



The Comparative Effect of Consciousness Raising Tasks on the Reading Comprehension of the High and Low Risk-Taking English as Foreign Language Learners

Shahram janbazi ^{1*}, Abdollah baradaran ²

¹ Department of English Language Teaching, Islamic Azad University; Central Tehran Branch, Tehran, Iran

² Department of English Language Teaching, Islamic Azad University; Central Tehran Branch, Tehran, Iran

Received: 11 April, 2017

Accepted: 12 August, 2017

Abstract

This study investigated the comparative effect of consciousness raising tasks on the reading comprehension ability of the high and low risk-taking English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners. To achieve the purpose of this study, 106 students from the Shahid Sattary University in Tehran were selected from among a total number of 150 based on their performance on the Preliminary English Test (PET). A personality trait questionnaire was administrated to determine learners' risk-taking levels (i.e. high, moderator and low). Therefore, 30 high and 30 low risk-taking learners were selected as two experimental groups. Although the learners had different personality traits, they were in the same classes and received the same treatment. The design of this study was quasi experimental and an independent samples t-test was applied to test the null hypothesis. The findings of the study showed that the group with high risk-taking trait outperformed the low group. Therefore, a significant difference was found between the two experimental groups in term of their reading comprehension ability.

Keywords: Consciousness raising tasks, Reading comprehension, Risk-taking

INTRODUCTION

English, as an international language, is widely used in everyday communication all around the world and ability to read in English is required in most cases. According to Rivers (1981), reading is an important skill, especially for those who do not have an access to native speakers, but they have an access to the written and material forms of that language for gaining new information and access to lots of explanations and interpretations.

One of the most interesting issues that teachers of English as a foreign language encounter is to find the best way of teaching grammar that targets reading comprehension. On the other hand, the aim is seeking an appropriate format of developing the essential grammatical points and the ability to use it in real life situation, without sacrificing any of them (Behrouzi & Kazemirad, 2012). This approach of teaching grammar promotes consciousness raising (CR) tasks, which provide learners with successful acquisition while communicating at the same time. Ellis (2003)

*Corresponding Author's Email:
Sha.janbazi.lng@iauctb.ac.ir



believes that consciousness raising (CR) task draws learners in thinking and communicating about language. Therefore, learners are able to talk about the meaning of different grammatical structures and discover regular patterns in their use. The direct goal of CR tasks is to facilitate learners become aware of something about the language that they might not detect on their own.

A growing number of the researchers are seeking the relation between learner variables (e.g. personality traits) and language learning. For example, Crozier (1997) claims that personality traits have been shown to have an effect on learning achievement. However, Ellis (1994) believes that there is often no hypothetical basis for predicting which personality traits will be positively or negatively associated to which characteristic of second language (L2) proficiency. Risk-taking as a complicated phenomenon is an aspect in the L2 acquisition that has an effect on learners' improvement (Brown, 1994). Different people have different degrees of it. Risk-taking, therefore, could be investigated in order to discover its relationship with the reading comprehension.

Beebe (as cited in Seliger, 1983) describes risk-taking as “[in] a situation where an individual has to make a decision involving choice between alternatives of different desirability; the outcome of the choice is uncertain; there is possibility of failure” (p. 39). She also says that “you take a risk every time you open your mouth [to speak in a] foreign language, or for that matter in any learning situation where you are called on to perform...without realizing it, even the most conservative individual takes risks” (p. 39).

According to Jonassen and Grabowski (1993), high risk-taking learners are process-oriented and have high tolerance of errors in their production than low risk-taking learners who are produced-oriented with low tolerance of errors who do not believe on trial and errors.

In fact, no study has been dedicated to analyze the effect of different aspects of risk-taking on reading comprehension through consciousness raising tasks. Hence, the current study aimed to

investigate the comparative effect of consciousness raising tasks on high and low risk-taking English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners' reading comprehension. To fulfill the objective of the study, the following research question was proposed:

Is there any significant difference between the effect of consciousness raising tasks on low and high risk taking EFL learners' reading comprehension?

METHODS

The design of this study was quasi-experimental. The data were analyzed by an independent samples *t*-test and the instruments used were Preliminary English Test (PET) to homogenize intermediate level students' language proficiency, risk-taking questionnaire, reading comprehension posttest, and a course book. To assure the homogeneity of the participants, Preliminary English Test (PET) was piloted among 30 intermediate engineering students with the age range of 19 to 24 who were studying at the Shahid Sattary University in Tehran, Iran. The researchers with the help of their colleagues rated the speaking and writing section of the test. The researchers then applied the piloted PET from 150 intermediate students to select 106 male students ranging from 19 to 24 years old who scored one standard deviation above and below the mean based on their performance on the PET. After selecting 106 homogenous students, the Persian version of Venturesomeness subscale of Eysenck's IVE questionnaire validated by Kiany and Pournia (2006) was used in order to qualify two groups of 30 high risk-taking learners and 30 low risk-taking learners.

Instruments

○ *Risk-taking questionnaire*

Venturesomeness subscale of Eysenck's IVE questionnaire validated by Kiany and Pournia (2006) comprised of 16 questions was employed to determine the learners' levels of risk-taking based on their scores on risk taking questionnaire.

The learners were categorized into high, medium and low risk-takers if they fell above +0.5 SD, in ± 0.5 SD or below -0.5 SD respectively.

○ *Reading comprehension posttest*

To estimate the result of the treatment and the collected data at the end of the research, a piloted researcher-made reading comprehension posttest was administrated after treatment based on the topics of the course book, which were covered during the academic semester to measure the learners' reading comprehension. There were 40 question items consisting of multiple choices, true/false, and matching exercises.

○ *Course book*

The course book that was used in this research study was *Active Skills for Reading* (book 1) written by Neil J. Anderson in 2006. Ten units of this book, which consists of 20 chapters, were covered.

○ **Procedure of the Study**

Prior to the experiment, the PET and the teacher made reading comprehension posttest were standardized by piloting them among a group of 30 male students with similar characteristics of the representative sample in different sessions. The reliability of items was calculated based on analyzing the items such as item facility and item discrimination to omit the malfunctioning items. Moreover, Cronbach Alpha formula was also run prior to the main administration to ensure the reliability of the test. In addition, two raters (the first author and his experienced colleague) scored the writing and speaking parts of the PET according to the PET rating scales. The inter-rater reliability was computed through Pearson Product Moment and the average score given by two raters was considered as the participants' final score on writing and speaking parts of the PET.

Among 150 learners who took the PET for homogenization, 106 of them whose scores were one standard deviation above and below the mean score participated in the study. Then the risk-taking questionnaire was administrated to 106

homogeneous participants. A number of 35 participants were assigned based on their scores to high risk-taking group and 30 ones to low risk-taking group. To have groups with the equal number of participants, the extra five participants were randomly omitted from the high risk-taking group. The scores of the learners in reading of a parallel test were considered as the learners' score in pretest to find out the language proficiency of the learners in the reading comprehension section before given any treatment.

The duration of the treatment was 21 teaching sessions in which one session was devoted to administering the posttest. In the first session, the teacher introduced the course and gave the participants some instructions in relation to the treatment. The researchers prepared consciousness raising (CR) tasks based on its grammatical points to draw the learners' attention from familiar to unfamiliar features of the language. This allows them to create some structures about the form meaning relationship of those features by using the techniques of underling, bolding, and italicizing through 'discovery activities' (Behrouzi & Kazemirad, 2012).

RESULTS

The data of the piloting phase of the PET was first analyzed to check its usefulness in this research study. The results indicated that there were significant correlation between the raters for speaking ($\gamma = .84$), and writing ($\gamma = .64$) of the piloting phase of the PET. Moreover, reliability statistics of the PET was .72 that illustrated high reliability of the test. Table 1 below shows the descriptive statistics of the piloting PET with the mean of 53.10 and the standard deviation of 12.59.

Table 1.***Descriptive statistics of the piloting PET***

	statistics	Std. Error
Piloting PET	N	30
	Range	49.00
	Minimum	29.00
	Maximum	78.00
	Mean	53.10
	SD	12.59
	Variance	158.44
	Skewness	-.28. .42

Table 2 below shows descriptive statistics of main PET administration with the mean of 52.91 and the standard deviation of 8.52. Consequently,

among the 150 original students, 106 students whose PET scores fell within the range of 61 and 44 were selected as the homogenous students.

Table 2.***Descriptive statistics of main PET administration***

	statistics	Std. Error
Main PET	N	150
	Range	42.00
	Minimum	32.00
	Maximum	74.00
	Mean	52.91
	SD	8.52
	Variance	72.60
	Skewness	-.16 .19

After ensuring the homogeneity of the 106 participants, the Persian version of risk-taking questionnaire validated by Kiany and Pournia (2006) was administrated to choose the students with high and low risk-taking quality among

high/low/moderator EFL learners. Table 3 below shows the descriptive statistics of risk-taking questionnaire with the mean of 46.21 and the standard deviation of 13.49.

Table 3.***Descriptive statistics of risk-taking questionnaire***

	statistics	Std. Error
Risk-Taking	N	106
	Range	51.00
	Minimum	23.00
	Maximum	74.00
	Mean	46.21
	SD	13.49
	Variance	181.90
	Skewness	.072 .23

To check the homogeneity of the two experimental groups prior to the treatment, an

independent samples *t*-test was conducted on the PET scores and reading comprehension (depend-

ent variable). Table 4 below shows that F statistic had a significance level of .08. Therefore, the assumption of equal variance was met. Furthermore, there was no significance difference in the

scores for high risk-takers ($M= 52.37$, $SD=5.02$) and low risk-takers ($M=52.13$, $SD= 3.75$) conditions, $t(58) = .20$, $P=.83$.

Table 4.
Independent samples t-test on PET scores

	Levene' s Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Mean					
	F	Sig.	T (2 tailed)	Df Difference	Mean Difference	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	3.13	.08	.20	.58	.83	.23	-2.05	2.52
Equal variances assumed		.20	53.67	.83	.23	1.14	-2.06	2.53

Table 5 below presents that F statistic had a significance level of .60. Therefore, the assumption of equal variance was met. In addition, there was no significance difference in the scores for

high risk-takers ($M= 23.13$, $SD= 3.41$) and low risk-takers ($M=22.97$, $SD= 3.21$) in terms of their reading comprehension ability prior to the treatment, $t(58) = .19$, $P=.85$.

Table 5.
Independent samples t-test on reading comprehension (pretest scores)

	Levene' s Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Mean					
	F	Sig.	T (2 tailed)	Df Difference	Mean Difference	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.27	.60	.19	.85	.17	.86	-1.54	1.88
Equal variances assumed		.19	57.79	.84	.17	.86	-1.54	1.88

Reliability statistics of the reading comprehension posttest was .77 that presented high reliability of the test. In addition, Table 6 provides descriptive statistics of high risk-takers

($M= 33.70$, $SD= 3.62$) and low risk-takers ($M=30.67$, $SD= 3.70$) scores of the reading comprehension posttest.

Table 6.**Descriptive statistics of the two experimental groups' scores of the reading comprehension posttest**

	Group	Statistics		Std. Error	
Reading Comprehension Posttest	High risk-takers	N	30		
		Range	14		
		Minimum	26		
		Maximum	40		
		Mean	33.7		
		SD	3.62		
		Variance	13.11		
		Skewness	-.41	.42	.198
	Low risk-takers	N	30		
		Range	14		
		Minimum	24		
		Maximum	38		
		Mean	30.67		
		SD	3.70	Variance	
	13.68				
Skewness	.15		.42		

As can be seen from the above table, the high risk-taking group with a mean of 33.7 outperformed the low risk-taking group with a mean of 30.67.

Testing the Null Hypothesis

In order to test the null hypothesis, an independent samples *t*-test was run on the reading comprehension posttest scores of the two experimental groups.

Table 7 below shows that F statistic had a significance level of .81. Therefore, the assumption of equal variance was met. In addition, there was a significance difference in the scores for high risk-takers ($M= 33.70$, $SD= 3.62$) and low risk-takers ($M=30.67$, $SD= 3.70$) in terms of their reading comprehension ability after the treatment, $t(58) = 3.21$, $P=.00$. Therefore, the null hypothesis of the study was rejected.

Table 7.**Independent samples *t*-test on the reading comprehension posttest scores**

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				<i>t</i> -test for Equality of Mean				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2 tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	0.59	.81	3.21	58	.00	3.03	.94	1.14	4.92
Equal Variances not assumed			3.21	57.9	.00	3.03	.94	1.14	4.92

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the comparative effect of consciousness raising tasks on the reading comprehension ability of the high and low EFL learners. Before presenting descriptive statistics of the administration for each group separately, assumptions for parametric test were met. Therefore, the present data were measured on an interval scale and none of the subjects participated in more than one group. In addition, the normality of distribution and homogeneity of variance were proven in all sections of the test.

Considering the question of the study, the statistical analysis of the data revealed that there was a significant difference between the reading comprehension ability of the learners of high and low risk-taking EFL learners through consciousness raising tasks. Hence, the researchers rejected the null hypothesis of the study and findings indicated that high risk-taking EFL learners showed more improvement than low risk-taking EFL learners in their reading comprehension. Crivos and Luchini (2012) state that “an effective grammar teaching model should be compatible with a communicative framework that emphasizes learners’ understanding of classroom input through meaningful, negotiated interactions” (p. 149). This approach of grammar teaching emphasis on acquiring grammatical point while communicating that needs to motivate and help learners to take part in communication. Yashima (2002) states that “the more one communicates, the more practice one has in talking and the more one learns” (p. 55). It can be concluded that learners could acquire the target language significantly when they take risk to share their information.

The results of this study was also in line with the finding of the study conducted by Ashouri and Fotovatnia (2010). They found that high-risk takers use the target language in communication to apply their consciousness raising tasks in the class in contrast to low risk takers. Furthermore, the results of this study was also in line with the finding of Brown (2000), according to which “Interaction requires the risk of failing to produce

intended meaning, of failing to interpret intended meaning, of being laughed at, of being shunned or rejected. The rewards, of course, are great and worth risks” (p. 150). Beebe (1983) believes that “Every human being takes risks” (p. 39). According to Brown, when learners learn a second language, they should be willing to gamble a bit and try out hunches about the language.

Since the participants in both experimental groups were homogenized at the beginning of the study, in terms of English language proficiency and reading comprehension ability, and in addition the treatment for both groups were the same; the final significant difference between their mean scores on their reading comprehension posttest could be attributed to the difference in their personality traits. For instance, high-risk takers like to use new structures in communication. In view of the fact that they are keen to experience new structures and always try to find opportunities to learn the language, they become “more resistant to fossilization” (Ashouri & Fotovatnia, 2010, p. 231; Alshalabi, 2003, p. 24). In addition, high risk-takers benefit higher amount of the linguistic input based on its quality and quantity than low risk-takers do.

In fact, the result of the present study advise that applying CR tasks as a way of teaching grammar in the class could be more effective with high risk-taking EFL learners than low risk-taking EFL learners. In addition, low risk-takers afraid of using complex sentences when they are not sure about its grammatical accuracy. That is to say, they lose to risk in trial and error situation, which is necessary in language learning. According to Kiany and Pournia (2006), “there is a trade-off situation in foreign language learning between two aspects of grammatical accuracy and syntactic complexity, in which one of the two is always sacrificed for the other” (p. 159). Therefore, it is recommended that teachers and learners should take the risk in using complex sentences so that they could do better in reading comprehension.

References

- Ashouri, A. F. & Fotovatnia, Z. (2010). The effect of individual differences on learners' translation belief in EFL learning. *English Language Teaching*, 3 (4), 228-236. Retrieved from <http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/elt/article/view/6422/6358>
- Beebe, L. M. (1983). Risk taking and language learner. In H. S. (Ed.), *classroom oriented research in second language acquisition*, 39-66. Rowley: Mass: Newbury House.
- Behrouzi, P., & Kazemirad, F. (2012). The effect of consciousness-raising tasks on Iranian elementary EFL learners' syntax acquisition. *International Journal of Linguistics*, 4(2), 334-347.
- Brown, H. D. (1994). *Principles of language learning and teaching*, Prentice Hall Regents, New Jersey.
- Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. (4th ed.), New York: Pearson Education.
- Crivos, M. B., & Luchini, P. L. (2012). A pedagogical proposal for teaching grammar using consciousness-raising tasks. *MJAL*, 4(3), 141-153.
- Crozier, W. R. (1997). *Individual learners: Personality differences in education*. London: Routledge.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis R. (2002). Grammar teaching – practice or consciousness-raising? In Richard J. and Rennandya W. (Eds.), *Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice*, 167 – 174, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Jonassen, D. H., & Grabowski, B. (1993). *Handbook of Individual differences and instruction*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associate Hillsdale, NJ.
- Kiani, Gh. R., & Pournia, Y. (2006). The relationship between risk-taking and the syntactic complexity and grammatical accuracy of the Iranian international EFL learners' descriptive and expository writing. *Pazhuhesh-e Zabanha-ye Khareji*, 27, 143-164.
- Rivers, W. M. (1981). *Teaching foreign language skills*. Chicago: The University of Chicago.
- Schmidt, R. (1990). The role of consciousness in second language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 11, 129- 158.
- Yashima, Tomoko. (2002). Willingness to communicate in a second language: The Japanese EFL context. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86 (1), 54-66.

Biodata

Shahram Janbazi received his Bachelor of Science degree in Maintenance Engineering from Shahid Sattary University of Aeronautical Technology and Science. He also received his Master degree in the field of Teaching English to Foreign Language Learners (TEFL) from the Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch. He has been teaching English for more than eight years. He is currently teaching English at the Shahid Sattary University.
Email: Sha.janbazi.lng@iauctb.ac.ir

Dr Abdollah Baradaran is an associate professor in the field of Teaching English to Foreign Language Learners (TEFL). He is also the dean of the faculty of Foreign Languages at the Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch in Iran. He has many articles published and presented in national and international journals and seminars in the field of second language education.
Email: a.baradaran@iauctb.ac.ir