Research Paper

Effects of Applying "Talk about Picture" Instruction Strategies on Pre-intermediate and Upper-intermediate EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

The present study was an endeavor to explore the impact of using "talk about picture" instruction strategy on pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension performance of a language institute in Urmia, Iran. Also, students' views on the use of this strategy in EFL classes and their effect on their reading comprehension were assessed. To this end, 60 students (males and female) studying at pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate level in wo language institutes in Urmia, north-west of Iran were chosen through convenience sampling. The students were classified into two groups of experimental and control groups. The teaching technique of the experimental group was managed by "talk about picture" to establish a set of five-session treatments, the posttest on the reading comprehension test (PET for pre-intermediate and OPT for upper-intermediate) were conducted. The results revealed that the employment "talk about picture" strategy significantly affected the EFL learners' reading comprehension also they could have pedagogical implications for language teachers, learners, and syllabus designers.

Keywords: Pre-intermediate learners, upper-intermediate learners, reading comprehension, talk about picture instruction

INTRODUCTION

Every language has four key skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. Among these skills, due to their feasibility and availability, some attract the attention of teachers compared to others. Reading and speaking have long been considered as highly attended language skills. In the present study, guided by integrative approach of teaching language skills and employing "talk about" technique, the researchers are interested in fostering learners reading skills. Due to its significant role in improving students' learning processes and outcomes, reading has always been among the hotly researched and debated skills among scholars, researchers and teachers as well (Dhillon, Herman, & Syafryadin, 2020). There are several reasons why reading is considered as one of the major language skills. The important role assigned to reading skill in enhancing language development (Oxford, 2016) can be attributed to several reasons. First, reading is considered to be the most pervasive input available for learners. This is particularly the case in English Language in Foreign (EFL) contexts. In EFL contexts, learners have limited exposure to authentic language outside the classroom, and within the classroom the most prevalent input resource accessible to learners is through reading texts (Richards, Richards, & Renandya, 2002).

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Krashen (1985) who is known as the father of comprehensible input hypothesis, highlights the role of input especially comprehensible input in acquiring a language. Extending Krashen's model, Long (1996) introduces interaction hypothesis and suggests that, what is needed for language acquisition to take place is not just comprehensible input, he further highlights the role of interaction and its facilitative role in language learning. Accordingly, exposure to large amount of comprehensible input will be beneficial for language development and it further accelerates language acquisition process (Grabe, 1991). Thereby, reading comprehension is one of the most feasible ways through which exposure to language input can be facilitated.

Another reason for considering reading as an important skill is concerned with the point that reading skill can act as a preliminary step for improving and facilitating learning other skills (Richards et al., 2002). Conforming the significant role played by reading, Kern (2014) suggests that not only reading provides learners with conventions of the language, but it also helps learners get acquainted with cultural values and beliefs which help language use to be shaped. In a similar vein ,Bright and McGregor (1970) stated that "where there is little reading, there will be little language learning" (p. 52). Nowadays, in agreement with Hinkel (2006), it is generally believed that language skills should be integrated (Anderson, 2012; Ferris, 2012; Oxford, 2016). It is reasonably argued that even in our everyday lives, we are rarely isolating language skills; rather, we mix language skills for various purposes. Additionally, Harmer (2007) justified skill-mixing arguing that mixing skills renders natural language learning processes and maximizes learning opportunities for learners. Guided by the abovementioned conclusions concerning integrating language skills, in the present study, the authors will integrate reading and speaking skills.

Previous Research
As it was discussed, the main aim of this study was an endeavor to explore the effect of "talking about pictures" instruction strategy on EFL learners' reading skill. Accordingly, the goal of this literature review was firstly to introduce the related theoretical frameworks and then to summarize the history of using these two different visual strategies in English language learning classes. In addition, in this chapter, some local studies on the using these strategies were reported.

For the purpose of this study, different theoretical frameworks can be introduced and used such as Theory of Mental Models (Johnson-Laird, 1983), Transmediation Theory (Siegel, 1995), and The Repetition Hypothesis (Gyselinck & Tardieu, 1999). However, the most comprehensive one is on predicting the relationship between visuals and reading comprehension is Dual Coding Theory (Paivio & Clark, 2006; Sadoski & Paivio, 2004). In the following lines, this theoretical framework of the study was completely explained and elaborated.

DCT is the theoretical framework on which this study was based. As mentioned above, it, indeed, deals with the relationship between the visual materials and reading comprehension. Paivio (1990) maintained that words and visuals require different cognitive processes and they also have different cognitive representation. Inasmuch as they ask for different cognitive requirements, the human mind calls its different systems for different pieces of information it receives. For instance, the human mind uses the verbal system for verbal information and the imagery system for visual or pictorial information (Yi-Chun & Yi-Ching, 2009). As its name suggests, the verbal system deals with information which is verbal in nature including words, speech, language or whatever is called linguistic codes. However, the imagery system pertains to another type of the codes, that is visual codes such as pictures, images, or any real-world object. Paivio (1990) stated that the information received through these ways moves to its relevant systems for processing.

DCT can explain two different and commonly-discussed processes in reading comprehension process: top-down and bottom-up. The former, also called concept-driven, is contingent to what reader convey to the context from his own personal experience, background, or world knowledge (Brown & Lee, 2015). However, the latter deals with the single direction

part-to-whole processing of a written or printed text (Suraprajit, 2019). To put it simply, in this type of process, the main focus in on the individual words, specific grammatical difficulties, and repeated readings. Regarding bottom-up processes, DCT supposes that readers arrange parts of language and construct mental representations of them using various sensory methods. Having knowledge about these language components and the possible contexts in which they may appear and as a result, creating some mental images based on them can help readers to bring the links between graphemes and phonemes and the sensory realization of the language components including letters, words, phrases and sentences. With reference to what was stated above and based on the goals of the study, the following research questions were addressed:

RQ1. Does "talking about picture" have any significant effect on reading comprehension of Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners?

RQ2. Does "talking about picture" have any significant effect on reading comprehension of Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners?

METHODOLOGY
Participants
The participants of this study consist of 60 males and female EFL learners studying at pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate level in four different classes of two language institutes in Urmia, north-west of Iran. Participants are selected from 8 classes and their age ranged between 13-20 years old. Four classes would be female students and the other four classes would consist of four male classes. Only those learners, whose scores on OPT and PET were one standard deviation below and above the mean were selected. From each group, two classes would be pre-intermediate level and receives 'talk about picture" instructions. In the upper-intermediate groups we would have students with the same instructions. The following table represents students required for the study and classifications.

Table 1
Classifying participants into eight different groups based on the gender, language level, and type of education

Gender groups	Pre-intermediate	Upper-intermediate
Male	Talk about Picture (TAP)	Talk about Picture (TAP)
Female	Talk about Picture (TAP)	Talk about Picture (TAP)

Instruments
Oxford Placement Test (OPT) (Upper-intermediate English homogenization test)
The original pencil-and paper Oxford Placement Test (second version) was initiated by Dave Allen in 1985. It is both easy to organize and empirical at evaluating students into different ranks of performance. This test has online and paper-and pencil versions. The online version test learners' abilities in correct English usage and has a listening section. The pencil-and paper type has three sections. Part 1 evaluates learners' knowledge of grammar, part 2 appraises learners' vocabulary knowledge and part 3 weighs up writing ability.

Preliminary English Test (PET) (Pre-intermediate English homogenization test)
PET: the language proficiency test used in this study was Preliminary English Test (PET). This test was an international examination sanctioning a certain level of mastery of the English language. It was offered by Cambridge English language assessment. It was on intermediate qualification which demonstrates the ability to communicate English for every day purpose. It included reading, writing, speaking and listening. Reading and writing take 1:30', listening 45' and speaking is an interview 10-12minutes.

Design of the Study
The present study is applied research and a quantitative one that uses data for comparison of the instruction strategies that that is applied in the study in the two genders and a specific level of language knowledge. Based on the nature of the study, the design of the study would ignore gender differences, but concerns the two approaches and the two different levels of language knowledge. Based on the study, 2 research

questions and hypotheses are proposed. The first question would examine the effect of TAP in students of pre-intermediate level in case of their reading comprehension. The second question will consider the effect of TAP in students of upper-intermediate level on reading comprehension performances of Iranian EFL learners.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection procedure includes planning. Planning is believed as the preparations of actions and procedures used in one cycle to achieve the objectives stated before the process of teaching and learning. In the planning steps, some activities will be planned as follows; 1) Preparing a lesson plan, and 2) Preparing pictures and activities that are going to be used in the process of teaching and learning speaking and reading comprehension.

The goal of acting is to implement the arrangements of actions and procedures in order to grasp the objectives of teaching and its criteria. In this step, the researchers are as an English teacher and are helped by a collaborator. The collaborator is needed to help the researcher evaluating the performance of the subjects in learning speaking. The researcher arranges to teach speaking and reading by using pictures. The tasks and activities that are going to be conducted in the process of teaching and learning will be followed in 12 sessions.

Instructional Materials

The textbooks employed in the present study were *Top Notch* series(Ascher & Saslow, 2011), the ones applied in the present study were *Top Notch 2A* for pre-intermediate level and *Summit 1A* for the upper-intermediate level. Generally, the *Top-Notch* series consist of 12 textbooks on the whole. They are written by Joan Saslow and Allen Ascher in 2006 and published in the United States by Pearson Longman Incorporation.

The instructional materials used in this study were Talk about Picture (TAP) instructions. TAP instructions were employed for the other one pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate female students. The same procedure was applied to the male students.

RESULTS

The results revealed that employing pictures as a teaching aid can help with language learning in general, and speaking and reading comprehension in particular. These approaches can also be used to help pupils improve their learning abilities as well as their performance in the classroom. When students are taught with visuals, they are less likely to become bored, have less language anxiety, have more fun, gain more confidence, and be more motivated to speak (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005). Likewise, the usage of visuals attracts the attention of students, expands their imagination, and makes for a more engaging learning environment.

As a result, given the importance of speaking and reading comprehension in a foreign language in today's globalized world, using pictures and employing various ways for incorporating pictures into language courses can be one of the problem's remedies. According to the existing literature, the presence of visuals has a moderately beneficial influence on learners' reading comprehension and speaking ability. Similarly, it has been suggested that including pictures into our teachings can help to remove the fear from our students.

The present study was an endeavor to explore the effects of the use of visuals on both speaking and reading comprehension of the participants along two proficiency levels. Briefly, the independent variables of the study were talk about pictures and proficiency level along pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate levels; however, the participants' speaking as well as reading comprehension were considered as the dependent variables. In what follows the discussion of the results of the three research questions of the study.

The first and second research questions addressed the effects of talking with picture strategy on the lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate level participant' reading comprehension. In both groups, the reading comprehension scores of the participants whose reading text were accompanied by *talk with picture* were higher than that of the group with no picture. These findings evidenced that the use of talk with picture had a supportive effect on the participants' reading comprehension. This

facilitating effect applies to both lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate level participants. Therefore, the findings rejected both of the related null hypotheses.

What such results suggest is that the use of pictures assisted the participants' reading comprehension. The supportive effect of the use of the *talk with picture* strategy can be partially explained by the fact that the use of pictures has the potential to help the participants to guess the meanings of the unknown words (Renkl & Scheiter, 2017). Thus, the use of pictures helps students make intelligent guess. Learner may resort to the pictures when they encounter difficulty in understanding the text. Looking at the pictures helps students to recognize some clues which, in turn, will help them understand the text (Adnan & Ritzhaupt, 2018).

In a similar vein, using visuals has the added benefit of assisting participants in making inferences. To put it another way, the inclusion of pictures enhances the text and encourages readers to create rational connections between words and images (Serafini, 2010). Furthermore, readers intentionally undertake analyses and comparisons of what they have noticed while reading during the reading comprehension process. When the reader has difficulty understanding the text's verbal input (e.g., vocabulary and structure), the visuals can help focus the reader's attention on the linguistic input, especially at lower levels. Students were able to deduce meaning from the text with the help of the graphics.

Additionally, as Thornbury (2006) asserted, visualizing pictures is an appropriate way to produce new and various words or to make a connection between an abstract word with some mental image and schemata. Accordingly, since learners have mental images in their mind about some specific words, they can easily member words and use them. The more they practice with them, the more they remember words and the more appropriately they use them.

Finally, because many students find learning to read and speak to be challenging jobs, it is probable that attractive graphics that accompany the text will make the task of learning to read a little more enjoyable. The current study adds to the growing body of evidence that using

pictures (both talk with pictures and talk about pictures) has similar good impacts on comprehension and speaking abilities, showing the flexible potential of pictures in aiding language learning. As a result, it was discovered that the use of visual resources has aided both teachers and students in language learning, particularly in boosting speaking abilities and reading comprehension through the creation of a dynamic, enjoyable, and most importantly, effective learning environment.

DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to delve into the meaning, importance, and relevance of our results concerning the impact of "talk about picture" instruction strategies on reading comprehension among pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate EFL learners.

Summary of Main Results

To begin writing a good discussion section, it is essential first to provide a brief summary of the main results and how they answer the research question or hypothesis. The results revealed that employing "talk about picture" as a teaching aid significantly affected EFL learners' reading comprehension. Specifically, the reading comprehension scores of participants whose reading texts were accompanied by pictures were higher than those without pictures. This facilitating effect applied to both pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate level participants, thus rejecting both related null hypotheses.

Findings

The supportive effect of using the "talk about picture" strategy can be partially explained by its potential to help participants guess the meanings of unknown words. By resorting to pictures when encountering difficulties in understanding the text, students could recognize clues that enhanced their comprehension. Furthermore, the inclusion of pictures encouraged readers to create rational connections between words and images, making for a more engaging learning environment. This aligns with the Dual Coding Theory (DCT), which posits that visual materials facilitate reading comprehension by leveraging different cognitive processes and

representations (Paivio & Clark, 2006). Additionally, visuals expanded students' imagination and provided an enjoyable learning atmosphere, reducing language anxiety and increasing motivation to speak (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005). As Thornbury (2006) asserted, visualizing pictures helps produce new and various words or make connections between abstract words and mental images, aiding memory retention and appropriate usage.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to see how effective pictures are at improving reading comprehension and speaking skills in lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate students. There were two methods used: talking with the picture and talking about the picture. In the following sections first, we will summarize the related findings. Following that the associated implications are explicated. In the final section, the suggestions for the future research are presented.

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