EFL LEARNERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS TEACHERS' READING ALOUD AND READING COMPREHENSION: A GENDER-BASED STUDY

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Abstract

The present study was developed in order to investigate the relationship between teacher's reading aloud and Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension, based on their gender. The participants of the study were 70 male ($n = 31$) and female ($n = 39$) pre-intermediate EFL learners who were selected based on their performance on English language placement test called Oxford Placement Test (OPT).They were assigned to two equal groups of control and experimental. Theexperimental group received the read aloud instruction while control group received reading instruction through routine methods, both in six sessions. In every session, the participants received a reading comprehension test. The first three tests were regarded as pretest and the second three tests, as posttest. The results of independent sample t-test showed that there is significant difference between the control and experimental group on their performance on posttest. Therefore, reading aloud instruction was effective in enhancing Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension ability. It was also found there is no significant difference between male and female EFL learners' reading comprehension ability.
Keywords: Reading aloud, reading comprehension, gender

1.1 Introduction

Nowadays, learning foreign languages becomes a fundamental requirement to gain professional and academic success as the majority of scientific studies are published in English. Reading is considered as one of the receptive skills of language learning; however, reading ability and proficiency has always indicated the level of literacy. Its importance is also augmented with regard to the different functions it serves. Being able to gain information through written texts, having fun and pleasure as a result of reading magazines, novels, anecdotes, etc., and being skillful enough to get the daily business done, are some of the functions that reading fulfills.

Reading in a second language involves a complex cognitive process with a high degree of difficulty. Through the passage of time, various styles, techniques and strategies of reading instruction have been taken into consideration, including receptive reading, reflective reading, skim reading, scanning, intensive and extensive reading. What determines the speed and the strategy used for reading is certainly the purpose for which the reader is processing the text. Teachers have had a crucial responsibility in equipping students with the most modern reading strategies. Various experiments have been done in the realm of comprehension (Hedge, 2008; Nunan, 2004; Richards &Renandya, 2002).

Among various types of instructional reading comprehension techniques, reading aloud is the most available and common one. Anderson, Hiebert, Wilkinson and Scott(1985)stated that "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (p.33). Reading aloud is one of the strategies that activate learners' prior knowledge and enables them to apply this information while they read (Pardo, 2004). For teachers, reading aloud provides a precious opportunity for students to learn vocabulary, as well as reading skills and strategies (Cunningham, 2006).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

As a skill full of fruitful attainments, reading has a fundamental value for EFL learners. However, due to lack of familiarity with appropriate strategies, most of the learners have profound problems and passive role in reading comprehension process. In spite of a common theory among English learners that reading skill is the easiest skill in English language, there are lots of critical problems in mentioned skill among the learners especially in pre-intermediate levels. One of the most effective and influential strategies to improve reading comprehension ability is reading aloud strategy.

Although a number of different studies (Elley, 1989; Hillman, 1975; McCormick, 1981) have been investigated the use of reading aloud as a teaching tool to enhance learners' comprehension and motivation in second and foreign language classroom, it has not been given sufficient attention by language teachers and researchers as May (1986) asserted reading aloud needs a comprehensive empirical evidence to support the use of this teaching and learning strategy in classroom.

There has been an illusion regarding reading comprehension as a passive skill. In order to remove the illusion regarding reading skill as a passive skill and prepare the situation that the learner can read aloud, the researcher attempted to apply reading aloud to reading comprehension skill to investigate whether reading aloud affects reading comprehension skill or not. Indeed, the researcher tried to feel the gaps in this case and intended to explore a way to improve EFL learners' reading skill.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

Given the above problems in the current reading comprehension teaching and learning methodology, this study was an attempt to study the relationship between teacher's reading aloud and Iranian male and female EFL learners' reading comprehension.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study would be of considerable interest to language learners, teachers and not only because of adding information to the present theoretical knowledge to improve EFL learners' reading abilities, but also of providing opportunities to enhance their strategic behavior. Reading aloud is one of the cognitive strategies that let the learners wean the dependency of teachers and make them active in reading comprehension process.

Moreover, it is hoped that this study would be significant with respect to its implications in employing appropriate materials for second language syllabus designers and material developers. At the end, it is hoped that findings of this study motivate EFL teachers to get some insights related to the use of appropriate strategies to enhance the learners' reading comprehension abilities.

The findings of this study may motivate teachers to apply cognitive strategies in language teaching and reinforce the learners' positive attitude regarding reading comprehension.

1.5 Research Question

In view of the discussion in the previous sections, the researcher intends to answer the following research question:

1. Does teacher's reading aloud make any significant difference between male and female EFL learners regarding their reading comprehension?

1.6 Research Hypothesis

1. Teacher's reading aloud does not make any significant difference between male and female EFL learners regarding their reading comprehension.

2. Literature Review

Reading is likely to be considered as the most significant skill among the four language skills particularly in scholastic settings for a wide range of learners including those learning foreign languages. This undeniable significance made a large number of studies to be dedicated to the exploration and teaching of reading.

Reading comprehension is a complex psycholinguistic process and cognitive ability which needs to incorporate listener/readers' knowledge into text information plus elaboration of a mental representation (Meneghetti, et.al. 2007). The plethora of studies have been investigated reading comprehension process and products and tried to provide a clear picture of the how readers extract meaning and to explain the number and types of abilities and skills involved in reading comprehension process.

Providing a well-structured plan for the read-aloud sessions would provide precious opportunities for students to take advantages of this strategy (Terblanche, 2002). In contrast, unplannedness may lead to discouragement on the part of the learners. This is a very significant point for teachers since as Rog (2001) warns success would be yielded as a result of the good selection of books and the method to implement in reading.

In a study on 49 participants (23 males and 26 females), Oxford and Young (1997) tried to investigate strategies involved in reading comprehension. In this regard they chose three texts (2 Spanish texts and one English text). The texts belonged to the courses books of the test takers. There texts had different topics: foreign cultures in work, economics, leisure and history. The result showed that there was no particular difference between the scores of two genders in all text topics, also there was no difference in the self-report in both genders regarding familiarity with the topics of the texts or their background knowledge of any of the readings. Brantmeier (2002) used the same readings of Oxford and Young (1997) study and gave them to two groups of university students of Grammar and literature. The grammar group contained 9 males and 47 females and the literature group contained 23 males and 53 females. The male participants of the two groups said that they were more familiar with the boxing topic than females and the female participants said that they were more familiar with frustrated housewife than males. The researcher found that there was no difference between the two genders in comprehension of the gender oriented texts at advanced levels of learning and although there is a significant difference in topic familiarity in instruction levels, the effect of text content on second language reading comprehension by gender is kept when the intermediate texts are examined by advanced participants.

Al-Shumaimeri (2005) worked on 132 Saudi female and male students of EFL to compare their performance on gender neutral texts. The readings contained two tests of readings with familiar and unfamiliar subjects. The result showed that the male students did better in the reading texts. Also familiarity with the texts was an effective issue in reading comprehension.

In a study to investigate the effect of gender on reading comprehension, Sallabas (2008) found that there is a huge difference between female and male gender in the process of reading comprehension and the females gained more scores than male participants in reading comprehension. Wei-Wei (2009) studied the effect of gender on reading comprehension among secondary level students in China. The researcher found that the male gender tended to use bottom up strategies while the female gender tended to use more top down strategies. The males approached the words in the texts analytically while the females looked at the text more globally and tried to guess the meanings of the words in the text. In general females were better in using both background knowledge and the text knowledge and could interact with the text using their world knowledge.

To sum up, even though there are a number of studies investigating the significance of read aloud activities in reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition and recall, there are few studies which have examined the effects of read aloud activities on reading comprehension based on the gender of the learners. Thus, the primary focus of the present study is on investigating the impact of read aloud activity types on reading comprehension of the learners with a focus on their gender, in order to fill part of the existing gap in this little explored area.

3. Methodology
3.1 Participants
The participants of the study were 70 male (n = 31) and female (n = 39) pre-intermediate EFL learners who were studying English in an English Language Institute located in a city in Iran. Their level of education was from the first grade to the third grade of high schools and their age was from 14 to 16. The learners' level of language proficiency was determined by a Standard English language placement test called Oxford Placement Test (OPT). The selected participants

of the study were randomly assigned to two groups of experimental and control in order to pursue the goals of the study.

The participants of the study received reading instruction along with other language components in their general English course. Since gender of the participants was a relevant variable, the gender variable applied. Because of the unbalanced percentages of male and female students studying the English language at the English language institute, in the group of subjects participating in this study, females outnumbered males.

3.3 Materials
The materials employed for data collection consisted of OPT and reading comprehension passages. The detailed description of materials is as follows.

3.3.1 Oxford Placement Test
In order to manifest the participants' homogeneity in terms of language proficiency level, a version of Oxford Placement Test called Solutions Placement Test (Edwards, 2007) was used in this study. The validity of the test is self-evident. This test enabled the researcher to select those learners who were compatible with the conditions of the study. It also enabled the researcher to have a greater understanding of what level their participants were at. Oxford placement test were used to assess students' knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and reading. The test contained 50 multiple choice questions assessing students' knowledge of grammar and vocabulary and a reading text with 10 graded comprehension questions (five true-false and five multiple choice items) measuring learners' reading comprehension ability.

3.3.2 Reading Comprehension Passages
Reading comprehension passages were the key instruments of this study. Six syllabus-based reading passages along with five multiple-choice comprehension questions after each passage were used in the study. They were selected from the pre-intermediate reading comprehension course book, i.e. *Pre-intermediate Select Readings books* (Lee & Gunderson, 2011).The average length of each passage was between 2500 to 3000 words and they were selected based on three different textual types:
1. Narrative passage with an inbuilt dialogue designed to illustrate the effect of phonological features such as stress and intonation
2. Straight narrative passage
3. An expository passage containing factual information about a certain subject.

Regarding the scoring of reading comprehension questions, every correct item was awarded +2 points and incorrect one was assigned 0. The first three reading passages were considered as pretest and the second three passages were used as posttests of the study.

3.4 Procedure
In order to investigate the effect of reading aloud on reading comprehension of EFL learners, a structured procedure was designed to collect data. The participants' intended language proficiency level for this study was pre-intermediate, so in order to ensure the homogeneity of the participants, the Standard English language proficiency test i.e., Oxford Placement test (Solutions) was administered. As was mentioned earlier, the test consisted of 50 multiple-choice items of grammar, vocabulary, and 5 true-false items as well as 5 multiple-choice reading comprehension test items. A total of 70 EFL learners participated in the study. Every correct

answer in multiple-choice and true false questions was given +1 point and every incorrect answer was given 0 point. No negative score was considered for penalty in this test. The total score of the test was 60. A definite range of scores is determined by Oxford Placement Test (Edwards, 2007) to interpret the results. Regarding the obtained scores, 14 participants could not attain the minimum score for the pre-intermediate level and they were excluded from the whole sample. Then, the participants were randomly assigned to two equal groups of control ($n = 30$) and experimental ($n = 30$).

The main study was conducted in the following manner. The experimental group received the read aloud instruction. In the first session, the participants were asked to read aloud each passage in turn and then answer the questions. In the second session, the researcher himself read the passage aloud and then asked the learners to answer the questions. In the third session, the researcher read aloud the text and randomly paused at some spots in the passage and asked the learners to read subsequent word aloud. Afterwards, the participants answered the reading comprehension questions. The students' scores in these three sessions were regarded as their pretest.

The fourth session was initiated by reading aloud each passage separately by the researcher and providing a brief introduction in one sentence or two in order to give the participants a general perception towards what they were about to read. Likewise, the participants answered reading comprehension questions at the end of the fourth session.

In the fifth session, the passages were read aloud by the researcher and discussion of the general meaning of the passage as well as vocabulary explanation was conducted. Finally, the process of reading aloud instruction was completed in the sixth session. The researcher read aloud the passage while pausing to ask questions, reviewing of the events and clarifying some ambiguous points and at the same time, the students were able to explain target words. This process not only helped learners improve their comprehension, but let them build strategies to use in reading independently. The scores of the students in the last three sessions of reading comprehension were considered as posttest.

In the control group, the participants received the same six reading passages but no reading-aloud instruction was provided. The reading instruction was presented by means of routine and traditional techniques in language institute. The lesson began with presenting the new words and the students were asked to read silently and their silent reading would be checked by the researcher by either randomly reading a word wrongly or requiring them to read the word aloud correctly. Finally, the participants were asked to answer the reading comprehension questions. In similar manner, the pretest and the posttest of the control group were considered as the first and the last three sessions of the study respectively.

All the procedures of data collection were done without any major problem and they proceeded in the predicted order. All the participants were present in all phases of the study. Furthermore, to care for the tenets of the research, no one of the papers during different phases of study was given back to the participants, and no information about the content of study was transpired before administering it.

3.5 Data Analysis

The raw data was collected and submitted to SPSS 21.0 to perform statistical analysis. First, descriptive statistics (such as mean, standard deviation, kurtosis, skewness and frequency) is needed for proficiency test to show the general information of obtained scores. The selected participants of study were randomly assigned to two groups and a t-test was performed to show

that there is no significant difference between learners in terms of their language proficiency. The reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha formula was performed on reading passages.

4. Discussion
4.1 Analysis of Proficiency Test
All participants of the main study (n = 74) took part in a proficiency test called Oxford Placement Test (Solutions). The purpose of the proficiency test was to manifest the learner's homogeneity or to show whether the learners' knowledge of English is at the same level. The detailed descriptive statistics of proficiency test is shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1. The Frequency of scores obtained from proficiency test

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
	29	1	1.6	1.6
	31	1	1.6	1.6
	33	1	1.6	1.6
	35	1	1.6	1.6
	39	6	9.4	9.4
	40	6	9.4	9.4
	41	10	15.6	15.6
	42	9	15.6	15.6
	43	6	7.8	7.8
Valid	44	5	7.8	7.8
	45	7	7.8	7.8
	46	4	6.2	6.2
	47	4	6.2	6.2
	48	3	1.6	1.6
	49	3	1.6	1.6
	50	4	1.6	1.6
	51	1	1.6	1.6
	53	2	1.6	1.6
	Total	74	100.0	100.0

According to Oxford Placement Test (Solutions) (2007), the intermediate learners are those who attain 31 and above (out of 50) on grammar and vocabulary section and 8 and above (out of 10) on reading. The total score should not be less than 39. As Table 4.1 shows, four participants could not attain the intended scores for intermediate level of language proficiency; therefore, they were excluded from the sample.

4.2 Analysis of the Pretest
The participants of the study were randomly assigned to two group of control and experimental. Every group received reading instruction for 6 sessions. The scores of participants of both experimental and control groups in the first three reading tests were regarded as their pretest. The descriptive statistics of the scores of control and experimental groups' mean score on pretest is presented in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2.The descriptive statistics of control and experimental groups' mean scores on pretest

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest (Experimental Group)	35	2.33	4.67	3.4762	.56178
Pretest (Control Group)	35	2.67	4.00	3.2190	.29085
Valid N (list wise)	35				

The results of t-test indicated that that there is no statistical significant difference between experimental and control group in their performance on pretest.

4.3 Analysis of the Posttest

As mentioned, the second three reading comprehension tests were considered as posttest. The descriptive statistics of the scores of experimental group on the second three reading comprehension tests are presented in Table 4.3.

The mean of both control and experimental groups' scores on the second three reading comprehension tests were considered for their posttest. The descriptive statistics of control and experimental groups' mean scores on pretest are presented in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3. The descriptive statistics of control and experimental groups' mean scores on posttest

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Posttest (Experimental Group)	35	6.00	8.67	7.0571	.70240
Posttest (Control Group)	35	3.33	5.67	4.4857	.58490
Valid N (listwise)	35				

The results of the posttest showed that there is a significant difference between the posttest scores of both control and experimental groups ($t = 16.64$, $p < .05$) in such a way that experimental group outperformed on reading comprehension tests. In other words, teacher's reading aloud have had a significant effect on enhancing Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension.

In order to investigate the second research question of the study in finding whether teacher's reading aloud makes any significant difference between male and female EFL learners regarding their reading comprehension, the following statistical procedures were conducted. The descriptive statistics of both male and female EFL learners regarding their performance on reading comprehension posttest is provided in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4. Descriptive statistics of male and female EFL learners on posttest

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest	Female	39	5.7692	1.41866	.22717
	Male	31	5.7742	1.50157	.26969

An independent sample t-test was performed between the performance of male and female EFL learners on posttest. The results are shown in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5. Independent samples t-test between the performance of male and female EFL learners on posttest

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
									Lower	Upper	
Posttest	Equal variances assumed	.349	.557	-.01	68	.989	-.00496	.35030	-.7039	.6940	

The results showed that there is not any significant difference between male and female EFL learners ($t = .01$, $p > .05$) regarding their performance on posttest. Therefore, the null hypothesis of the study is accepted.

4.4 Discussion

The results of the present study confirm the findings of McCarrier, Pinnell, andFountas (2000) that found read-aloud stories can introduce new topics to students and they can use them when they involve in writing and provide a good model of how writers express their thoughts.

Similar to this study, Cooper and Kiger(2003) found that read-aloud strategy have significant impact on reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition of young children which allowed them to grow as independent learners and build strategies to deduce or acquire the meaning of new words when they read independently. Students could expand the number of words they could employ in speaking and writing.

5. Conclusion

Reading comprehension is an interactive process between the reader and the written text as well as the interaction between bottom-up and top-down strategies. The results of this study supported the use of reading aloud in reading as they allow the students to comprehend more information, associate it with other ideas and incorporate new ideas into their prior knowledge. Therefore, when information is decoded by using oral modalities, learning will be easier.

It can be inferred from the results of this study that the use of reading aloud can contribute to save time and energy as it summarizes the information. The use of reading aloud instruction, can be used in different stages of teaching reading.

From this study, it was found that EFL learners' overall reading comprehension ability was significantly improved after they had been trained to use reading aloud strategy. The present study filled a gap on the effectiveness of reading aloud strategy in reading comprehension. Reading aloud instruction is distinctly different from conventional reading instruction methods as target structures, patterns and activities are generally presented within communicative contexts. Conversely, reading instruction that is currently presented in the conventional de-contextualized method in Iranian language classrooms can be recalled within similar contexts like discrete point tests. Also, from this study it was found that there is not any significant difference between male and female EFL learners regarding their performance on posttest.

To sum up, reading aloud instruction is identified as the major vehicles to help EFL learners enhance their reading comprehension but there is not any significant difference between male and female EFL learners regarding comprehension.

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