The Effect of User-Friendly Texts vs. Impersonal and Hybrid Texts on the Reading Comprehension Ability of Iranian EFL Learners

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This study focuses on the effect of user-friendly, impersonal, and hybrid texts on the reading comprehension ability of Iranian foreign language learners. Forty-five students of Alzahra University were selected on the basis of their performance in a recent TOEFL. They were given three different texts (each group of 15 students was given one type) describing the same area of English usage, which were all followed by a reading comprehension test. Also, a questionnaire containing two questions was given to the participants in order to tap their own personal feelings. Series of one-way ANOVA displayed that the mean differences among the three groups were significant at 0.05 level and the user-friendly group outperformed the other ones.

Keywords: User-Friendly Texts, Impersonal Texts, Hybrid Texts

Reading as an important skill usually receives a special attention in Iran in comparison with other skills. This can be verified by examining high school books which are generally developed by focusing mainly on reading comprehension ability. Despite this fact, the majority of Iranian foreign language (EFL) learners are not proficient in reading comprehension and they

usually admit having difficulties in reading. In order to improve reading as an important skill, different researchers have proposed different solutions to enhance students' reading comprehension ability (Richards & Renanday, 2002).

In some researches in the field of reading comprehension, priority is given to texts and their different features (Wallace, 2002). When a person reads, he tries to relate the new information in the text to what is already known. Consequently, textual features play an important role in activating prior knowledge, which would lead to comprehension (Rumelhart, 1980, p.35; Jonathan & Just, 1991; Bartu, 2001; Nassaji, 2002). Accordingly, the choice of meta-language (the language of linguistic description) which is used in language teaching materials, is also significant and crucial (Dryer, 1999).

Berry (2000) has distinguished three types of texts: impersonal texts, hybrid texts and user-friendly texts. Impersonal texts refer to the texts which are formal and utilize more passive forms in the construction of their sentences. Hybrid texts refer to the text which is in between. It uses a mixture of user-friendly and impersonal styles. Finally, user-friendly texts refer to the texts which are informal and include personal language, judgmental words or emotive language.

However, the effect of each type of text on the comprehension ability of EFL students is still arguable. In this regard, some researchers have worked on the effects of impersonal and hybrid texts, but a few researchers have taken into account the effect of user-friendly texts (Berry, 2000). Attention to this area of research seems to be vital, especially in Iran, where English books at high school are mainly reading-based (i.e., they are developed to improve reading skill with less emphasis on other skills).

Review of Related Literature

Reading is defined by Grellet (1981) as a medium of communication, the power to get information from the written language; it is also considered as an active thought-arousing, problem- solving process. In this process, the reader must make an

active contribution by drawing upon and using concurrently various abilities that he has acquired. It is also mentioned that when a person reads, he/she must make a connection between what a text is about and external referential objects, ideas and people (Mikulecky, 1990). Therefore, the reader processes the text in the light of established schemata: cognitive abilities, background knowledge, language knowledge, cultural values and beliefs. The same could also be found in Schema theory (Anderson, 1977; Spiro, 1979) which states that new information can only have meaning when the individual can relate it to what he/she already knows.

Meanwhile, the text usually provides new information to be processed: grapho-phonic information, syntactic information, semantic information including illustrations, and genre information (Mikulecky, 1990). All of the above factors could contribute to the fact that most of the EFL students face difficulties when reading the texts, and consequently, they cannot comprehend the texts (Bloom, 1956).

As it was mentioned before, Berry (2000) has classified texts into three types: impersonal texts, hybrid texts, and user-friendly texts. Considering different types of texts, impersonal style is the one which is used more widely. It is one of the main features of the academic writing. The style is impersonal when it is formal and the language used is non-discursive. In this type of text, there are many sophisticated words. In fact, it is called impersonal because it does not usually contain personal language, judgmental words or emotive language (Berry, 2000). Gray and Aldred (1998, p.79) characterized the features of impersonal text as follows: Poor layout, lack of point, poor logical structure, too concise or in some cases not concise enough, ambiguous and full of jargon. In a similar vein, Scarella (2003) observed that impersonal style has the following features: use of formal or sophisticated words, increased level of formality in language and tone, discipline specific terminology (used in text) , use of less personal and more impersonal language achieved through the avoidance of personal pronouns and judgmental words, avoidance of contractions (can't), colloquial (everyday spoken) language, rhetorical questions, and

run-on expressions (*etc*, and *so on*), greater use of passive voice, use of nominalization (we walked for charity–the charity walk), use of nominal groups (groups of words that provide more information about people, places or concepts such as *depression era or the rate of economic growth*), use of supporting evidence to support the arguments being presented, and finally integrating the evidence effectively and expertly into the text several times.

Another type of text is hybrid. The hybrid text or the one which is found in the authentic material is not written for educational purposes. It is a text which is in between. It means that it possesses some features of user-friendly texts and some features of impersonal ones. In fact, this type of text contains of a mixture of user-friendly and impersonal styles. It is believed that there is a problem with the hybrid texts in that their language is difficult. Consequently, because the hybrid texts are difficult for language learners especially at the beginning and intermediate levels; which diminishes the effectiveness of their application in language teaching is diminished (Nuttall, 1996).

The third type of text which is taken into consideration in this study is user-friendly texts. Little research has been done in the case of user-friendly texts or user-friendly meta-language. As Berry (2000) mentioned it is not exactly clear yet whether this "user-friendly" metalanguage is appropriate in terms of learner expectations, or helpful in terms of learning outcomes.

The concepts of user-friendly and learner-friendly have been developed to enhance on line planning. Despite the fact that the two terms have been considered independent of each other, they are co-dependent (Howard, 2003). These two terms are also applied for language learning materials (Berry, 2000), and they aim to enhance the facilitating features of the materials in order to make them easier for learners to use them (Howard , 2003). In this regard, Vande Kopple (1985) used the term "learner friendly" to deal with the type of text that would increase writers' sensitivity to the needs of their readers, making them better able to meet those needs, and thus changing writer based prose (Flower, 1979) to reader based prose.

The present research looks at one particular movement that has emerged in educational reference materials in recent years, that is, the trend towards a more user-friendly style. The major features of interest here, then, would be the use of active rather than passive and the choice of you instead of any other pronouns.

However, it should be mentioned that although it is assumed that user-friendly meta-language is beneficial for the learners, there is little evidence of any positive effect on learners' reading comprehension and actually as Amritavalli's (1999) evidence suggests, there might even be a negative effect.

Research Questions and hypothesis

1. What are the effects of *user-friendly* texts on the reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners?

2. What are the effects of *impersonal* texts on the reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners?

3. What are the effects of *hybrid* texts on the reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners?

Based on the above-mentioned research questions, three null hypotheses were formed as the following:

H01: *User-friendly* texts do not have any significant effect on the reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners.

H02: *Impersonal* texts do not have any significant effect on the reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners.

H03: *Hybrid* texts do not have any significant effect on the reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 45 full-time undergraduate EFL learners. All learners studied English as a foreign language in Iranian schools for about 7 years, three years at junior high school and then four years at high school. In addition, they have been studying English for two or three years at

university. The students were assigned randomly into three groups (15 each) and each group received one of the three types of texts.

Instruments

The instruments that were used during the research include:
- Test A**:** a recent version of standardized TOEFL (2004) was used as the pre-test.
- Texts: Three different types of texts were used as the main instrument of the research. These three text types were chosen from the same subject matter. They were also tested for readability before being given to the participants. Needless to say, all of the three text types had identical readability quotients. Also, it should be mentioned that they had the same length of almost six hundred words each.
- Test B**:** Immediately after reading the text, a test of comprehension containing 15multiple choice was given to each group. The items were preceded by an example item.
- A questionnaire: Furthermore, a questionnaire containing the following two statements was also administered to the participants:

    a. This text is very easy to understand.

    b. This text uses the right kind of language for explaining the subject.

Using a five-point Likert scale to evaluate the responses of the subjects to the above statements, the students' reaction to the text in terms of its readability and appropriacy were also examined.

Procedure

On the basis of the results of the subjects' performance in TOEFL test, the students were divided randomly into three groups to make sure that the participants are homogenous with regard to their English proficiency. Next, each group of students read the assigned text and then they were asked to take the reading comprehension test. Finally, they were asked to fill out the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

In addition to the descriptive data, a comparison was made between the mean score of each group. Meanwhile, the students' responses to two statements were taken into consideration. The mean for statements were calculated according to the values assigned to each response (i.e. from 5 for "strongly agree", down to 0 for "'strongly disagree") divided by the number of subjects. Furthermore, as a means of statistical analysis, a series of one-way ANOVAs was performed, followed by a post-hoc Scheffe test.

Results and Discussions

Pre-test

The mean and the range of each group display that the groups were homogenous and the difference between the levels of the proficiency of each group would not influence the final results of the study. In addition, to make sure that the groups were homogeneous, a one way ANOVA was used. Table 1 gives the results of ANOVA.

Table1
ANOVA of the TOEFL Test

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4004.800	2	2002.400	1.037	.364
Within Groups	81120.00	42	1931.429		
Total	85124.80	44			

Pilot Study

B-index of the items of the test was calculated. Only one of the items (item 3) was not suitable and it was revised by the researcher.

The Experiment Proper

As it was mentioned before, the participants were divided randomly into three groups of 15 students. Each group was given one type of text followed by a 15-item comprehension test. Then, the scores of the participants were calculated and the results were analyzed through a one-way ANOVA. The result is given in Table2.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics of the scores

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Impersonal	15	8.20	2.513	.649	6.81	9.59	3	13
User-friendly	15	10.60	2.293	.592	9.33	11.87	7	14
Hybrid	15	10.47	2.066	.533	9.32	11.61	7	14
Total	45	9.76	2.506	.374	9.00	10.51	3	14

Table 3
ANOVA for comparing three groups

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	54.578	2	27.289	5.169	.010
Within Groups	221.733	42	5.279		
Total	276.311	44			

Table 4
Scheffe test to show the relationship between each two group

(I) GROUP	(J) GROUP	Mean Difference (I–J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Impersonal	User-friendy	−2.400*	.839	.024	−4.53	−.27
	Hybrid	−2.267*	.839	.035	−4.40	−.14
User-friedy	Impersonal	2.400*	.839	.024	.27	4.53
	Hybrid	.133	.839	.987	−2.00	2.26
Hybrid	Impersonal	2.267*	.839	.035	.14	4.40
	User-friedy	−.133	.839	.987	−2.26	2.00

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

As the descriptive statistics show, the mean score of the user-friendly group is higher than the other two groups. It implies that the user-friendly group performed better than the other groups on the reading comprehension test. However, there is not a big difference between the user-friendly group and the hybrid group and their mean scores are close to each other.

A brief look at table 4 reveals that the mean differences between the impersonal group and the user-friendly group on one hand and between the impersonal and hybrid groups on the other hand are significant at 0.05 level (the significance is indicated by a * symbol). However, the mean difference between the user-friendly group and the hybrid one does not display a significant difference. This indicates that the user-friendly and hybrid groups outperformed the impersonal one. However, the two groups (hybrid & user-friendly) both performed almost the same on the test.

After reading comprehension test, the questionnaire containing two items (a & b) was given to the participants. The means for statements *a* and *b* were calculated according to the values assigned to each response.

Question a

To find out whether there is a significant difference between the responses of the three groups a one way ANOVA was used, the results of which are given in Table 5.

Table 5
ANOVA for question a

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	18.178	2	9.089	10.969	.000
Within Groups	34.800	42	.829		
Total	52.978	44			

Moreover, to determine the relationship between groups a Scheffe test was used. Table 6 indicates the results.

As table 6 shows, the mean difference between the impersonal group and the user-friendly group on one hand and between the impersonal and hybrid groups on the other hand is significant. However, this is not the case between the hybrid group and the user-friendly group and their responses were quite similar to each other. The mean scores reveal that the participants in the user-friendly and hybrid groups agreed more on the statement a than the participants in the impersonal group.

Table 6
Scheffe test for question a

(I) GROUP	(J) GROUP	Mean Difference (I−J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Impersonal	User-friendy	−1.53333*	.33238	.000	−2.3768	−.6899
	Hybrid	−1.00000*	.33238	.017	−1.8435	−.1565
User-friendy	Impersonal	1.53333*	.33238	.000	.6899	2.3768
	Hybrid	.53333	.33238	.287	−.3101	1.3768
Hybrid	Impersonal	1.00000*	.33238	.017	.1565	1.8435
	User-friendy	−.53333	.33238	.287	−1.3768	.3101

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level

Question b

The same data analysis procedure was carried out for question b. To determine whether there is any significant difference between the mean scores of the three groups, a one way ANOVA was used.

According to table 7, there is not any significant difference between the mean scores of the three groups. It means that the tree groups have the same idea regarding the statement b.

Table 7
ANOVA for question b

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.844	2	2.422	2.957	.063
Within Groups	34.400	42	.819		
Total	39.244	44			

The Scheffe test for question b which was used to demonstrate the relationship between the three groups does not reveal any significant difference between the mean scores of the user-friendly and impersonal, the impersonal and hybrid and the hybrid and user-friendly groups on question b. It shows that the three groups had the same opinion towards this statement. In addition, the mean scores reveal that all of the participants in different groups agreed that the three texts used the right kind of language for explaining the subject.

Table 8
Scheffe test for question b

(I) GROUP	(J) GROUP	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Impersonal	User-friendly	.33333	.33046	.605	-.5053	1.1719
	Hybrid	.80000	.33046	.064	-.0386	1.6386
User-friendly	Impersonal	-.33333	.33046	.605	-1.1719	.5053
	Hybrid	.46667	.33046	.378	-.3719	1.3053
Hybrid	Impersonal	-.80000	.33046	.064	-1.6386	.0386
	User-friendly	-.46667	.33046	.378	-1.3053	.3719

Reliability & Normality of the test

Finally the reliability of the test was calculated .The result is as follows:
Table 9
Reliability of the test

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.714	15

Furthermore, to make sure that the results had not been affected by the limited number of participants, the normality of the groups was also checked.

Conclusion

The findings are as follows:

1. There is a significant difference between the performances of the three groups of participants on the reading comprehension test.

2. The statistics (mean differences) presented in the previous chapter indicated that the mean score of the user-friendly group is higher than the other two groups (impersonal and hybrid ones). It entails that the user-friendly group performed better than the other groups on the reading comprehension test. However, there is not a major difference between the user-friendly group and the hybrid one and their mean scores are close to each other.

3. The mean differences between the user-friendly group and the impersonal group on one hand and between the impersonal and hybrid groups on the other hand are significant. However, the mean difference between the user-friendly group and the hybrid one does not display a significant difference. This indicates that the user-friendly and hybrid groups outperformed the impersonal one. However, the two groups (user-friendly & hybrid) both performed almost the same on the test.

4. The results demonstrated that the participants performed equally well in the user-friendly and the hybrid groups but worse in the impersonal group.

5. There is a significant difference between the responses of the three groups to question a. The mean of the user-friendly group is higher than the other two groups. It denotes that the participants of this group agreed more than the other two groups that their text was very easy to understand. Also the hybrid group displayed a positive view toward their own text type since the mean of this group does not differ much from the user-friendly one.

6. The mean differences of the answers to question *a* between the user-friendly group and the impersonal group on one hand and between the impersonal and hybrid groups on the other hand are significant. However, this is not the case between the hybrid group and the user-friendly one. This means that their responses were quit similar to each other. Considering the mean

scores of these two groups, it is revealed that the participants in the user-friendly and hybrid groups agreed more on the statement in question than the impersonal group.

7. There is not a significant difference between the responses of the three groups to question *b.* It means that all three groups had more or less the same idea towards the statement in question.

Considering the above findings, we can conclude that:

1. Hypothesis I is rejected since it was found that the user-friendly group outperformed the other two groups. Therefore, it can be concluded that the user-friendly text promotes reading comprehension ability of the language learners. However, there is not much difference between the user-friendly group and the hybrid one.

2. Hypothesis II is also rejected. Considering the mean scores, it is found that impersonal texts would impede reading comprehension ability of the language learners.

3. Hypothesis III is also rejected. As the hybrid group performed better than the impersonal group, we can conclude that hybrid texts enhance reading comprehension ability. However, as it was mentioned before, there is not a big difference between the user-friendly group and the hybrid one in this case.

In sum, it could be concluded that the user-friendly features in a text (even in combination with the impersonal one) would increase the reading comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners.

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