The Impact of Retelling Technique on Reading Comprehension of Iranian High School Students

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ABSTRACT: The present study examined the impact of the retelling technique on English reading comprehension for 70 first grades of high school students from Iran. The study was conducted on intermediate female students. To achieve the purpose of the study, the researcher chose a sample of 85 subjects, which were reduced to 70homogenous students. Then, the subjects were randomly assigned to one experimental and one control groups. Subjects in these groups were given a pretest at the beginning of the semester. In the following sessions, the students in the experimental group were trained in using retelling strategy along with seven texts, while the students in the control group had conventional techniques with the same texts. The results of data which analyzed by using t-test indicated a significant difference between these two groups. The results show that retelling significantly improved the participants’ text comprehension at the level of overall meaning. It also helped them to learn general concepts during reading and to draw connections between pieces of information introduced at different parts of the text.

Keywords: Reading comprehension, Retelling, Reading strategy, Conventional teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Reading without comprehension or understanding is not reading. Reading is a skill which is highly valued by students and teachers. Chastain (1988) considers reading as a receptive skill in which the reader is receiving a message from writer. “Good reading texts also provide good models for writing, and provide opportunities to introduce new topics, to stimulate discussion, and to study language.” (Richards& Renandya, 2002, p.273). The primary purpose of reading is comprehension. As Pardo (2004) mentioned comprehension is a process in which readers build meaning by communicating with text and information in the text.

Unfortunately, many second or foreign language teachers assume the students have mastered reading skills previously. In fact, during the reading courses, the students are tested rather than be trained. Obviously, due to the overwhelming cognitive load of comprehending the text, most students are confronted a lot of difficulties in deciphering the sentences (De Quitos, 2008). Therefore, they should be trained those reading strategies that prepare them to overcome those short coming which may affect their performance during the comprehension process. There are different methods for teaching reading comprehension. Reading strategies can be defined as “plans for solving problems encountered in constructing meaning” (Duffy, 1993, p.232). This study focuses on retelling strategy in oral format, and it attempts to understand the effect of this technique on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL students.

Retelling is an oral activity in which a reader explains the main ideas of the text also, a powerful classroom tool for building comprehension (Kissner, 2006). In this technique a reader retells the story of reading by using his or her own words. Morrow’s research (1986) concludes that retelling is one of the few activities that can be both an assessment and instructional technique. Retelling is a useful technique for checking students’ understanding. Unlike answering specific question after reading, retelling helps readers to process what they have read by organizing and explaining it to others. Teachers who use retellings for comprehension assessment find that they can check student progress effectively and completely, and can do it in less time than traditional methods. (Gambrell, Pfeiffer, Wilson, 1985; Reutzel & Cooter, 2007).
Literature Review

The ultimate goal of reading is to gain meaning and understanding from text. However, according to the 2000 National Reading Panel Report, reading comprehension is a skill that many children fail to achieve (National Reading Panel, 2000). Reading comprehension is the process of making meaning from text. The goal, therefore, is to gain an overall understanding of what is described in the text rather than to obtain meaning from isolated words or sentences (Woolley, 2011).

Reading strategies are tools that teachers use to help students learn to read and comprehend what they are reading. There are hundreds of reading strategies available to help students with their comprehension at different levels and with different types of text (Prado & Plourde, 2005).

Retelling is one of the best and most efficient strategies for discovering whether a child understands what he or she has read (Gambrell, Pfeiffer, & Wilson, 1985; Reutzel & Cooter, 2007). According to Morrow (1988), “Because retelling can indicate a reader’s or listener’s assimilation and reconstruction of text information, it can reflect comprehension etc., and allows a reader or listener to structure a response according to personal and individual interpretations of the text”.

Some researchers examined the effects of programs that applied retelling and found that there were significant differences in the effects of the retelling technique on kindergarten and elementary school students. For example, when retelling followed listening to stories, kindergarten children significantly improved their ability to recall more story elements, enhanced their sense of story structure, and increased the complexity of their oral language (Morrow, 1985, 1986, 1993; Pellegrini & Galad, 1982). French (1988) used story retelling as an instructional procedure in the language arts program for approximately eight years and found that elementary school students retained important information after retelling. In addition, retelling significantly increased elementary school students’ comprehension of text-based propositions (Gambrell, Koskinen, & Kapinus, 1991; Gambrell, Pfeiffer, & Wilson, 1985; Rose, Cundick, & Higbee, 1984). In a comparative study, Gambrell, Koskinen, and Kapinus (1991) pointed out that both skilled and less skilled readers who engaged in retelling did better on comprehension tasks after four rounds of retelling practice. More recently, retelling has been used in the United States in the field of content reading. The overall results indicate that retelling increases elementary students’ reading comprehension in terms of both the quantity and quality of what is understood (Richardson & Morgan, 2003). Taken together, these earlier studies suggest that engaging students in retelling what they have read improve reading comprehension of narrative texts. In the field of ESL/EFL, retelling is recommended as an instructional tool to increase students’ composition ability (Stewig, 1985), improve learners’ oral proficiency (Hurley, 1986), and enhance ESL students’ writing skills (Hu, 1995).

Having observed the previous studies related to the effectiveness of retelling strategy, it is confirmed that a few of them have been done in EFL/ESL contexts. The most significant research in this field is that one done by Lin (2010).

This study examined the impact of the retelling technique on English reading comprehension of 126 Chinese students from a Taiwanese university. Sixty five students were assigned to the experimental group and sixty one to the control group. Both groups received the same learning content, but the technique differed; the experimental group had the retelling technique, while the control group had conventional techniques. The results showed that retelling significantly improved the participants’ text comprehension at the level of overall meaning. However, retelling did not improve the ability of participants to remember details of expository texts. Based on what mentioned above this research addressed the following question: Does retelling technique significantly enhance the student’s reading ability?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A total of 70 female students taking first grade of high school at a public school in Gorgan took part in the study. The native language of all participants was Persian. The age of the students ranged from 15 to 17 years. Though they had studies English for 3 years at school, since they are still taught English mainly based on grammar-translation method, their knowledge of English was not usually so high and they didn’t have any retelling experience at the beginning of the research. Subjects had English lesson two sessions in a week.

Instruments

Three testing instruments were used in the present study. The first one was an Oxford proficiency test, administered as a standard criterion to 85 students at the beginning of the treatment. This test was included 60 multiple-choice items in four parts of cloze tests, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. According to the results of the proficiency test the students randomly divided to two groups; one control group and one
The second test for measuring the comprehension ability of the students before applying the treatment was an English reading comprehension pre-test designed and administered to control group and experimental group. This test consisted of four English passages with 20 multiple-choice items. All questions had exactly four answer choices. Participants were not asked open ended, matching, true/false, nor short answer questions and each question had one acceptable answer. The third one was post-test which was administered to all participants after the intervention program. The post-test was the same as pretest. Necessary time for each pre and post-test was 60 minutes for all groups.

**Procedure**

In this study, 70 students from one high school participated. The students informed that they were helping in doing a research, but they were not informed about the goal and the subject of the research. The study was conducted in an English class, which met for two hours class meeting each week. Eight class meetings were used for the study. As primary step, a standard proficiency test was administered to 85 subjects who were in first grade of high school in Gorgan, Iran, and those who were at intermediate level were selected as homogeneous 70 female students took part in this study. These 70 students were randomly assigned to one control and one experimental group. Then, the students took a pretest before receiving any treatment in order to measure the comprehension ability of the students. The test had multiple choice formats and its topic relates to the topics of students’ text book. Seven passages along with relevant questions were covered in this study, two texts for first step of the treatment that students were exposed to explicit instruction of the retelling technique at hand, and five texts for second phase of the treatment that the students were asked to have more practice of the technique. At the beginning of first session, the teacher explained the retelling technique in this study was the reading to oral, in which students read the text for 30 minutes then retold it orally with their own words. During the course of training, the participants in control group received non-retelling based instruction but were taught using traditional reading instruction, which teacher used grammar translation method. The participants of the control group were assigned to read the same passage as the participants in the experimental group. Totally, 7 passages with some multiple choice items were covered during 8 sessions. One week after the last treatment, the students were administered a post-test similar to the pre-test with the same difficulty level.

**RESULTS**

Research question was answered by comparing the results of reading comprehension pre- and post-tests from the experimental and control groups. Table 4.3 presents mean scores (M) and standard deviations (SDs) for the experimental and control groups’ reading comprehension pre- and post-tests. In the pre-test, the experimental group and the control group, respectively, answered 7.54% and 7.71% correctly. In the post-test, the experimental group and the control group, respectively, answered 17.23% and 11.23% correctly. Thus, the experimental group improved by 9.69%, from 7.54% in the pre-test to 17.23% in the post-test; in contrast, the control group improved by 3.34%, from 7.71% to 11.23%. The results in Table 4.5 further indicated that there was no significant difference between the experimental and control groups’ mean scores on the pre-test ($t = -0.395, df = 68, p = .694 > 0.05$). The reading comprehension ability of the experimental group is similar to that of the control group before the retelling intervention started. However, there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the post-test ($t = 13.463, df = 68, p = .000 < 0.05$). The experimental group achieved significantly higher scores than the control group in the post-test. This means that after the retelling intervention, the retelling instruction group outperformed the control group on the reading comprehension post-test.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Experimental Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Control Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
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<td>Pre-test</td>
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<td>1.990</td>
<td>7.71</td>
<td>1.619</td>
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<td>0.694</td>
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<td>Post-test</td>
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<td>1.926</td>
<td>11.23</td>
<td>1.800</td>
<td>13.463</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CONCLUSION**

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effect of oral retelling on reading comprehension ability of Iranian high school students. The result of study showed that there was a statistically meaningful
difference between the mean achievements of control group in favor of the group one which the participants received the oral retelling strategy.

The results of higher score of experimental group in the reading comprehension post-test provided compelling evidence that the retelling technique effectively increases participants’ comprehension ability. The participants who used their own words to retell the passage experienced a process of relating what they read to what they already knew. This verbal reconstruction that matched to readers’ personal experiences significantly aided readers’ comprehension of the text.

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