The Effect of Online Short Story Reading on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' L2 Reading Comprehension Ability

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Abstract

This study investigated the effects of reading online and paper-based (conventional) short stories on reading comprehension of intermediate Iranian EFL learners. Sixty participants who were studying in Jahad Daneshgahi, in Isfahan, Iran, were assigned to two homogeneous groups according to the result of an Oxford Placement Test (OPT). Students whose scores were within one standard deviation above and below the mean score were selected as participants of the study. Then, both groups were given a pretest, the result of which assured the homogeneity of the groups with regard to their reading comprehension. Twenty short stories were selected and given to the learners in the online group in a language lab from ESL Fast website. The second group of learners read the same passages in a print-based form. Finally, at the end of the course and after a week, participants sat for the post-test. Findings revealed that there was a significant effect of using online instructions on their reading comprehension performance. Moreover, it was found that the online group outperformed the print-baesd reading group.

Key words: online short story, paper-based reading, reading comprehension

INTRODUCTION

Recently, schools have been interested in using modern technology, particularly PCs and Internet connection. The increasing significance of this technology for education is testified by the fact that the Internet and its use by pupils and teachers has become the subject of a number of studies. In fact, many instructors are trying to improve their teaching through different and innovative language instructions as well as using technology. As a result, the Internet connection and online instruction play an important role in learning; especially in second and foreign languages (European Commission; 2006). As Nanjappa and Grant (2003) argued, there is a relationship between technology and constructivism and, "the implementation of each one benefiting the other" (p. 1). According to them, both constructivism and technology create a learning

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environment where learners make new knowledge by interacting with each other. Constructivists emphasized that students should get motivated in the learning process, as Airasian and Walsh (1997) called it "lighting the flame" (p. 446).

Accordingly, in order to give an appropriate motivation to students and achieve an improvement in their second language leaning, teachers utilize different instructional materials, like online activities which have been reported to have positive effects on learners' attitude (Chen, 2004; Garcia and Arias, 2000).In other words, the use of web-based technologies for second language instruction has become a critical issue of interest for language learning (Warschauer et al., 2000; Zhao & Lai, 2008).

Moreover, the integration of Internet technology and language learning curriculum has shifted the focus from a teacher-centered classroom to a learner-centered environment which empowers the learner through control over lesson content and the learning process (Fotos & Browne, 2004). Using this technology not only facilitates the learning processes (Gorjian, 2008), but also holds other great potentialities for language learning. One of these potentialities is the ability to present information in different formats using graphics, sound, text, and video with links to other chunks of information through using web-based language learning (WBLL) activities (Cummins, 2008b).

In addition, technology is a new and quick instructional method in language learning and teaching. It includes a wide range of activities and initiatives in materials development, pedagogical practice, and research. Online activities encourage students to move forward, provided the teacher is able to link students to do their best in language learning.

As we know one of the basic needs of EFL learners is to access to the meaning which can be improved through a variety of media available. It can shift the EFL learners' simple observation to the complex prediction, description and generalization. Also, using online activities can increase EFL learners' retention. The present study aimed to investigate the effect of online short story reading on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grammar-translation teachers prepare reading themselves by seeding new vocabulary and grammatical rules in the passage and students read those materials to learn. Audio-lingual proponents follow a behaviorist learning model by reinforcing language habits and students read passages containing the practiced structures to fix those structures in their minds. The communicative approach shifts the primary responsibility for meaning from the text itself to the readers as it conceives reading as an active mental process which greatly expands the reader's role. Thus, language learners now know that they have a much greater range of possible procedures to follow prior to, during, and after the reading assignment to read more effectively.

In the last decades, foreign language teaching and learning have been dominated by communicative language teaching methods and interactionism theories. According to

this approach which has become paramount in teaching instructions and courseware products, communicative approach is known as the best tool in developing the learners' second language communicative skill. Although it seems obvious that reading should play an important role within such a language curriculum, the training of this skill is still often neglected within second language classroom instruction. Most of the time both instructors and learners feel bored after an hour practicing in reading section. As a result, both teachers and students like to skip reading and they think it is not an important skill among the other skills.

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has the significances of the communicative approach and it has the main role in the establishment of an atmosphere in which learners learn the language through meaningful interaction and the exchange of genuine information can be a self-directed, self-assessing, and self-monitoring activity, in which the learner can take a more active role. Student-centered classes motivate learners to perform better and use their abilities in learning. In Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), reading contains authentic real life purposes. There is an audio file; which are presented by native speakers at a special speed, for online texts that students can listen it. Therefore, it is easy for learners to comprehend the passage appropriately, in different level. One of the most important aspects of using online instructions in the classroom is about decreasing the anxiety of students as well as the fact that, here is no peer pressure which inhibits them from language learning easily.

Many EFL learners have major problems in reading comprehension. The most problematic aspect in reading comprehension is that both teachers and students do not pay enough attention to reading. Another reason can be the books which are not as attractive as online instructions. CALL solved this problem by using different motion pictures and native speaker's voice with which students would work more enthusiastically.

However, the application of web-based materials and online courses is not yet commonplace in Iranian EFL classrooms due to inadequate number of PCs, lack of high speed internet, lack of administrative support or even the qualifications of our instructors as they have not been taught through these applications before. Bearing in mind the literature, the potential effects of online instruction on Iranian EFL learners' achievement appear to be under-researched. This study aimed to fill this gap by answering the following research questions:

- Does online short story reading improve Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension?
- Is there any significant difference between online and print-based short story reading with regard to their influence on EFL learners' reading comprehension?

METHOD

Participants

This study was conducted with a random sample of 100 (male and female) EFL learners whose age ranged between18 and 25. They were given an Oxford Placement Test (OPT). In order to make sure about their homogeneity, the researchers selected participants whose score range fell one standard deviation above and below the mean (i.e. mean±1). This being so, 60 students who met this criterion were chosen to be participants of the study and they were divided randomly into two experimental groups which involved 30 students each.

Procedure and Instrument

The present study was carried out over a period of around twelve weeks. As noted earlier, 60 homogeneous learners were randomly assigned to two groups. One week prior to the first treatment session, all of the participants took a pre-test which consisted of items designed to measure their reading proficiency level. Then, twenty short stories were presented in ten weeks to both groups; each week consisted of two teaching sessions.

After the pre-test and for the treatment phase of the study, participants in both groups attended twenty sessions of instruction and were taught different short stories. Both groups read the same short stories. As for print-based reading group, the conventional reading skill techniques were applied as follow: at the beginning of each session, the instructor brought up some questions about the topic of the short story and students gave their ideas. The teacher did pre-reading stage in order to draw students' attention to the story. After that, students read each short story in a print form themselves to comprehend it. They could guess the meaning of unknown words themselves or use printed dictionaries. Finally, a week after the treatment, they responded to the post-test reading comprehension questions.

However, the other group was given online short stories in a language lab. At first, participants read the short story online. In order to get the meaning of unknown words, they could use online dictionaries prepared for them on the systems. They read the whole content of the stories online while they were monitored by the instructor. Finally, a researcher-made reading comprehension post-test was run a week after the end of treatment.

Data analysis

In scoring the pre-test and the post-test, each correct answer was given a single point, and all the correct answers added up to a total sum. There was no negative point for the wrong answers or for the items not answered at all.

RESULTS

In order to answer the first research question, a paired sample t-test run. The claim of the t-test was to compare the obtained mean scores of the participants in the online reading group on the pretest and posttest to demonstrate the effectiveness of the treatment. Table 1 and 2 show the descriptive statistics and the result of paired samples t-test for the online group, respectively.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the online group

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	13.6750	30	1.47413	.26914
Posttest	16.7500	30	1.85114	.33797

Table 2: paired samples t-test results for the online group

| | Paired Differences | | | | | | | |
| | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
				Lower	Upper			
Pretest - Posttest	-3.075	1.714	.31307	-3.71529	-2.43471	-9.822	29	.000

As it can be seen, there was an increase in the reading comprehension scores of the online group from pretest (M=13.67, SD=1.47) to posttest (M=16.75, SD=1.85). Moreover, the t-test results revealed that there is a significant difference between the performance of the participants on the pretest and posttest (.000<0.05). Consequently, online reading technique was found to exert a significant effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension scores.

Furthermore, this study aimed to investigate the difference between online and print-based short story reading with regard to their influence on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension. In order to compare the performance of the two groups on the reading post-test, an independent samples t-test was run, the results of which are presented in Table 3 and 4.

As can be seen in the two tables below, there was a significant difference between the post-test scores for the online group (M=15.20, SD=1.75) and print-based group (M=12.64, SD=1.67; t (58) =8.25, sig= .000, two-tailed). Thus, it can be claimed that the online outperformed the conventional reading group.

Table 3: Independent samples t-test Descriptive statistics

	Posttest	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score	Online posttest	30	15.2083	1.75318	.32009
	Printed posttest	30	12.6417	1.67214	.30529

Table 4: Independent samples t-test results

		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
Score	Equal variances assumed	.725	.398	8.253	58	.000	4.28333	.51900	3.24445	5.32222
	Equal variances not assumed			8.253	56.692	.000	4.28333	.51900	3.24394	5.32273

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The first research question of this study asked whether using online short story exerts a significant influence on reading comprehension by Iranian intermediate EFL learners. As the results indicate that online reading technique can have a significantly positive effect on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension scores.

The second research question asked whether there is a significant difference between online and print-based short story reading with regard to the influence these two approaches to teaching exert on reading comprehension by Iranian intermediate EFL learners. The results of data analysis showed that the students in the online group performed significantly better than those in the print-based group. A possible explanation for better performance of the online group comes from the work of Nanjappa and Grant (2003) who believed that using online instructions can have a positive effect on their learning.

All the instructors try to use innovative method to give students motivation and achieve an improvement in their second language learning. According to Chen (2004) and Garcia and Arias (2000), online activities can be an attractive way to encourage learners in better language learning. Moreover, in line with the findings of the present study, Gorjian (2008) argued that using technology not only facilitate learning but also has a potentialities to present information in different formats in language learning.

Accordingly and in line with the findings of prior studies (Chen, 2004), it can be claimed that online activities, as a new medium for instruction, can increase learners' motivation and improve their performance. Bearing the findings of this study in mind, it is recommended that online instructions websites and activities be applied more frequently by language teachers. In fact, using online materials and activities (at least as a supplement to classroom instruction) should be extended to other language skills and other levels of proficiency.

It seems necessary for materials developers and language instructors to consider the usefulness of online instructions more than before and invest more in designing and

applying such online instructional materials. Apparently, online materials are beginning to overcome the shortcomings of the traditional methodology and language use adopted in teaching reading through textbooks.

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