Shared Reading: A Technique to Enhance Reading and Writing Abilities of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

The present study attempted to introduce shared reading as one of the most effective techniques in cultivating the learners' reading and writing abilities. To this end, 50 homogenous students were assigned to the control and experimental groups following the administration of a standardized English proficiency test. Thenceforth, based on writing and reading pretest scores of the learners on a general proficiency test, it was concluded that the two groups were homogeneous in terms of the two language skills. During the treatment, the experimental group was instructed through the shared reading technique whereas the control group practiced reading through traditional techniques. Afterward, both groups took part in reading and writing posttests identical to the ones used as the pretests. Using a t-test, the researcher found that the treatment had a significant effect on both reading and writing abilities of the experimental groups. The main concern of this study was to introduce shared reading technique as a useful technique in enhancing the proficiency of the Iranian EFL learners in reading and writing skills.

1. Introduction

Reading and writing, as two communicative activities,need to be supported and fostered during the language learning process. Day by day more EFL learners feel the necessity to improve these two skills in order to fulfill their requirements in both educational and non-educational fields. This growing need for EFL reading and writing has created a variety of capacities to which ESL instructors can contribute.

In the past, reading was considered as a primary leisure activity. However, with the advancement of technology, reading skill is losing its previous place among people in general and specifically in students' lives. Although some signs of interest can be observed in reading classes, it still involves a short term activity solely done in class. Thus, selecting techniques which can change reading to a long term activity is necessary. Reading can be seen as an interactive process between a reader and a text which leads to automaticity or reading fluency (Celce-Murcia, 2001). In the process of reading, the reader interacts dynamically with the text as he/she tries to elicit meaning and where various kinds of knowledge are being used.

Shared reading technique creates the necessary setting which is required in both reading and writing classes. Shared reading assists learners not by doing tasks in isolation, or drilling structures out of context, but by interacting and using language in a community of language learners. As it can be inferred from Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (1978), effective learning does not occur in a vacuum but in collaboration with more capable others. Depending on various factors, a teacher will provide various levels of assistance over various tasks. The goal is to

allow students to do as much as they can on their ownbefore the teacher interferes and supports the successful completion of the task. This environment resembles the atmosphere of a shared reading class. The teacher's authority may have a special influence over EFL students who often lack confidence in their ability to express themselves in the foreign language (Hyland, 2000).

The concept of shared reading was first developed by Holdaway in New Zealand in the early 1980's (Mei, 1999). Button and Johnson (cited in Militante, 2006) state that the main purpose of shared reading is to make shared opportunities for students to develop the strategies of sampling, predicting, confirming, and self-correcting for future independent use. Shared reading can facilitate the collaboration between students and peers with teachers and can provide a non-threatening context in which the reading process can be modeled and the use of effective reading strategies can be encouraged. Besides, rereading a text at different points over a period of time assists learners to focus on meaning and engage in the activity with greater enthusiasm and higher self-esteem. Furthermore, it makes the observation of the process of reading possible for teachers and provides them with the opportunity to use a certain passage for different teaching purposes including attention to word awareness, writing, and listening for a particular feature of language as well as listening for a purpose. The chance to become familiar with the target text prior to the reading process helps learners to easily take part in class discussions, enjoy the activity, wonder about what they read, explore new ideas, and thus fully comprehend the reading material (Militante, 2006).

According to Parkes (2000), the purposes of shared reading include providing students with enjoyable reading experiences, introducing them

to a variety of authors and illustrations and the ways they can reach the meaning of the texts. The second important purpose is to teach students systematically and explicitly how to become readers themselves. It is this second purpose that distinguishes shared reading from reading-aloud. The teacher models effective reading skills, strategies, and behaviors repeatedly. Furthermore, the language and pictures in shared reading resources provide a rich context for discussion. As Moony (cited in Parkes, 2000) points out, " Personal satisfaction from and the enjoyment of the story, as well as the conviction that reading is worthwhile and that it is for them personally, should be the long term effect of any shared book experience"(p.30).

It is critically important to choose the right resources for shared reading. The texts must delight the students, offer opportunities for cooperation among the students, and have sufficient substance to support rereading. Cooper (2001) believes that different types of texts can be used in a variety of ways. Since the teacher scaffolds the texts, the chosen texts can be more difficult than the average student's reading ability. However, the texts can be leveled or placed in a sequence of difficulty progressing from simple to more complex using different sets of criteria depending on the age and grade level. Additionally, the content and layout must support the teacher's efforts; the text must be worth coming back to many times and many purposes, and invite collaborative meaning making (Ashton, 1996).

Activating participation in the reading process is the shared reading's target.Typically, on rereading the book, the teacher encourages the students to join in and the conversation afterwards focuses on textual features and reading strategies (Lawson, 2009). In these and other ways the text becomes a collaborative effort involving thinking, talking,

reading, and problem solving. Teachers can introduce shared book reading to the students from the first session. While some students will talk about the illustrations, some will listen and watch as the teacher points to the words and reads, a few will predict what might happen next, but all will be acting and feeling like readers; teachers should follow the students' activities and explore their thinking.

In order to conduct a class in shared reading technique, teachers need to apply some reading strategies that can facilitate comprehension of the text. According to Richards and Renandya (2002) "having an effective strategic reading entails a number of classroom processes: general strategy discussion, teacher modeling, student reading, analysis of strategies used by the teacher or by students when thinking aloud, and explanation of individual strategies on a regular basis" (p. 289). Before any instruction can take place, teacher's knowledge and understanding of the strategy must be established. As Parkes (2000) maintains, shared reading in the classroom contributes to the establishment of a friendly atmosphere as well as more active participation of the learners; it enhances collaboration and negotiation of meaning and provides the learners with the opportunity to make life-to-text and text-to-text relation. Likewise, Nichols (2008) puts more focus on feedback aspect of shared reading. She believes a key to supporting students in developing independent abilities is the teachers' informative feedback. In this way students learn to take charge and to make decisions about text choice. This aspect of shared reading, if implemented in our present educational system, can help students to reach a level of capability to present their ideas even about the theme of the passage or the choice of words. Teachers in a shared reading class should ask their students to develop the ability to think purposefully on their own. Nichols believes that during shared

and guided reading, teacher feedback should be offered throughout the lesson and then repeated during the lesson briefly. This will develop partnership, thinking and talking together.

Progressively, more EFL students are seeking writing help especially at college and university centers. This trend emphasizes the complementary role of the writing process in EFL instruction and brings about social and cognitive challenges related to foreign language learning. The ability to writewell is not a naturally acquired skill; it is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in instructional settings or other environments. Also, the increase in writing research has been due to a response to the current trend in testing the skill in different areas (Gomez, Parker, Lara-Alecio, & Gomez, 1996).As put forward by Hadley (cited in Myles, 2002), writing can be viewed as a continuum of activities that range from the most mechanical aspects on the one end, to the more complex act of composing on the other end. According to Myles (2002), writing in second language requires conscious effort and practice in composing, developing, and analyzing ideas. Hence, students' writing in a foreign language necessitates their proficiency in the foreign language.

Extensive research signifies that students learn and create language not by doing paper tasks in isolation, or drilling structures out of context, but by interacting and manipulating language and by engaging in meaningful use of language in a community of language learners. Kroll (1990) maintains that teaching writing needs to be based on a broad and comprehensive picture. This picture must account for the contributions of the writer, reader, text and context, as well as their interaction and implies formulating adequate and appropriate approaches based on viable theories of the nature of writing.

Moreover, some educators claim that for many students traditional reading classesare difficult and even painful to tolerate (Ghosn, 1997). Since language is an interactive process, students learning a language need ample opportunities to interact in a meaningful and interesting context. They need to witness the collaboration of their peers and teachers in creating meaningful contexts and participate in negotiating meaning in them. In their study, Eldredge, Reutzel, and Hollingsworth (cited in Kats &Boran, 2004) compared shared reading with reading aloud and found that students in the shared reading group did better than those in the reading aloud group in cases of word-analysis knowledge, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Further, the strategy caused a significant change in the ability of less skilled students to comprehend texts (Kats &Boran, 2004).

Based on the issues discussed above, this study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1- Does shared reading in foreign language classroom have any significant impact on Iranian EFL learners' writing ability?

2- Does shared reading in foreign language classroom assist Iranian EFL learners in the development of reading ability?

2. Methodolgy

2.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 50 (33 males and 17 females) students who were selected based on convenient sampling from the high intermediate level students of an English language school in Tehran. At the onset of the study, the Cambridge Preliminary English Test(PET)was administered and it was proved that the participants were homogeneous

with their scores falling between one standard deviation above and below the mean. The process of homogenizing the participants was to conclude that all further changes in learners' reading and writing ability were due to the received treatment.The two groups were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups with 26 and 24 students in each group respectively.

2.2 Design and procedure

The design of the study was quasi-experimental because randomization was notfeasible. As mentioned earlier, the PET was used to examine the homogeneity of the learners and to enable the researchers to conclude that all further changes in reading and writing abilities of the learners were due to the treatment received. The reading ability of the learners in the two experimental and control groups were compared separately based on the results of the PET. Besides, the writing ability of the learners was examined through a paragraph writing task.The materials from *Total English* were selected carefully to teach specific skills and strategies and to follow the shared reading class goals. Each passage was used in different ways depending on the needs of the students and the teacher's purposes. The treatment which lasted for 30-40 minutes each session, continued for 14 sessions. In each session, the participants received a short passage with an interesting topic and attractive illustrations appropriate for their age.

To achieve the purpose of the study, which was to examine the effectiveness of shared reading techniqueon the reading and writing ability of Iranian EFL learners,the following instruments were used:

The first instrument utilized in the course of this study was the PET to measure the general proficiency of the participants and to ensure that

they all belonged to the same population. The test available at

http://cambridgeesol.org/exams/general-english/pet.html

consists of 80 items including listening (25 questions), English use (20 questions), reading (35 questions) and a writing test. The reliability of the test was estimated through Cronbach's Alpha. Additionally, the reliability of each of the sub-tests was computed separately since the reading sub-test was going to be used for measuring the reading ability of the participants. The time allocated to the test was 70 minutes.

The second instrument employed in the study was a pretest paragraph writing task to evaluate the participants' writing ability and to ensure that there was no significant difference among them prior to the treatment. The writing pretest was then scored holistically by two raters to maximize the reliability of the scoring procedure. At the end of the treatment, the participants were asked to write a paragraph with the same topic as the pretest ("*A note to a friend about your new house")* to determine their writing ability after the treatment which was again scored by the two raters.

Moreover, the reading section of the homogeneity test with 35 multiple choice type reading questions including reading comprehension, cloze test, and matching, was separately scored and used to assess the participants' reading ability before the treatment to ensure that there was no significant difference among them in terms of their reading skill. The same reading test was administered to both groups to determine their improvement on reading ability after the treatment.

The materialswhich wereused in this study were selected from the book *"Total English"* student book- high intermediate section (2006). In order to fulfill the goals of the shared reading technique, the readability of the reading passages selected from this book wascomputed through

Microsoft Office Flesch Reading Ease and wasproved to be higher than the readability of the passages of the course book of the participants.

During the treatment, the primary focus was on the illustrations provided in the book. The students were asked to make guesses based on the topic of each passageand the pictures which were thought to offer them with some semantic information on the text.During this phase thestudents were involved in a meaning making activity while they were looking at illustrations and predicted the content of the passage from the title and guessed what will happen next;also they were encouraged to talk about the setting, characters, and events. Subsequently, the teacher started to point out the new words, depict multi-syllable words, segment them, and ask the students to guess the meaning of each multi-syllable word to support student's word awareness. The next step was making syntactic information. In this phase students used their previous grammar knowledge to predict the next word appearing in the sentences. Students performed this task in groups of three and then the informative feedback of the teacher helped them to continue this activity with more self-esteem. The different steps of the treatment process seemed to assist learners to improve their knowledge on parts of speech.

After working on various aspects of the text, the teacher started to read the textas the first reader,although not in the usual reading aloud style. She paused in needed places and asked for semantic or syntactic questions which the students had previously worked on. If the vocabulary or structure of the passage was too difficult some extra time was allotted for some additional practice. If the teacher thought that the text could be handled by students, the post of reading would shift to them and the reading task was doneby the students who had volunteered or were chosen by the student reader. Afterwards, thestudents were given a cloze

test prepared by the teacher to provide them with some more practice on the new structures and words.

The final step was highlighting three or four key words which could be used as a clue to guide students to give a short summary of each paragraph. Students benefited from these oral summaries as an aid to write a short summary of the whole text. They also could make some questions out of their manuscripts. In this way the students were encouraged to participate in the shared reading activity and thus, interact with peers. The activities enabled learners to evaluate the text, criticize its theme, and try to get inside the writers' head. In order to make life-to-text connection, the students were asked to find similar examples or related themes and were given few minutes to talk about them.

The members of the control group were provided with the same materials during 15 sessions. Reading activity in each session, similar to the experimental group, lasted for 20-30 minutes. The procedure was followed based on the reading aloud task. Before going through the text,the students were given some warm up. Like a typical reading class, the students started to read each passage in a round robin. The new vocabularies were introduced and explained on the boardin advance. When reading the text was completed, thestudents were askedto give a short summary of the content both orally and in written form. The learners were asked to write answers to some inferential and referential questions which were extracted from the text. They were free to discuss their answers with other classmates before writing them down.

A writing task with the same topic as the pretest was given to the learners in both groupsas the posttest and were scored by two raters.The average of the scores of the two raters was considered as the final score of the participants on the writing posttest.

3. Results

In order to check the homogeneity of the participants, the PET was administered to the participants in both of the groups. The reliability of the test was estimated through Cronbach's Alpha which signified a relatively high reliability index($r=0.79$). The descriptive statistics of the language proficiency test and the reliability of the sub-tests of writing, reading, speaking, listening, and use of English are shown in Tables 1 and 2 below:

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the initial language proficiency test

Language Proficiency Test	N	Mean	SD	SEM	Skewness	Std. Error of Skewness	Reliability
Experimental	26	80.903	7.846	1.538	-0.122	0.456	
Control	24	79.635	10.407	2.124	-0.081	0.472	0.79

As it is shown on Table 1, the results of skewness in the proficiency test analysis signified that both distributions met the assumption of normality (the ratio of -0.267 and -0.171 for the experimental and the control groups respectively falling within the range of -1.96 and +1.96).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the subtests of proficiency test

Test	N	Mean	SD	Reliability
Writing	50	3.497	0.692	0.93
Reading	50	25.900	3.759	0.78
Speaking	50	12.860	1.457	0.76
Listening	50	19.440	2.734	0.76

From the total 78 students who took part in the proficiency test, 50 students whose scores on the proficiency test lay between one standard deviation above and below the mean were included in the study and were randomly assigned to two experimental and control groups.

The performance of the two groups on the proficiency test showed remarkable similarities. However, a *t*-test was run in order to make sure that the two groups did not differ significantly before they were exposed to the instructional intervention. It is worth mentioning that the two groups were homogeneous in terms of their variances [F=1.547, p=0.220]. Comparing the means of the two groups with $t(48)$=0.489, p=0.627(two-tailed)indicated that the two groups were homogenous in terms of their language proficiency and belonged to the same population. Table 3 illustrates the results:

Table 3. Comparing means of language proficiency test

Levene's Test for Equality of variances			t-Test for Equality of Means			
	F	Sig.	t	Sig. (2-tailed)	Df	Mean Difference
Equal Variance Assumed	1.547	0.220	0.489	0.627	48	2.593

To ensure that the two groups were homogenous in terms of their reading and writing ability, the participants were asked to write a paragraph and their scores on the reading section of the PET was considered as their reading pretest. The writings of the participants were scored holistically by two raters.

For the writing test, the inter-rater reliability between the two sets of scores was computed. The result (rr= .93) at .05 level of significance

waz larger than the critical value and thus it shows that there was a high correlation between the two sets of the scores. After ensuring the consistency between the two sets of scores of the two raters, the total writing score of each participant was computed through averaging the two rater's scores. After administering the writing pre-test, a *t*-test was run between the mean scores of the writing pretest of the experimental group (M=6.980, SD=1.469) and the control group (M=7.010, SD=1.228) to check whether there was any significant difference between the writing means of the two groups. The descriptive statistics of the writing pre-test is presented in the Tables 4 and 5 below.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the writing pre-test

Groups	N	Mean	SD	SEM	Skewness	Std. Error of Skewness
Experimental	26	6.980	1.469	0.288	0.123	0.467
Control	24	7.010	1.228	0.250	0.177	0.472

Table 5. Comparing means of the writing pre-test

Levene's Test for Equality of variances			t-Test for Equality of Means			
	F	Sig.	t	Sig. (2-tailed)	Df	Mean Difference
Equal Variance Assumed	0.446	0.507	0.077	0.939	48	0.029

As it can be seen in Table 4 the results of the skewness analysis demonstrated that the assumption of normality was observed in both distributions of scores (the ratio of 0.269 and 0.375 for the experimental and the control groups respectively falling within the range of -1.96 and +1.96). Moreover, as the Table 5 signifies with the variance assumed equal [F=0.446, p=0.507], the t-test results indicated that there was no

significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the writing pre-test, t(48)=0.077, p=0.939 (two-tailed) and thus, the two groups belonged to the same population before the treatment.

After administering the writing pre-test a reading pretest was run and a t-test was calculated between the mean score of the reading pretest in experimental groups (M=26.500, SD=3.408) and the control group (M=25.250, SD=4.078) to check whether there was any significant differences between the reading means of the two groups. The descriptive statistics of the reading pre-test are presented in the Tables 6 and 7 below.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of the reading pre-test

Groups	N	Mean	SD	SEM	Skewness	Std. Error of Skewness
Experimental	26	26.500	3.408	0.668	-0.538	0.456
Control	24	25.250	4.078	0.832	0.080	0.472

As it can be seen in Table 6, the results of the skewness of the reading pre-test analysis demonstrated that the assumption of normality was observed in both distributions of scores (the ratio of -1.179 and 0.169 for the experimental and the control groups respectively falling within .(the range of -1.96 and +1.96

Table 7. Comparing means of the reading pre-test

	Levene's Test for Equality of variances		t-Test for Equality of Means			
	F	Sig.	T	Sig. (2-tailed)	Df	Mean Difference
Equal Variance Assumed	1.452	0.234	1.179	0.244	48	1.250

As illustrated in Table 7, with the variance assumed equal [F=1.452, p=0.234], the t-test results indicated that there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the writing pre-test, t(48)=1.179, p=0.244 (two-tailed) and thus, the two groups belonged to the same population before the treatment.

After the treatment, the writing test which was utilized in pretest was again used for the writing posttest. The descriptive statistics of the experimental group (M=7.875, SD=1.139) and the control group (M=6.583, SD=1.150) are demonstrated in Table 8.

Table 8 . Descriptive statistics of the writing post-test

Groups	N	Mean	SD	SEM	Skewness	Std. Error of Skewness
Experimental	26	7.875	1.139	0.221	-0.503	0.456
Control	24	6.583	1.150	0.234	-0.015	0.472

As illustrated in Table 8, the results of the skewness of the writing post-test analysis demonstrated that the assumption of normality was observed in both distributions of scores (the ratio of -1.103 and -0.031 for the experimental and the control groups respectively falling within the range of -1.96 and +1.96).

The means of the two groups on the writing post-test were compared through another t-test. As Table 9shows, F=0.00, p=0.993 confirmed the equality of the variances and t(48)=3.99, p=0.00(two-tailed) suggested that the mean difference 1.291 is significant and the first null hypothesis can be safely rejected. The effect size, using eta squared was 0.24 which indicated a relatively large effect size which means that shared reading by itself accounted for 24% of the overall variance.

Table 9. Comparing means of the writing post-test

Levene's Test for Equality of variances		t-test for Equality of Means					Eta Squared ($\eta^{2)}$)
	F	Sig.	T	Sig. (2-tailed)	Df	Mean Difference	
Equal Variance Assumed	0.00	0.993	3.99	0.00	48	1.291	0.24

After the treatment, also a reading test which was utilized in pre-test again was used for the reading post-test. Again, the results of the skewness analysis signified that both distributions met the assumption of normality(the ratio of -0.151 and -0.224 for the experimental and the control groups respectively falling within the range of -1.96 and +1.96). The descriptive statistics of the experimental group (M=30.269, SD=2.600) and the control group (M=26.583, SD=2.872) are demonstrated in Table 10.

Table 10 . Descriptive statistics of the reading post-test

Groups	N	Mean	SD	SEM	Skewness	Std. Error of Skewness
Experimental	26	30.269	2.600	0.510	-0.069	-0.106
Control	24	26.583	2.872	0.586	0.456	0.472

The means of the two groups on the reading post-test were compared through another t-test. As Table 11 shows, F=0.01, p=0.970 confirmed the equality of the variances and t(48)=4.762, p=0.00(two-tailed) suggested that the mean difference 3.685 is significant and the second null hypothesis can be safely rejected. The effect size, using eta squared

was 0.24 which indicated a relatively large effect size which means that shared reading by itself accounted for 24% of the overall variance.

Table 11. Comparing means of the reading post-test

Levene's Test for Equality of variances			t-test for Equality of Means				Eta Squared ($\eta^{2)}$
	F	Sig.	T	Sig. (2-tailed)	Df	Mean Difference	
Equal Variance Assumed	0.01	0.970	4.762	0.00	48	3.685	0.24

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis and comparison of the results on the post-test revealed that there was a significant difference in the writing posttest scores of the students in the experimental group in comparison to the control group. Also this difference has been seen in the reading posttest scores of the students in the experimental group, in comparison to the control group. Hence, the positive answer to the first research question showed that share reading had a significant impact on the writing ability of the group of EFL learners. Through shared reading, the participants in the experimental group seemed to pay a more careful attention to the syntactic and semantic features of language as compared to the control group. As Militante (2006) put forward, shared reading creates a three-way partnership between the teacher, the author, and the student.The collaboration between the learners and the teacher encouragedthem to read the materials while they were paying attention to others' viewpoints and finding reasons for either agreeing or disagreeing and thus, developing their own personal ideas. The strategy of thinking together

fostered by shared reading could enable them to seek for ideas, organize their thoughts and use them while writing. In fact, shared reading strategies could provide a useful practice in utilizing thinking strategies necessary for successful writing.

The positive answer to the second research question justified the usefulness of shared reading technique in EFL reading classes due to the fact that the technique changed an individual activity to a collaborative taskin which the reading process could be modeled while the learners' focus was on meaning.Through increasing readers' exposure to a wide variety of text types and vocabulary,shared reading couldenhance the reading ability of the EFL learners. Moreover, the secure learning environment encouraged them to join in, and share a reading experience. According to Parkes (2000) the purpose of shared reading is to teach students systematically and explicitly how to be readers and writers themselves.

All in all, it can be concluded that applying shared reading technique could enhance the reading and writing ability of the learners. It can be argued that shared reading technique as powerful educational tool, not only has essential effects on the reading ability of learners (Mei, 1999; Kats &Boran, 2004; Parkes, 2000), but also through providing collaborative tasks can significantly improve students' writing ability.

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