advantages for pedagogical advantages of short stories over other literary texts:

1. 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
2. Requires more attention and analysis helps students to be more creative and raise the critical thinking skills
3. raise cultural awareness,
4. reduce students anxiety and helps them feel more relax
5. is good for multicultural contexts because of its universal language
6. offers a fictional and interesting world

There are several benefits of short stories including motivational, cultural and higher-order thinking benefits. Nevertheless, before instructors look at these benefits in more details, they need to be reminded of one benefit that all instructors should take advantage of, reinforcement of skills (Odilea Rocha Erkaya). Instructors using short story in their classes, utilized all four skills to their learners.

A great number of studies have discussed the benefits of using literature in language classes. For example Parkinson and Reid Thomas (2000, as cited in Sell, 2012 in Khatib& Nasrollahi) 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

Maley (1989, as cited in Hismanoglu, 2005, 2012 in Khatib& Nasrollahi) 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

In their survey in Hong Kong, Lao and Krashen (2000) also found that the group who read literary texts had improvement in vocabulary and reading. 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) (as cited in Khatib& Nasrollahi, 2012). 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). 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

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to stress on the effects of short stories over reading comprehension. Proficient readers do not read word by word to get the meaning, but they comprehend the text as a whole. Two main purposes are involved. The first one is to teach the student to enhance a particular attitude and to activate the student's knowledge through review what is known about the topic. It is also considered to check their own understanding, monitor their own reading comprehension, summarize the major ideas, paraphrase the text they have learnt, expand on new ideas and words, and unite new information and previous one. Furthermore it is considered to help students not to translate the text word for word, train the students to identify the type of the text, get the main idea, and understand title.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

This question was mentioned in this survey:

Is there any significant difference in reading comprehension through short stories or traditional way?

The null hypotheses of the study states that there is a significant relationship between these 2 ways in teaching reading comprehension, and our group with teaching reading comprehension through short stories will get the best results in comprehension test.

METHOD

According to the hypothesis of this study, it is believed that learning English through short story would enhance reading comprehension. To examine the above research question the following corresponding null hypothesis was formulated:

There is no significant difference between students' reading comprehension by teaching through short story or not in the advanced stages of language learning.

Following experiment was designed to investigate the hypothesis:

40 adult, Persian speaking advanced-level, in Kish institute, participated in this study. These students were all studying English as a foreign language, their ages ranged between 18 to 24 years. There were two groups of students: group A, and group B in their advanced level.

Instrument

In each group that is, group A and B there were 20 students. 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 "Modern Short Stories in English " by Robert J. Dixson. 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.

Procedures

A group of 40 students in Advanced level 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.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

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 4.693 (Table 1). This amount of t-value is higher than the critical value of 2.02 at 40 degrees of freedom.

Table 1. Independent T-Test Posttest of Reading Comprehension by Groups

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
reading	Equal variances assumed	19.098	.000	4.693	38	.000	4.05000	.86291	2.30314	5.79686
	Equal variances not assumed			4.693	27.490	.000	4.05000	.86291	2.28094	5.81906

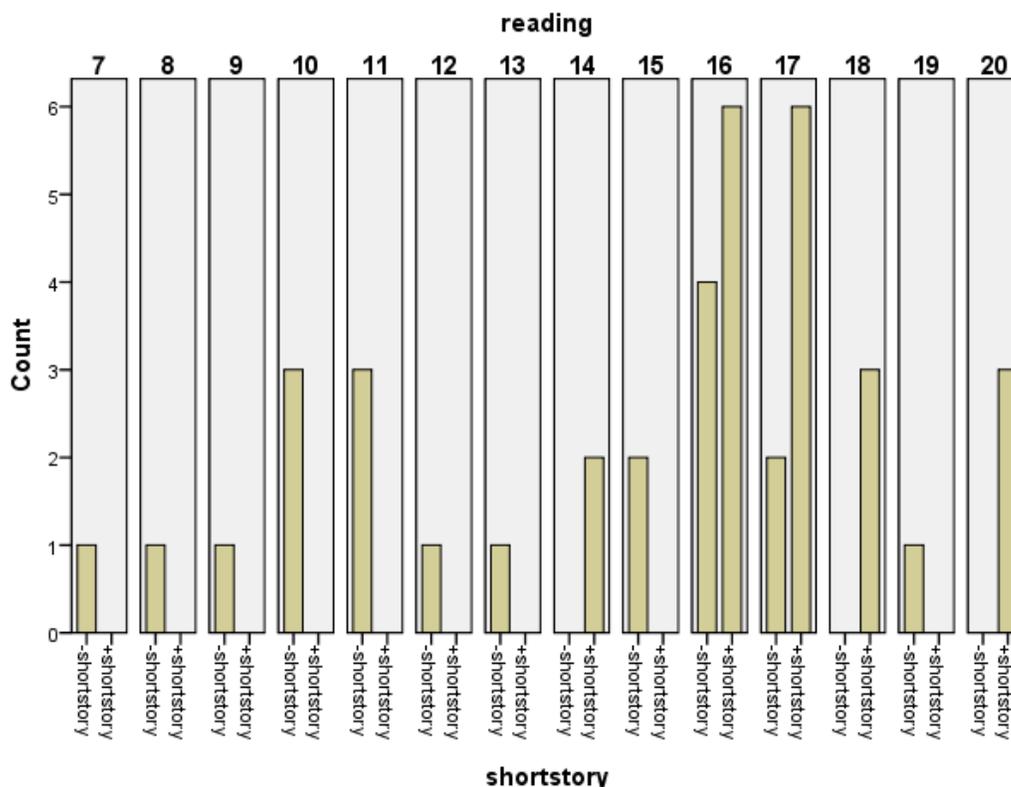
Based on these results it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups' on the posttest of reading

comprehension. Thus the null-hypothesis as using short stories cannot enrich Iranian EFL learners' reading ability is rejected. Table 2 displays the mean scores for the experimental (M = 17.0000) and control (M = 12.9500) groups on the pretest of reading.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics Posttest of Reading

Group Statistics					Std. Error
	short story	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean
reading	+shortstory	20	17.0000	1.68585	.37697
	-shortstory	20	12.9500	3.47131	.77621

Following graph displays the mean scores of the two groups on the posttest of reading:



Graph: Posttest of Reading by Groups

The experimental and control groups enjoy homogenous variances on the posttest of reading. As displayed in Table 1, the probability associated with the Levene's F of 19.098 is 38. 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 2 "Equal variances assumed" is reported.

CONCLUSION

The ability to understand a text is based not only on the reader's linguistic knowledge, but also on general knowledge of the world and the extent to which that knowledge is activated during processing. The results of all ESL/EFL studies and the view of reading comprehension as an interactive process between the reader and the text [44] lead to several implications for the teachers. Many experts support use of literature in foreign language teaching, but it can be seen that literary texts in language classes are not without problem. Hismanoglu (2005) found this problem that: "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 there is lack the background and training in that field" (p.65).

This study found that all respondents in a group that the researchers thought reading comprehension through short story showed improvement after the reading course and the result of the present study shows that the control group and experimental group show a significant difference in their posttest.

The results of the research found sufficient reasons for teaching short story in Iranian reading comprehension classroom. However since the size of the sample was small, the results cannot be generalized to all Iranian context. Other variables such as the cultural and educational background, gender, age 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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