Promoting the Reading Comprehension Ability of EFL Iranian Learners through Translating, Paraphrasing and Elaborating the Passages

Maryam Mohseni[1*]

[1] Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, Islamic Azad University, South Tehran Branch, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

This research study investigates the impact of three sorts of simplification of reading comprehension passages through translating, paraphrasing and elaborating new words and expressions on the Iranian language teaching freshmen's reading comprehension ability. In phase one six English reading passages in one of three types- (a) translated, (b) paraphrased, (c) elaborated words and expressions- were offered to 90 male and female subjects categorized in three groups for three consecutive sessions. The ANOVA statistical findings unraveled that paraphrasing had the significant meaningful impact on the subjects' reading comprehension ability. In phase two 180 students were divided into two sexes (i.e., males and females) in six thirty-subject groups to be exposed to the three aforementioned reading comprehension approaches for six sessions. Comprehension was assessed by reading comprehension questions (10 items) and a twenty-item M/C test for each of the three abovementioned passage types. The test data were analyzed through a 2X3 ANOVA Factorial design along with post hoc analyses. The results revealed that the female subjects benefited from paraphrasing more than the males while the males outperformed their counterparts in the realm of translated passages. Elaboration helped the both sexes more or less to the same degree. Accordingly, the educational materials developers and designers are considerably recommended to take this issue into consideration which may count as the ultimate objective of EFL reading instruction.

Keywords: ANOVA, Factorial design, M/C test, Paraphrasing, Post hoc analyses, Translation

INTRODUCTION

In situations where English is taught as a foreign language, reading is often the main goal of learners. Moreover, it is considered to be of primary importance by the teachers. As Rivers (1981) states reading is clearly the most important

* Corresponding Author's Email:
Mary.mohseni@yahoo.com

activity in any language class, not as a source of information and a pleasurable activity, but as a means of consolidating and extending one's knowledge of the language. The main difference in the attitude for reading in recent years has been the emphasis on providing guidelines for students in developing this skill. Therefore, language teachers and researchers have tried to plan learning experiences to help the students develop their

habits of reading which lead them to direct the comprehension of the text and help them to learn how to use different aids or procedures accompanying their reading process. (p. 259)

In academic settings too, reading is assumed to be the central means for learning new information and it is the most important skill which is needed for learners' success. Now this question arises: what kind of context is appropriate for improving General English reading comprehension?

Statement of the Problem

Richards and Rogers (1996) maintain that comprehending and summarizing EFL passages has always been considered as a complicated task for EFL learners. The approach in teaching reading comprehension has been predominantly communicative which emphasizes implicit, incidental learning. The techniques used in comprehension teaching include inferring the meaning of lexical items from the context in which they occur, using the dictionary, using the realia, stimuli and providing English synonyms.(p. 133)

Sokmen (1997) holds that the argument against implicit instruction to facilitate second language acquisition according to 'come from a number of potential problems associated with inferring words from context.' A number of studies on teaching reading comprehensions have shown the ineffectiveness   of just using explicit instruction and the need to accompany
it with implicit instruction or in context explanation of the new words and expressions. (p.223)
They postulate that to promote and ameliorate learning the current reading comprehension instruction emphasizes both implicit and also explicit learning. Whilst there is now more emphasis on explicit learning, it has been argued that the comprehension development of a language, second and foreign in particular is more likely to be generally implicit or incidental beyond a certain level of proficiency (Sokmen, 1997 and Wong , 1982 p. 390).

Carter and McCarthy (1998) argue that teachers often believe that by translating a passage into the target language the chance of grasping the clear meaning of it is stolen from the students. This study attempts to explore the effect of translating (explicit instruction), paraphrasing (implicit instruction) and elaborating (in context instruction) on EFL learners' reading comprehension ability. On the other hand, educational practitioners, i.e. syllabus designer and material developers are expected to differentiate the male and female's amount of reading comprehension when they are exposed to the three aforementioned inputs. (p.302)

Background
Translation

Nunan (1991) believes that translation is commonly the selection of the nearest equivalent for a language unit in the source language in a target language. Naturally and supposedly after translation, what changes is the form and the code and what should remain unchanged are the meaning

Depending on whether we consider the language unit, be translated, at the level of word, sentence, or a general concept, translation experts have recognized three approaches to translation:

. translation at the level of word (word for word translation)

. translation at the level of sentence

. conceptual translation

In the first approach, for each word in the source language an equivalent word is selected in the target language. This type of translation is effective, especially in translating phrases and proper names such as United Nations, Ministry of Education, Deep Structure, and so on. However, it is problematic at the level of sentences due to the differences in the syntax of source and target languages. Translated texts as a product of this approach are not usually lucid or communicative, and readers will get through the text slowly and uneasily. The structure of the source text becomes an important guide to decisions regarding what should or should not appear in the derived text.

When translating at the sentence level, the problem of word for word translation and, therefore, lack of lucidity will be remedied by observing the grammatical rules and word order in the

target language while preserving the meaning of individual words. So, sentences such as "I like to eat, "I think she is clever, "and "We were all tired" can easily be translated into the target language according to the grammatical hints.

In conceptual translation, the unit of translation is neither the word nor is it the sentence; rather it is the concept. The best example is the translation of idioms and proverbs such as the following.

"He gave me a nasty look" , or "Carrying coal to Newcastle"

Such idioms and proverbs cannot be translated word for word; rather they should be translated into equivalent concepts in the TL to convey the same meaning and produce the same effect on the readers. (pp. 45-47)

Paraphrasing

Reading has been the focus of extensive research; however, a large portion of the research has focused on foundational reading skills, such as development of the alphabetic principal and phonological awareness (Williams, 2005 p. 167). This focus on foundational skills is understandable,

because decoding skills are fundamental to successful reading. This perspective assumes that when students become proficient in decoding skills, comprehension of text will follow automatically. Although this may be true for the great majority of students, there is evidence that there are sources of comprehension problems that are independent of decoding (Williams, 2005, p. 169).

Researchers have identified students who cannot comprehend text effectively in spite of successful decoding (Shumaker et al., 1984). One strategy that can solve this problem is the "RAP" paraphrasing strategy (Schumaker, Denton, & Deshler, 1984). They hold that RAP is a three-step strategy: Read paragraph; ask myself, "What were the main idea and the two details?" and Put it into my own words. The RAP strategy is based on sound theory utilizing paraphrasing to help improve memory of main ideas and details in text. Initial pilot data for the RAP strategy were

promising. They also reported that students who were taught to use the RAP strategy increased their recall of text from 48% to 84%. Despite its promise, there is relatively little published research on the RAP strategy (Schumaker et al., 1984, p. 360).

Elaboration

Through this approach the readers have a full access to the detailed explanation of the new words and expressions right following each of the new words and expressions within the context.

Research Questions:

Q1: Do different kinds of teaching reading comprehension i.e. translating, paraphrasing or elaborating make any significant difference on EFL learners' overall reading comprehension?

Q2: Is there any significant difference between reading comprehension ability of those EFL learners who have been taught to paraphrase the passage, those who have taught to translate them or those who are provided with the elaboration of the new words and expressions within the context?

Q3: Is there any difference between the male and female learners to benefit from the   three aforementioned approaches to comprehend the essence of the reading passages?

Statement of the Hypotheses

In order to gain access to more or less convincing findings to remove the pertinent ambiguities in this respect the following research hypotheses are suggested.

1. *There is no significant difference between the amount of reading comprehension of the second/foreign language learners when they are exposed to translated, paraphrased or elaborated reading materials.*
2. *There is no interaction between the sex and the method of comprehension input- namely, translated, paraphrased or elaborated*

reading materials.

METHOD
Participants
This study, conducted in June 2009 involved 400 Iranian university students, freshmen. Among them, 100 subjects who participated in pilot studies were excluded from the main study. All were Iranian EFL students between 19 and 25 years of age enrolled in the Islamic Azad University located in Pishva city in Iran.

On the basis of their scores on the nationwide TEOFL test those who got more than seventy percent of the scores were selected as the subjects of this study- 180 male and female students. A levene's test was also conducted and their homogeneity was confirmed. This study involved two phases. In the first phase the 180 participants were categorized into three groups.
- Group A was assigned to get the translated reading passages.
- Group B was assigned to get the reading passages along with the paraphrases.
- Group C was assigned to get the reading passages along with the elaborated unfamiliar words and expressions inside the texts.

An ANOVA test was determined to compare the difference among the means.

In phase two, the participants were divided into six subgroups- three 30 male groups and three 30 female groups. A factorial design employing a 2x3 table was assigned to illuminate the interaction between sex and methods.

Instruments
Phase One
For the first phase the following instruments were employed.
1. TOEFL Reading Test (Barron's, 1989)
2. Six intermediate piloted reading passages selected from Fluency English and Developing Skills (Alexander; 1967a)with the level of difficulty determined through the Fog index model.
Phase Two

For the second phase the hereunder instruments were utilized.
1. Six intermediate piloted reading passages selected from Fluency in English and Developing Skills (Alexander; 1967b)with the level of difficulty determined through the Fog index model.

Procedure
Pilot Studies
As a preliminary step, two pilot studies were conducted 4 weeks before the main study. The purpose of the first pilot study was to choose 6 out of 10 passages that were appropriate in difficulty and content for use in the main study to identify vocabulary and information that needed modification. After constructing the M/C comprehension questions test on the 6 reading passages thus chosen, it was pilot tested in order to identify and modify items that were too easy or too difficult. For instance, items that almost all the subjects had answered correctly or incorrectly were revised to make them more discriminating.

Main Study
The main study was administered in two separate phases. In phase one 180 participants were divided into three 60 male and female subject groups (A, B, and C). Each group was supposed to have six classes during regular 50-minute English class sessions where they centralized on the translated, paraphrased, and elaborated passages. Three types of test booklets were prepared, each consisting of only one of the three versions (A, B, and C) of the six- passage reading task and test. Within each class, the same procedure was followed. Subjects were told to read and try to understand the six short passages and to answer reading comprehension questions (10 items) and 20multiple-choice questions.

In phase two the same 180 subjects took part, but this time they were divided into six subgroups- three 30 female and three 30 male subjects.

In this respect other different piloted passages in three forms with the same level of difficulty-

six passages for each vertical groups- were assigned. These subjects had also six classes during regular, 50-minute English class sessions. They were also given three kinds of test booklet, each involving exclusively one of the three versions (A, B, and C).Within each class, the same procedure was followed. Subjects were told to read and try to understand six short passages and to answer 20 multiple-choice questions.

Sex Method :Translation Paraphrasing Elaboration

Male Subjects	G1	G2	G3
Female Subjects	G4	G5	G6

Data Analysis
Phase 1
The data obtained through the procedure described above were analyzed by the analysis of variance (ANOVA). LSD tests were also used in post hoc analyses to examine which of the mean differences among the three subject groups were statistically significant. Statistically, it was unraveled that the participants who availed themselves of the paraphrased sentences did a better job on the test and excelled the other two.

Phase 2
The results acquired through the procedure described above in phase two were analyzed by the two-way ANOVA (2x3 Factorial Design) on the total comprehension scores. The F-observed value for the interaction between the sex of the subjects and the input modification on the performance of the subjects on the post-test revealed that the input offered through paraphrasing the complicated sentences had significant effect on the performance of the female subjects only. The translated passages helped the male subjects more than the female ones and elaborated passages helped the female and the male subjects' performance to an equal degree.

Thus, the null-hypothesis as there is no significant interaction between the gender of the subjects and the methods of teaching on their performance on the post-test was rejected, and it

could be claimed that there was a significant interaction between the two variables.

CONCLUSION AND PEDOGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS
The major findings of the present study can be summarized as follows:

1. Learners perceive their comprehension to be higher when they receive modified input than when they receive unmodified input.
2. Translated, paraphrased and elaborated passages have amore positive impact on the learners' reading comprehension than the intact reading passages.
3. Elaborated input significantly enhance the reading comprehension of learners of the both sexes to the same extent.
4. Female learners benefit more than male learners when they are exposed to the paraphrasing input.
5. Male learners are more benefited when they are exposed to the translation input.
6. The sex of the learners and the type of input enjoy positive interaction. Accordingly the findings of the present study suggest that the provision of any types of information in written input enhances the reading comprehension.

This study also unravels that female readers are cognitively and metacognitively different from male readers and females are more sensitive and adoptive to the paraphrased passages than the males. This lack of equality should also be taken into consideration in educational arenas.

On the other hand, it is widely accepted that assessment is an essential part of the educational system. In recent years, however, its importance has increased; not only is there more assessment in schools, but it is also of more significance for pupils and educational system as a whole. Because of this, it is crucially important that assessment is considered in terms of its fairness for all – males and females - as a measure of achievement. Put simply, the problem of equality and equity among male and female learners should also be considered by test developer.

References

Alexander, L. G. (1967a). *Developing skills*. Essex, England: Longman Press.

Alexander, L. G. (1967b). *Fluency in English*. Essex, England: Longman Press.

Carter, Ronald, and Michael McCarthy. (1988).*Vocabulary and Language Teaching*,United Kingdom: Longman Press.

Chaudron, C. (1983). Say it again Sam. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Long, M. (1985). To simplify or not simplify: A look at intake. *Studies in Second Language Acquisitions*, 15, 333-355.

Nunan, D.(1991). *Language Teaching Methodology*: a Textbook for Teachers. New York: Prentice-Hall.

Renandya, Willy, A. (2002*). Methodology in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Richards, J., and T. Rodgers. (1996). *Application and Methods in Language Teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Rivers, W. M. (1981). *Teaching Foreign Language Skills*, Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

Schumaker, A. Denton, F., Desher, B. (2004). *The Task-based Approach in language Teaching*. London: University of Murcia Press.

Sokmen, J. Anita. (1997).*Current Trends in Teaching Second Language Vocabulary', in Vocabulary Description, Acquisition and Pedagogy* .New York: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, D.(2005). *A Framework for Task-based Learning*, London: Longman.

Wong, Irene F.H., and Lim Saw Choo. (1982).'Language Transfer in the Use of English in Malaysia Structure and Meaning,' *in Transfer and Translation in Language and Teaching*, RELC Seminar Singapore. Singapore: Fong & Sons