Directed Reading-Thinking Activity and Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

Reading comprehension is one of the essential skills for learning in every language and in Iranian educational system, there seems a need to make some revisions in teaching reading comprehension. In an attempt to address this problem, this research set out to utilize Directed Reading –Thinking Activity (coined by Stauffer, 1969) as a teaching comprehension model which was expected to enhance students' reading comprehension ability of graded readings. To do this end, 50 intermediate students from Zabansara Institute were randomly assigned to two groups (one control and one experimental) each consisting of 25 participants. Drawing on a mixed-methods design, the two groups were compared in pre-test and post-test in the quantitative phase. In the qualitative stage, fifteen students from experimental group were interviewed on the effect of implementing DRTA based setting on their comprehension of graded readings (The implemented readings in this study were narrative texts). The findings of the study revealed that DRTA had significant effect on participants' reading comprehension of graded reading. The study provides some pedagogical implications for EFL teachers and students, and suggests some possible avenues for further studies as well.

Keywords: directed reading-thinking activity, graded reading, reading comprehension, narrative texts

Introduction

English Language Teaching (ELT) teachers face a set of issues that are largely specific to ELT. The role of an ELT teacher is unique; therefore, ELT teachers should apply the most effective methods in their teaching for many reasons: as an example, learners need to be instructed in a way that they can build their confidence and competence in English language. Moreover, learners must lead through the steps that foster their independence. Languages generally are taught and even assessed surrounding four skills and skills are divided into two major skills as *receptive* and *productive* skills. In English language, like other languages, four language skills are contributed and required by learners in learning English. Harmer (2007) introduces reading as a useful language acquisition. Furthermore, he states1 reading has a positive effect on learners' vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation. Clearly, reading is the most important academic language skill for second or foreign language students. In the past 15 years, many have argued about it as the most important academic skill. In line with this, good materials for reading motivate learners, in a sense that they may present good topics for discussion and fascinating passages for reading. In general, readings are divided into *extensive* and *intensive* readings. For the former, the purpose of reading is pleasure and is somewhere out of classroom. With regard to the intensive reading, on the other hand, detailed focused reading is determined as a frame.

In majority of Iranian English classes, learners are indulged in reading variety of reading books for both intensive and extensive purposes. When the course goals have been decided, the next task facing the teacher is to select appropriate materials. Clearly, graded readings are the best materials to fulfill this aim. Graded readings or progressive readings are one of those teaching materials that could be used by teachers in any class. Arman (2009) explains graded reading as a staged process, and a form of literature that enables students to manage reading in a short period of time. Hill (2008) defines it as "books written for learners of English using limited lexis and syntax" (p.185). As Carrier (1982) state a graded reading is written with the purpose of controlled language which means that language must be controlled in lexical and structural choices.

Majority of learners and particularly readers may take it for granted that intended meaning of author or writer lies in the words which are printed on the

page, so it can be understood that reading is no more than a process in which the meanings are obtained from the source. Comprehension of these words is highly interactive, thus the readers use variety of skills in this process when they encounter a text and furthermore comprehension involves decoding. Since reading is one of those four language skills that are contributed and required by learners in English, it is very essential for teachers and instructors to train their learners to take active role in comprehension process. Essentially, learners are expected to read various kinds of texts to get information or knowledge on their own. Nuttall (1996, as cited in Richard, 2005) highlights " Reading is like an infection disease: it is caught not taught." What is understood from this quotation is that reading and comprehending of a text highly depends on the reader and thus individuals should comprehend the message that is intended by the author.

With no intention to undervalue or ignore other skills, the researchers of current study consider the reading skill significant for many reasons. In this respect, Wood, et al. (1988) claim that a great number of English learners in EFL context might not use English in their speaking. Similarly, they still use their reading skill and as Harrison (2003) states reading not only increases life skill, but also goes much deeper and enables us to think, which can affect the development of imagination, exerts a powerful influence on the emotional and moral as well as verbal tasks. Reading a text for many people means just reading books, however reading can be anything from a few words, one sentence, or may be thousands of comprehending sentences. So, people deal with reading in their everyday lives such as labels, instructions and so on. The second reason for opting reading skill is that reading is such a receptive skill that Richards and Renandya (2002) claim that good written text is a good model for writing. Therefore, it is believed that reading the written text can boost writing skill too, and written text can be used as a model that enhances the process of writing. Reading is also a way to inform about past, present and future. Specifically, reading is an activity which the reader may get information or extend his or her existing knowledge. Understanding and comprehending reading materials are crucial since reading is an essential skill at the very beginning of learning any subject.

Comprehension of texts in classroom makes the learners be active and have insight through the passage. In addition, it can be helpful for enhancing language, grammar, and vocabulary knowledge. There are some components of reading that readers should concentrate on while reading like identifying new vocabularies, references, main ideas, factual information, making inferences, and in depth understanding the text will develop in subsequent sections. Although a multitude of skills are brought into practice when reading is in progress but skills are sometimes categorized into *decoding* and *comprehension*. Hoover and Gough (1990) express decoding as a process through the reader translates symbols on the page to language. Since learners are facing different difficulties in their reading comprehension, there should be some methods and strategies that would ease the reading process and assist the learners in their reading.

Although reading has been gaining importance in recent years and graded readings are produced with the aim of adapting the level of difficulty with each grade in this connection, learners still find it specifically graded reading a troublesome issue. Comprehension in this case is prominent but learners read a text without comprehending it since they may consider reading a task with a limited concern. So, it becomes a major problem for teachers on teaching every text of reading in English in their classes and graded readings are not exception in this case.

In order to enhance learners' ability in reading comprehension, teachers should be more aware of their strategies and choose the most proper strategy in their teaching. Graded readings for learners are still problematic to comprehend. Many students have difficulty in comprehending graded reading texts. Some problems may root in lack of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. Students often find it difficult to understand the text and almost they cannot find supporting details of the text, even they often misunderstand some information presented in the text. In the case of this study, the participants have not learned to guess meaning using the context or to employ their background knowledge related to the text or they were not active in process of the reading. Consequently, they could not answer the reading comprehension questions or were poor in answering reading comprehension questions.

In recent years, interactive process of reading as what was mentioned above is gaining importance. Hedge (2001) described this term as a dynamic

relationship between text and reader, which in this the reader struggles with the text to get meaning; this struggle leads the reader to interact with the text and become involved in and become more active. Goodman (1976) called this process as "psycholinguistic guessing game".

Based on the discussion above, the researchers proposed (DRTA), developed by Stauffer & Hammond (1969), as a strategy for teaching reading. Ross et. al. (1984) state, "DRTA improves learners' comprehension in the case of interacting material while the reading DRTA promotes active comprehension based upon the idea that learners can use their own experiences to comprehend the message of the author" (p.311). Besides, DRTA is known as a metacognitive strategy that activates readers to pay attention to their purpose of reading; in other words, set a clear goal for their reading text and thinking. In this process, the role of the teacher is to prescribe how the learners will interact with the text.

In response to the reading skill learners are expected to be able to understand the text, comprehend and be able to answer the questions regarding to the text. Still there are some factors such as lack of vocabulary knowledge and lack of getting proper information from the text that may discourage learners from reading. Considering the importance of reading comprehension, it is vital to overcome the problems that hinder reading comprehension. In a broader perspective, there seems need to a teaching strategy for reading which improves the learning, facilitates reading, and equally invites learners to actively participate in reading as needed in any English classroom. In line with this need, DRTA can be suggested as a strategy of teaching reading which helps learners be active and stimulate their background knowledge about the text. Further, it provides the use of reading strategies like reviewing words before reading and guessing. DRTA has three main steps that keeps learners engaged in the process of reading namely before, while, and after reading. It is also used as a controlled activity in its all stages

The other factor that should be noticed in reading ability is using a process that designs reading in a three-phase procedure involving pre-reading, while, and post reading. Williams (1984) states DRTA is designed to assist students in setting a purpose for reading; making, justifying, and verifying predictions; and coming to conclusion. DRTA encourages students to make prediction while

they are reading. After reading segments of a text, students stop, confirm or revise previous predictions, and make new predictions about what they will read next. So in first step, which is prediction involves students before reading, next stage as reading and justifying are corresponded with while reading, reflecting and coming to conclusion is a process like post reading. In an attempt to operationalize the proposed strategy, the following two research questions were formulated to serve the aim of the current study:

Q1: Does DRTA affect intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension (graded reading)?

Q2: How do the steps of DRTA influence the EFL learners' reading comprehension (graded reading)?

Method

Participants

The current study was conducted by selecting 50 intermediate EFL students from among the students attending Zabansara English Language Institute. Most of the students were taught by one of the researchers of the study, studying American English File 2 as their course book, Developing Tactics for Listening, Active Reading 2 and a graded reading for each term. The students had about a two-year experience of learning English. The students were chosen to attend in intermediate level based on the placement test they have already taken. So, they were randomly chosen from intermediate level. The researchers selected an experimental group and a control group in intermediate level. The study utilized a comprehension test for homogenizing them and determining their level of proficiency before commencing the study.

The administration of the research followed the schedule of English in intermediate class of AEC8 (American English Course) in the first and second semester of spring 2016. According to the schedule, English was taught 3 hours a week, 90 minutes each session, every Monday and Wednesday.

Instruments and Materials

The following instruments were utilized in the procedure of data collection:

Reading Comprehension Test: This test is used at the very beginning of research procedure for both groups of learners to identify their level of reading comprehension and for homogenizing both groups in the same level for

reading. The test was selected from Michigan Comprehension Test for intermediate level with B1 difficulty level.

Pre-Test and Post-Test: These tests (pre- test and post-test) were retrieved from Oxford library site, Oxford Book Worms series library for "*Great Expectations*" and "*Sense and Sensibility*" stage 5. These tests intended to get the data about the students' reading comprehension of graded reading for "*Great Expectations*" and "*Sense and Sensibility*". Each of these tests consisted 40 items of multiple-choices tests. Before conducting the test, validity and reliability of test were measured as well. In this study, the reliability of Cronbach's alpha was 0.804 for post-test and for pre-test was 0.892.

Interview: One of the researchers interviewed fifteen intermediate EFL students of experimental group after implementation of DRTA. Convenience sampling was undertaken and the participants who were willing to be interviewed, were selected. Each student was interviewed for about 4 minutes and the data obtained were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Materials: The instructional materials used in this study were two narrative graded reading books. The first one was "*Great Expectation*" stage 5 from the series of Oxford BookWorms (OBW) and the second material for graded reading was "*Sense and Sensibility*" stage 5 from the series of Oxford BookWorms (OBW) as well.

Procedure

Prior to conducting the research, the consent of the head master of Zabansara Language Institute was obtained. Then, 50 students, whose homogeneity had already been assured using Michigan Reading Comprehension Test with B1 difficulty level, were randomly assigned into two control and experimental groups, each group consisting of 25 participants. The experimental and the control groups were pre-tested, in the last week of first term in spring. The participants were assigned in one of the study conditions: one representing the experimental group taught by the directed reading thinking activity and the other representing the control group taught by the conventional strategy (summarizing and translating) for 17 sessions twice a week. The treatment was conducted 14 times for 35 minutes each and every treatment was done on a certain chapter of Sense and Sensibility stage 5 as a graded reading.

The control group students were exposed to conventional method of reading in which summary telling and translating every word were used for graded readings whereas, the ex-group learners were exposed to DRTA method of reading which is explained as follow: As the teacher of experimental group, DRTA strategy was used by one of the researchers in intermediate class. The procedures of using DRTA technique is that first certain chapter of graded reading of stage 5 was chosen (Sense and Sensibility). Then students read the title of the text. They began to brainstorm a list of ideas that came to their minds when they saw and heard about the title or topic, they wrote down those ideas on the board which was a way to combine and renovate new collocations of word usage. This stage helped to activate students' prior knowledge. While doing the task, students made predictions about what they read in the text. They used all available clues, such as picture, charts, table of contents. In the next step, students read a section of the text. The teacher, determined stopping points when the students were reading to themselves. Later on, students confirmed or revised their prior prediction and made new predictions. Students were encouraged to explain what the text is then they explained what made them to make new predictions. Finally, students combined what they have read and the importance of it to their lives.

After the treatment the researchers administered the post-test similar to the procedures followed in pre-test by one of the researchers to all students in both the experimental and control groups. Both the pre- and post-tests were administered to the students in the two groups to measure their reading comprehension in English (Graded Reading).

In the last phase of the study, fifteen students of the experimental group were interviewed after implementation of DRTA for about 4 minutes for each when the results of post-test were clear. Data were audio-recorded and then transcribed (See Appendix I).

Design

This investigation adopted the mixed- methods approach. Two comparison groups were selected, differing on the independent variable (DRTA) and were compared on the dependent variable (reading comprehension of graded reading).

Results

In this section, the obtained data were analyzed by means of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 16 (SPSS, 16) to get the results. The paired sample t-test formula was used to analyze the data in this research for quantitative phase. It was used to know if the differences between pre-test and post-test were significant. To examine whether the difference between the means of pre-test and post-test was statistically significant, the t-value obtained should be consulted with the critical value in the t-test.

Table 1
Paired Samples Statistics for Control Group

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-Test	24.16	25	6.162	-2.149	24	.612
Post -Test	25.04	25	5.601			

Our obtained sig (2 tailed) for 0.05 level is .612 and since it is more than 0.05; therefore, the null hypothesis was verified. That is, there is no significance difference. So, the conventional method casts no effect on the population before and after its administration. The illustration is presented in following figure:
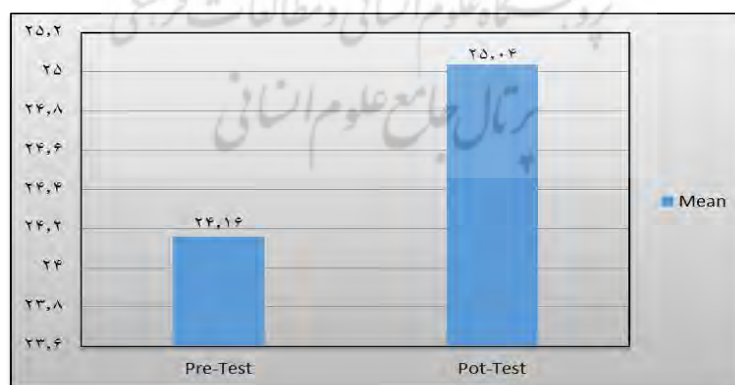

Figure 1. Pre-Test and Post-Test Results in Control Group

As it can be seen in table 2, our t value of (-13.24) with 24 df is significant at the .05 level. Therefore, the t-test supports our claim that the instruction actually helped our students, thus our null hypothesis was rejected.

Table 2
Paired Samples Statistics for Experimental Group

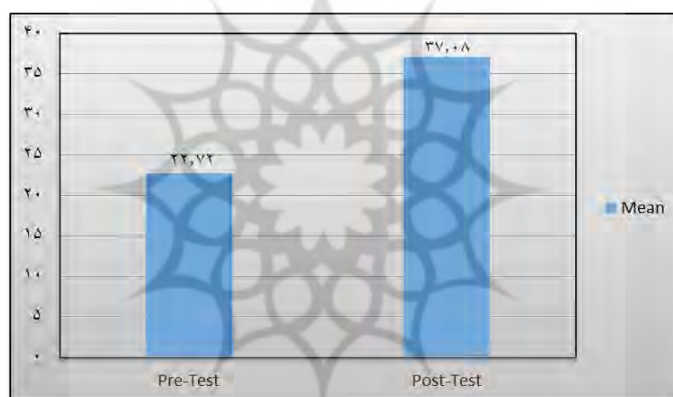|	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-Test	22.72	25	5.77	-13.24	24	.000
Post -Test	37.08	25	2.08			

Figure 2. Results of Pre-Test and Post-Test in Experimental Group

In relation to implementing DRTA as a method of graded reading teaching, fifteen participants were interviewed to capture how the DRTA influences the EFL learners' reading comprehension of graded reading. Based on the results of the interview some important points were found. When the researcher asked the students whether DRTA strategy was effective or not for improving their reading comprehension of graded reading, majority of them agreed it was effective because it helped them comprehend the story easily.

Based on the reflection above, it can be concluded that DRTA can be considered as an effective solution to tackle reading comprehension of graded readings. After the implementation of DRTA, the students could

understand the texts better such as finding the general and specific information from the text. This, in turn, helped them answer comprehension questions of post-test. It may occur since they had discussed the texts together during the activity of DRTA resulting in their increased understanding of the texts. This finding is supported and verified by the interview transcripts (Appendix I).

Discussion

The present study investigated the effect of using DRTA on improving participants' reading comprehension of graded reading. The results of the independent samples *t*-test for the post-test showed a significant difference between the reading comprehension of graded reading of participants in experimental and control groups. So, the findings are in line with the findings of the studies by Riley (2006), Stahl (2008) and Al Odwan (2012) who found that the use of DRTA can improve students' reading comprehension ability of graded reading. The outperformance of the participants in experimental group was indicative of the effectiveness of DRTA to reading comprehension of graded reading. The helpfulness of DRTA is also corroborated by the findings of Tancock (1994) used the DRTA in combination with pre-reading activities such as generating questions and post-reading activities such as clarifying, and investigated their effect on the reading comprehension of children with reading problems. Results revealed that there was a significant improvement in their reading skills. Backing up the effectiveness of DRTA, Erliana (2011), conducted a study to describe how DRTA can improve reading comprehension. The data were taken from observation, field notes, questionnaire, and achievement test. The result indicated that the DRTA not only improves students' comprehension but also increases their motivation in learning.

The findings of the study underlined the benefits of DRTA to improve participants' reading comprehension. After implementing DRTA along with its accompanying actions, the researchers found changes in learning process of reading and in the students' reading comprehension ability of graded reading texts. For instance, Pre-teaching vocabulary was found to be effective in introducing new vocabulary items necessary to understanding a given text. During the research, the teacher either used pictures or demonstrated the

students the meaning of a word using gestures to help them learn the meaning of the new vocabulary items. When the students had mastered vocabulary needed to understand a given text, their comprehension became better.

Interestingly, the implementation of DRTA with four steps, predicting, reading, proving/disproving predictions, and reflecting was also effective to improve the students' reading comprehension ability and engage them in learning activities. DRTA helps students set reading purposes by making predictions, read more actively and enthusiastically, and remember more information from what they have read. It explains improvements in students' reading comprehension ability.

In this research, the implementation of DRTA, especially during the predicting stage, taught the students that in order to comprehend an English text, summarizing and translating every single word are not sole strategies to achieve comprehension. Instead, they should also use their background knowledge to predict the content of the text (Bower & Kawaguchi, 2011). Here, predictions served as their reading purposes. Setting reading purposes is believed to be one of the strategies to improve comprehension (Brown, 2001). The next stage of DRTA after predicting is reading. In this stage, the students used information they found after reading one section of a text to prove/ disprove predictions in the next stage. This sequence was repeated until the students finished reading the whole sections of a text.

In qualitative section of this study, the researchers interviewed fifteen participants and based on the elicited responses the following themes were extracted including improvement in students' prediction and creativity-checking their understanding- challenging students- teacher modeled reading. Based on the elicited themes, it can be assumed that DRTA can be considered as an effective solution to improve participants' reading comprehension of graded readings. After the implementation of DRTA, the students could understand the texts better such as finding the general and specific information from the text. This in turn helped them answer comprehension questions of post-test considerably. It may occur since they had discussed the texts together during the activity of DRTA resulting in their increased understanding of the texts. This finding is verified by transcripts of interviews. Based on the students' responses, by implementing DRTA technique, language instructors can teach the students different aspects of reading, such as identifying the main

idea, specific information, inferences, references and vocabulary easily. This is because while applying this technique, the teacher can implement the aspects one by one implicitly. So, it can be more efficient for teachers because they do not need to explain more about the aspects.

The study provided some pedagogical implications for EFL teachers and students, and suggested some possible avenues for further studies as well. According to the findings, by implementing DRTA in class, EFL teachers can assist their students to empower their reading comprehension in terms of graded reading. In summary, implementing DRTA enabled students improve their prediction, creativity and self-assessment of their comprehension.

In line with the result of the data analyses and discussion the researchers draw the conclusions as follows:

1. DRTA technique shows the difference in students' reading comprehension achievement. Which can be concluded from their scores of pre-test and post-test. From both tests, it was found that the students' score improved. And, the improvement showed that there is a difference from the pre-test to the post- test results.

2. The implementation of DRTA with four steps, predicting, reading, proving or disproving predictions, reflecting was effective to improve the students' reading comprehension ability and engaged them in learning activity. The implementation of DRTA especially during the predicting stage taught the students that to comprehend an English text, summarizing and translating every single word composing the text are not sole strategies to achieve comprehension. Instead, they may also use their background knowledge to predict the content of the text. Predictions served as their reading purposes which are believed to be one of the strategies to improve comprehension. Besides, the implementation of DRTA also helped the students to monitor their comprehension through the predicting and prediction proving/ disproving sequence. Through this sequence, the students hypothesized and proved/ disproved predictions that they made on their own which eventually resulted in their improved comprehension.

3. The implementation of DRTA technique can increase the students' achievement of reading comprehension in graded readings especially, narrative texts. It can be seen from the students' mean score of pre-test and post-test

which increased several points. It happens because the students got the treatment before the post-test. In addition, the implementation of DRTA makes the students interested in reading activity and finally it influences their scores and also their motivation to study.

4. DRTA technique is one of the successful instructional techniques that can be used by the teachers as their effective means for teaching reading comprehension. By using this technique, the students can be enthusiastic to read the text. They will be able to use their critical thinking and share their idea. This technique can be used by the teacher to motivate their students to read the text, because the students will not only be an active reader, but they can also participate actively in telling their ideas.

5. Implementing DRTA through learning in a group improves students' cooperation. Working in a group is not an easy thing especially in learning process. It happens because the students have different ideas. It will be difficult to unite their idea. But in DRTA technique, these activities can be more fun because the students can discuss their ideas and share all their ideas to create a good story. It can be more communicative tasks and provide students with new concepts, ideas, suggestions, style of thinking as well as opinions.

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Appendix I

1. Teacher: Do you ever find yourself making predictions about what you read? If so when?

   Student*: Yes. While I was reading, I could make some assumptions about the next steps in the story. For example; when Pip wanted to go London, his sister died and I was able to predict some of the events because of poor condition in their family.*

2. Teacher: Before you started reading, did you guess what the passage was going to be about? Why did you make the guess?

   Student*: Yes*. According to previous chapters and the pictures presented in the book I could make accurate guesses.

4. Teacher: What did you think of the content of the passage after reading?

   Student*: The content of the story was so interesting in a way that it made me make some guesses in which some of them came true and specially at the end of the story when I expected Biddy to get marry pip, she chose Joe.

5. Teacher: Did you ask yourself what was your inference of passage before reading?

   Student*: No. I usually try not to make any inferences about stories.

6. Teacher: Can you describe the most important ideas of what you just you read to another person?

   Student*: Yes, I can. When I read a story, I can keep the most important ideas in my mind and I can recite them to other people.

7. Teacher: Did you wonder about any part which needed reading how?

   Student: Yes, very frequently it happened. For example, when it was not clear what sort of relationship was Estella and Miss Havisham and there was confused and even I had to read that part three times.

8. Teacher: Did you find any part which needed rereading how?

   Student*: Yes. In some cases, for better understanding I had to go over a section more than two times but making predictions helped me to have a picture of story in my mind in which helped me get the ideas better.

Biodata

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