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Improving Iranian EFL Young Learners' Reading Comprehension Skills: Collaborative and Individual Reading in Focus

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Abstract

This study aimed to inquire about EFL reading sessions across Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) and Individual Reading (IR) among young EFL learners. In essence, the researcher's goal was to investigate how reading sessions using CSR and reading aloud across individual and collaborative activities promote EFL learners' reading comprehension skills. To this end, 2 Iranian EFL teachers from a primary school in Tehran, and 16 Iranian second-graders studying at a primary school in Tehran, were randomly selected as participants. Then, using teachers' reflective journals, participants' observations, and face-to-face interviews with teachers, the needed data were elicited and descriptively analyzed. The obtained results showed that reading sessions using CSR and reading aloud strategy across individual and collaborative activities promote learners' reading comprehension skill more than IR reading sessions. Moreover, teacher-student interactions (TSI) and student-student interactions (SSI) proved beneficial in improving the participants' reading comprehension skills.

Keywords: Collaborative reading; Individual reading activities; Reading sessions; Young EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a cognitive activity in which the reader takes part in a conversation with the

author through the text. On the other hand, reading strategies are considered as one of the features of cognitive psychology which are

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essential for a successful comprehension. Reading is useful for language acquisition, provided that students' more or less understand what they read. Acquiring the ability to read from an early age is crucial since it helps individuals have a greater worldview and achieve broader and more up-to-date information through reading texts of different genres. Besides, some scholars believe that language learners' learning reading skills help them learn other language skills such as writing, speaking, and listening (Krashen, 2007; Moore, 2015; Nation & Macalister, 2020; Singhal, 2001). Moore (2015), in a similar fashion, explains that "comprehension is the essence of reading and the active process of constructing meaning from the text" (p. 1); therefore, without comprehension skills and reading strategies, learners will not be able to understand what they read deeply. According to Namaziandost et al. (2020), several factors such as environment, teaching strategies and the task, learner's views about language learning, interaction with other learners, and teaching style affect the differential progress and success of second language learners and their comprehension of reading texts. Among the reading strategies, Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) and Individual Reading, have been introduced and analyzed in different studies and teachers have applied them to help students acquire reading skills. Accordingly, Klingner and Vaughn (1996) explain CSR as a combination of reading instruction and group work. They add that "the goals of CSR are to improve reading comprehension and increase

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conceptual learning in ways that maximize student's' involvement"(1998, p. 34, cited in Rahayu, 2018). Klingner, Vaughn, Boardman, and Swanson (2012) have divided CSR into before reading (Preview), during reading (Click and Clunk, and Gist strategies), and after reading (Wrap up), which are explained below.

Before Reading

The students and teacher preview the textbook collectively to activate background knowledge and background information, make association between the current topic and prior knowledge, guess what might be learned, and set a specific goal for reading. During this stage, the tutor monitors learners to scan the topic, heading, pictures in the passage. The tutor prompts learners to inspiration and brain storming what they already recognize about the subject and asks them to share ideas with their classmates.

During Reading

During the reading process, students apply a technique called Click and Clunk to examine comprehension and distinguish misunderstanding and unclear vocabularies or notions. When the text makes sense, it clicks; when it does not, it clunks. When students have completed a unit, they apply a fix-up strategy to the unfamiliar vocabularies and notions. First, they re-read the whole sentence with the clunk in it and describe it if they can understand and discover a meaning from contextual hints. Second, they re-read the sentence with the clunk and the sentences before or after, looking for hints to help figure out the clunk.

After Reading

In this stage, students do the activities by answering tutor-like questions regarding the transcript and by recognizing the main ideas in the passage. Students attempt to think of more straightforward questions that need comprehending of the passage as well as connection with prior knowledge.

Based on what was stated above, the following research question were addressed:

Q. How do collaborative strategic reading and reading aloud across individual and collaborative activities promote young students' reading comprehension?

LITERATURE REVIEWS

CSR in Teaching Reading Comprehension

This technique is believed to propose opportunities for foreign language young learners to be involved and engaged in discussion process, to promote critical thinking, to enhance their courage, and to spread their willingness to take responsibility for their own learning. Moreover, working in groups can improve the learners' self-steam and confidence as each of them can take on crucial roles in their argument and debate. In fact, students feel that they have made vital contributions throughout the learning procedure. Gani, Yusuf, and Susiani (2016) investigated the effects of using Collaborative

Strategic Reading (CSR) in teaching reading to EFL learners. They also examined students' response to the implementation of collaborative strategic reading in foreign language. They concluded that the students replied positively toward the use of CSR to support them improve their reading understanding. They also indicated that the learners who were trained reading using Collaborative strategic reading attained better marks than those who were trained using the non-collaborative strategic reading method. This is supported in a recent study by Hong et al. (2020) who believe that "quantitative and qualitative analyses indicate that the use of Knowledge Forum technology in the class supported the development of higherlevel reading comprehension skills through sustaining creative, collaborative work".

Many researchers have conducted the studies in the field of CSR. They have indicated that collaborative strategic reading comprises reading comprehension strategy instruction and cooperative learning. Klingner et al. (1998) mentioned that collaborative strategic reading can aid monitor learners' understanding through participating in groups. In addition; collaborative strategic readings have positive effect on students' reading achievement in foreign and second language. Wang (2008) also discovered in his study that since collaborative strategic reading can efficiently promote learners' reading comprehension, it also improves students' motivation in the process of learning.

Framework of the Study

This research is established on socio-cultural theory and dual coding theory. Socio-cultural theory basically highlights the role of social interaction and language as critical mediators of the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). As cited by Lantolf (2006) as well as Clark and Graves (2005), the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a central conception in socio-cultural theory that clarifies the imperative role of educators as mediators and is at the corn of the concept of scaffolding, explaining "what an individual can achieve when participating in cooperation with others versus what he or she could have accomplished without partnerships with others" (Zuengler & Miller, 2006, p.39). Socio-cultural theory, posited by Vygotsky (1978) seems to afford the explanation for the role of teachers in young learners' reading.

Moreover, it provides a theory for predicting how teachers are engaged with students' in the process of learning.

Dual Coding Theory was presented by Paivio (1971). He found that a combination of word with picture can increase young learners' reading, and make young learners interested in reading vocabulary. Actually, Paivio believed that children's reading skills are improved when they establish a straight connection between the terms of pictures and the terms of words. Dual coding theory of Paivio (1971) highlighted the importance of providing input for both the visual representational system and the verbal representative system because image traces are remembered better than are verbal components. Originally, dual coding theory developed to account for verbal and nonverbal influences on memory. According to Paivio (1971), there are two kinds of memory coding in image system and a verbal system. Verbally presented material is encoded only in the verbal system while visually presented material is encoded both verbal and image system.

The theories presented above, were the basis of this study because they highlight numerous details and reasons that may help to investigate reading sessions across collaborative and individual reading. The two theories are represented in the following figure.



Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

METHODOLOGY

Design

The design used in the current study was qualitative in nature, involving face to face interview, observation and interaction with teachers to get insider's perspective.

Participants

The participants of this study were twofold: 2 Iranian teachers selected from a primary school in Tehran, and 16 Iranian primary school students in grade two. They were both randomly selected for the purposes of this study.

Instruments

The instruments used in this study were face-toface interviews, teachers' reflective journals, and participant observation in some sessions. These instruments were applied in a triangulation manner to collect and analyze the data.

Face-to-face Interview

The face-to-face interview provides an opportunity for both the researcher and the participants to clarify questions asked by the researcher or responses given by participants. This is to make sure the participants (teachers) can express their view and perception towards students' reading in foreign language. The interview used in this study included closeended questions and open-ended questions. Open-ended questions encourage teachers to play an active role in the interview process. In fact, open-ended questions in the interview encouraged teachers to disclose their own reaction and feelings. The questions were clear and direct. In close-ended questions, the researcher asked questions to which the teachers were expected to answer (See Appendix A). Before the interview began, the interviewer explained the reason for the interview. Background questions and demographic questions were sequenced at the beginning and specific questions on issues under study at the end. At the beginning, common questions were asked in order to obtain the information from respondents (See Appendix B).

Procedures

This study was performed in 16 sessions over a period of 12 weeks. The operations performed in this study include carrying out interviews with the teachers, asking teachers for reflections, and observing some of the participants in some reading sessions. After the last session teachers of students were interviewed individually. In face-to-face interviews, teachers' perceptions, experiences and comments were recorded. The questions used in the interview were close-ended and open-ended. Also, audio tape recording was used to ensure that teachers do the reading activities and apply the reading activities appropriately.

Therefore.

RESULTS

This section will present the results concerning the posed research question based on the following themes: being independent reader, actively engaging in the process of reading and giving corrective feed back.

Being independent reader

Based on the researcher's observation, teachers made the students participate as readers, i.e., the teacher read the text and asked different kind of questions about the text. Also, the teacher read the text aloud and then the student read alone while the teacher listened, or the teacher read one page, and let the student read alone the next page. In collaborative reading, students took turn in reading or read together. Moreover, teachers applied the preview strategy, the first stage in collaborative strategic reading, by asking various questions about the topic to brainstorm and make students ready for the activity. The aim of preview stage was to activate students' prior knowledge. Therefore, students talked to the whole class about their ideas and were more likely to read. This helped them to become independent readers. Also, group discussion made the students feel more comfortable and confident in comprehension. As a result of this, students could improve their self-confidence and become independent readers.

Generally speaking, through reading aloud and collaborative strategic reading, teachers made the students part of the reading session. readers. In fact, teachers provided opportunities for passive and dependent students. They involved them in the discussion process to take responsibility for their learning and become independent in reading, the students felt that they had made crucial participation during their education. Actually, during reading sessions, instead of depending too much on the teacher, students were observed to learn from each other and read independently. **Giving Corrective Feedback**

students become independent

Another significant result of the data analysis was giving corrective feedback. Corrective feedback promotes an interactive teacherstudent relationship and student-student relationship while reading is presented. In this study, based on the researcher's observation, the teachers' technique in correcting errors illustrated a tendency of giving immediate feedback rather than encouraging the students to give correct words. As a result of this, less communication and teacher-student interaction and peer interaction occurred during the reading sessions. Actually, very little focus was given to the use of language for communication in teachers' instruction. This left the students with very few opportunities to receive feedback on their language use. Also, it was observed that peer correction happened in the reading sessions. In fact, peer correction in class happens when a student gives a response and teacher asked a class. In the participants' interview, the teachers expressed that the

involvement of peers in the correction process makes the classroom atmosphere more supportive and friendly. Peer correction is implemented in classrooms to enhance learners' cooperation, interaction and involvement in reading process so it can improve their reading ability.

It should be noted that in collaborative reading, the teacher did not always correct students' errors immediately. She/he just acted as a facilitator so that students themselves could be involved in the process of correcting errors in the reading process.

The researcher's observation and teachers' reflective journal also revealed that some students felt reluctant to correct their friends' errors. They indicated that some students might feel reluctant to correct their friends' errors because correcting friends' errors might harm their relationship. In addition, in group work students might feel reluctant about giving their work to their peers for correction because they do not want their classmates know about their errors.

All in all, during reading sessions, that is, teacher-student reading and student-student reading, through error correction, the teachers encouraged their students to understand their mistakes by repeating or emphasizing on their mistakes. The aims of this error correction technique were to get the students to notice their errors, to remind them of their errors and sometimes to teach them what they were reading wrong. It should be mentioned that in this study, the engagement of peers in the correction procedure made the class situation more helpful and pleasant.

Being Involved in Reading Process

Based on the researcher's observation, asking and answering questions in reading provided a chance for the student to get involved in and improve their reading. Furthermore, support from teachers and peers was a significant factor in this respect. Actually, when the students knew that they were supported by their teachers and classmates, they tended to involve more actively and make a better attempt in their reading process. In addition, a strong correlation between young learners'' success in reading in the foreign language and teachers' participation and support with their students, was observed. Some of the teachers in their journals stated the following:

1.My students interact well with me during reading the book by asking and answering questions.

2.Asking and answering questions in reading sessions at class can encourage my students to participate in reading because it provides the opportunity for my students to express their understanding of the text more openly. Through open-ended questions I asked my students to express their opinions about the content of the book.

3.During reading the text, I asked my students some open-ended questions and it helped students to participate in reading. In addition, through conversations, my students made meaning and share."

Again, the researcher's observation showed that there were four steps for engaging the students in the reading process. The first step was asking questions, the second step was going back to the text (story) and proving the answers to the questions were correct, the third step was making a connection between pictures and the content of the text, and the fourth step was giving the students' opinion about the text story. Through these steps, the students understood the content gist of the book.

Roughly speaking, through teacher-student interaction and peer interaction, the students became active learners. The open-ended questions during reading the text encouraged them to get involved in the process of learning both in collaborative reading and individual reading. In fact, open-ended questions played a crucial role in encouraging students to become active in the reading process. In fact, through open-ended questions, teachers captured their students' mind with the text events and involved them in the process of reading Generally, collaborative reading, peer interaction and working in the group supported the students to grasp the content of their reading, to foster their comprehension, and to help them become more thoughtful, purposive readers and to more active learners.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the reading sessions across collaborative and individual activities recognizing barriers, students' response and interaction. The researcher investigated the effect of teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction on reading in foreign language development among young learners. The results of the qualitative analysis showed that teacher-student interaction and peer interaction caused significant improvement in students' reading.

Here, the answer to the posed research question can be given in relation to three themes as follows: independent reader, actively engaged in the process of reading and giving corrective feedback. The results revealed that reading aloud to the students and reading with teacher can make the students independent readers and had positive effect on their reading skill development. This is in line with Neuman, Copple, and Bredekamp (2000) who found that reading aloud and reading with the teacher are two of the most important activities which can be implemented for successful reading. In their study they concluded that reading aloud and reading with teacher can help the students to understand the content and structure of books when they read independently. Gibson, Gold, and Sgouros (2007) too discovered that through reading aloud and interactive reading between teacher and learners, learners become independent readers and it can develop their reading comprehension. The results also revealed that teacher-students reading by using appropriate reading activities like reading short stories, using picture flash cards, can make students independent readers.

As for the second theme, that is, being actively engaged in the process of reading, the results indicated that through teacher-student interaction, and peer interaction, the students became active learners. In fact, the open-ended questions during reading the text encouraged students to get involved in the process of learning both in collaborative reading and individual reading. Also, through open-ended questions, teachers captured their students' mind with the text events and involved them in the process of reading. At first teacher asked their students simple questions about the content of the book e.g. "What did lion eat?" and then followed their answers to ask questions with further related questions. During the interaction, teachers encouraged the students to give full answers, which helped them to become interested in the conversation and get involved in the process of reading. In fact, when teachers and students read together, discussions happened and through discussion students were involved in the process of learning and became active learners. This is in agreement with Neuman (2000), who stated that teacher-students reading activities and strategies like reading aloud, asking openended questions, and teachers' support can help the students to get involved in reading process and improve their reading in foreign language. By the same token, Goodenow (1993) and Wentzel (1994) maintained that interaction and support from teacher and peer is a significant factor that may influence student learning achievement, that is, when students recognize that they are supported by their teacher, they tend to involve more actively and make a better attempt in their work.

In connection with giving corrective feedback, the teacher encouraged their students to understand their mistake by repeating or emphasizing on their mistakes. Thus, the results showed that immediate response gave more impact and helped the students to be aware of errors on particular concepts that they made. It is to be mentioned that in the present study, giving immediate feedback rather than encouraging students to give correct words was observed. This is in accord with Brown (2016), stating that tutor class feedback to learners would give them the message that errors are not bad but that most errors are good indicators that inherent acquisition abilities are alive and well. He indicated that errors are commonly indicators of features of the new language that are still developing. It should be mentioned that in this study, the engagement of peers in the correction procedure made the class circumstance more supportive and friendlier in reading sessions. Peer correction is applied in classrooms to improve learners' collaboration, interaction and participation in reading process so it can improve students reading ability.

The analysis of the data obtained from the researcher's observation and teachers' reflective journal indicated that some students might feel reluctant to correct their friends' errors. They indicated that some learners might feel hesitant to correct their classmates' mistakes since correcting classmates' mistakes might damage their relationship. In addition; learners might feel reluctant about giving their work to their peers for correction because they do not want their classmates to know about their mistakes. In the same line, Harmer (2004) anticipated a possible problem with peer correction. He indicated that learners, after being corrected by a peer, might feel that they are inferior to their peers. In such cases, students prefer to be corrected by the teacher gently.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that dual coding theory can be used to illuminate the way EFL reading tasks and materials must be designed. However, materials developers should comprise appealing pictures as well as verbal assistance that improve EFL young learners' reading. In fact, young learners are unaware of the English language and such pictorial, visual and verbal supports will greatly help them. It can also be concluded that young EFL learners benefit from collaborative and individual readings that are based on dual coding theory and socio-cultural theory. In fact, students feel that through two techniques can make crucial cooperation during the process of learning and in order to be independent readers, and that collaborative reading can build up their self-confidence. The findings further showed that reading sessions across individual and collaborative activities provide an opportunity for students to engage in reading process. The final conclusion drawn from the findings of the study is that error correction promotes an interactive teacher-student relationship while reading is going on. Actually, during reading sessions in teacher-student reading and studentstudent reading, through error correction teacher can encourage the students to understand their mistakes by repeating or emphasizing on their mistakes. The aim of this error correction technique is to get the students to notice their errors, to remind them of their errors and sometimes to teach them what they reading Furthermore, wrong. error are

correction and peer correction promote an interactive teacher-student relationship and student-student relationship while reading is taking place.

The findings of the present study have implications for researchers and educators, that is, Iranian teachers of young students should teach in a way to foster students' positive attitudes towards reading in foreign language. Although the study was done on a limited number of participants, it has wider implications that may redefine the role of teachers in collaborative and individual reading sessions. Young learners need guidance and assistance. In countries where there are no structured reading programs, teachers must change and authorities (the Ministry of Education and schools) must play a direct role in order to ensure that teacher-student reading activities and student-student reading activities are practiced and are significantly beneficial.

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APPENDIX A

Close-ended Questions

Yes	NO	Questions
		1. Does your students interact well with you during reading sessions at class?
		Can you involve your students in reading by asking and answering questions?
		2. Does reading activities in teacher-student reading and collaborative
		reading make your students become independent readers?
		3. Does using pictures draw your students' attention to focus on the meaning
		of the story?
		4. Do collaborative and individual reading with your students lead to
		discussions in the class?
		5. Do your students enjoy when reading with you? Can you make your
		students become interested in reading?
		6. Does your participation with your students cause positive or negative effect
		on their reading in the foreign language? What about peer interaction and peer
		support?
		7. Are your students interested in participating in group work during reading
		sessions?
		8 Does brain storming occur through open-ended questions during pre-stage
		reading?
		9. Does the interaction between teacher and the student and peer interaction
		make students participate as readers and improve their self-confidence in
		collaborative reading?
		10. Do your students have a desire for the implementation of reading activities
		in reading sessions?

APPENDIX B

Open-ended Questions

1.What do you do during reading with your students to make them understand the text better?

2. How do you help the students to recognize and read unknown words, when they faced them? 3. How do you respond to the students when they make errors in reading in the foreign language?

4. How ready do you think your students are to read independently in the foreign language compared to other students who are not supported by their teacher?

5.What are the most common barriers and problems you have experienced in reading with

your students during collaborative and individual reading?

6. What are the possible strategies to solve students' barriers?

7. What is the students' reaction to the implementation of collaborative and individual reading?

8. How do your students benefit from reading with you and from reading with their classmate?

9. How do you feel about reading with your students in foreign language? Do you think

reading with your students goes well? What about collaborative reading? (student-student reading)? Does collaborative reading go well? 10. What are the potential impacts of teacherstudent interaction in reading sessions across individual and collaborative activities on students' reading in foreign language?

11. How many stages do the reading sessions process have in collaborative and individual reading?

Biodata

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