

The Effect of Story or Paragraph Frame on Iranian Students' English Reading Comprehension

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to measure up the effect of story or paragraph frames on Iranian students' English reading comprehension. Forty six female Iranian students were non-randomly assigned into two groups of experimental and control group, entitled as the story or paragraph frame-receivers and non-story or paragraph frame-receivers, respectively. The story or paragraph frame-receivers were treated based on story or paragraph frame-instruction, while the control group received conventional training of reading comprehension. Finally, participants sat for the post-test at the end of the course to reveal the result of treatment on reading comprehension. T-tests analyses were used and findings revealed that there was a significant differences between the post-test performances of the story or paragraph frames-receivers and non-story or paragraph frame-receivers. The results showed that the story or paragraph frame-receivers outperformed the non-story or paragraph frames-receivers.

Key words- Story; Paragraph frames; Reading comprehension

1. Introduction

A large body of reading research has recently targeted strategy instruction, which presumes that learners, who are empowered with knowledge of a particular reading strategy, and specifically the way it is used, can better increase their reading comprehension (Anderson, 2005). Moreover, Pressley (2002) emphasized that reading education should focus on comprehension instruction: readers should be taught comprehension strategies. Comprehension instructions entail "teaching people how to construct meaning from text rather than simply finding the meaning put there by the author" (Pressley, 2002, p. 390). In order to comprehend the text well, the student has to be engaged in utilizing strategies "to construct meaning from text, using text information to build conceptual understanding, [and] effectively communicating ideas orally and in writing" (Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2007, p.13). Students who are engaged in such meaningful literacy activities can become well-motivated and achieve reading success.

The first important method to increase reading comprehension is to formally teach specific skills and strategies to students. Successful reading teachers explicitly or directly teach their students what they need to know; that is, they actually explain, model, or demonstrate a desired objective to students through the direct/explicit approach (Blair, 2003; Lu-Fang, 2010). One strategy that engages students in reconstruction is story or paragraph frames (text structure), in other words, students' knowledge of text structures was also claimed to be a vital variable generating the understanding of the text (Tierney, LaZansky, Raphael, & Cohen, 1987). Story or paragraph frames can be used to assess the awareness of text organizational patterns to provide useful instructional tools for focusing on the structure of narrative

and expository text. Using a close format, both story and paragraph frames provide key words based on the organizational patterns of the text that can help students to write about what they have already read (Cudd & Roberts, 1987). In English-speaking context, paragraph frame is as an instructional tool. However, in the context of learning English as a second or foreign Language (ESL/EFL) no studies in the literature on story or paragraph frames examine it as an instructional tool for increasing reading comprehension. Thus the present study aims to instruct adult learners in the story or paragraph frames and examines the effect of story or paragraph frames on their reading comprehension performance.

2. Literature review

2.1. Fundamental premise of story or paragraph frame

Ornstein (1994, p.82) has defined the structure of the text as, "the main idea of the text, how information is organized, as well as the verbal and textual cues (or pedagogical aids) that help organize and bring unity to the text." With this definition about structure of the text, the importance of being aware of it seems necessary and useful. Researchers have shown that skill readers use variety of strategies to comprehend written texts (Sweet & Snow, 2003). Hence many readers are not aware of reading strategies; there is a need of explicit teaching.

Readers of all ages must be aware of text structures if they are to be most successful. The structure, or organization of the text, is the method of arranging ideas and the relationships among the ideas (Armbruster, 2004). Readers who are unaware of differing text structures are at a disadvantage because they do not approach reading with any type of reading plan (Meyer,

Brandt, & Bluth, 1980). However, readers who are familiar with text structures expect the information to unfold in certain ways (Snow, 2002).

Story grammar research provides teachers with an excellent tool for teaching narrative text structure awareness. Teaching pupils about story grammars and how stories are structured will help them to comprehend better. Story grammar research moves the teacher away from general explanations of story structure (e.g., those stories have a beginning, middle, and end) to the more specific (e.g., that stories have characters, a theme, and a plot). For expository structure (or structured overview), Harris and Hodges (1995) gave this definition, "a form of graphic organizer in which important concepts of a topic or unit of study, as reflected in its vocabulary, are displayed visually to anticipate, reverse, and confirm relationship among the concepts" (p. 245). Expository text structure may include main idea and supporting details (Flood, Lapp, & Farnan, 1986), or with four or five paragraphs in which the first paragraph expresses the problem, the second, third, and fourth paragraph present different solutions, and the last paragraph contains the conclusion (Miller & George, 1992). Story frame is a visual display, it is a graphic re-presentation which allows readers to see relationships, understand organization, connect ideas, and make abstract ideas concrete (Duke & Pearson, 2002). In addition to story frames, paragraph frames can be used to assess awareness of text organizational patterns and to provide useful instructional tools for focusing on the structure of text (Cudd & Roberts, 1987).

2.2. Research in using the story or paragraph frame technique as an instructional tool

Many studies have been done on comparing teaching text structures versus traditional reading instruction in which the students are asked to read the passage alone and try to answer the questions that followed the text passage. Most of the researches have consensus on the positive effect of students' awareness of text structure on their reading comprehension (Sharp, 2004). The results of Sharp's experiment demonstrate that organizational patterns (text structure) can have a strong influence on reading. Gordon and Braun (1982) investigated the effect of knowledge of story schemata on the structure of children's recall and written narratives. They found the students (fifth graders) who were taught story schemata recalled more text structure categories and answered more questions correctly than the students who did not learn story schemata. In 1987, Pehrsson and Denner reviewed research on the effects of text structures in reading, children's awareness of text structure, and the effects of training in text structures. They concluded that knowledge of text structures improves students' reading comprehension. Idol (1987) taught third and fourth graders story grammar and investigated the effects of the knowledge of story grammar on children's reading comprehension. The researcher found that story grammar helped children maintain comprehension improvement even though instructional and testing materials were above their reading levels. Roller and Schreiner (1985) examined the effects of the utilization of narrative and

expository organizational instruction on sixth-grade children's comprehension of prose. The subjects read the passages, answered multiple-choice questions, and wrote summaries of what they had read. The researchers found that those who were taught by the organizational instruction wrote better summaries than the children who received traditional instruction. Armbruster, Anderson, and Ostertag (1987) studied the effects of problem-solution text structure and summarization on fifth-grade students' reading and writing. Students learned through workbooks, which provide problem-solution text structures, problem-solution passages, copies of problem solution frame, and how to summarize. After training, the students completed a test in reading and writing. For the reading test, the students wrote an essay for a question and completed a 10-item short answer section, while in the writing test, they wrote summaries. The researchers found that the students who were trained in text structures scored higher on the reading test and wrote better summaries than the students who were not trained in text structures. Newman (2007) examined the effects of explicit instruction of expository text structure incorporating graphic organizers on the comprehension of third-grade students, the findings suggested that explicit instruction, which incorporates text structure and graphic organizers, could provide assistance for third-grade students to independently write a summary, create a topical net graphic organizer, and comprehend an expository text. Most of these researchers presented positive effects of knowledge of text structures on students' reading comprehension. With these evidences, teaching students to discuss the structures of narrative and expository text that they read may enhance their comprehension. The majority of studies mentioned earlier have native speaker participants.

Therefore, this research investigated the effects of teaching reading comprehension to Iranian students by using story or paragraph frames according to the structure of the text after reading the whole text. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of the story or paragraph frame technique on Iranian learners' reading comprehension of expository and narrative texts. The study addressed the following research question: Do teaching story or paragraph frames during post-reading phase enhance the students' reading comprehension ability?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 46 female Iranian students studying English as a foreign language in the second grades of high school in Ahvaz, Khuzestan. Random sampling was used for the selection of the participants. In fact, they were selected based on their availability to the researcher. Their age ranged from 15 to 17. To make sure of their homogeneity, a teacher-made test which serves as a pre-test was administered. Out of the two classes, one was assigned as experimental group and one as control group. The number of language learners in each group was twenty-three.

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. Pre-test and post-test

Instruments in this study were a teacher-made pre-test and a post-test on reading comprehension. The pre-test and the post-test were included 40 multiple-choice questions and true-false questions. The reliability of each test was estimated by Kuder-Richardson formula (KR-21). The reliability coefficient for the test was 0.76.

3.2.2. Materials

The material in this study was the high school text book, English book 2 by Birjandi, Norozi and Mahmmodi (2009). Two expository passages (Hic, Hic, Hic and How are you?) and two narrative passages (Charles Dickens and the Little children and The Little Old Man Who Could not Read) were taught. The Rationale for selecting this material was that it is supposed to be at the same level of difficulty in terms of lexical and grammatical complexity for grade 2 high school students. There were some other considerations which have been taken into account for the selection of the high school text book as the material of the study. First, the limited time of classes (3 hours per week) did not allow the researcher to choose other additional materials for the instruction; therefore choosing the students' own text books gave them the chance to study the material in the limited class time without any confusion. Second, it provides a sense of familiarity with the text book's context which assists teaching staff in identifying the especial strengths and weaknesses in the use of the book.

3.3. Procedure

The experimental and control group were assigned the same materials. However, the techniques used in the two

groups to teach reading comprehension were different; the experimental group had the story of paragraph frames technique, while the control group had the conventional techniques. The experimental group was exposed to the treatment for 8 sessions, forty minutes a session, once a week, during the semester.

In fact, in conducting the treatment sessions; the researcher went through the following steps: first, the researcher created a sentence or paragraph frame or story frame that corresponds to the organization of the details in the content passage to be read; made it as sophisticated as the text and students' abilities dictate. The researcher underlined key portions in the text that signal the organization, such as the topic sentence, text frame language, transitions, and summary or conclusion. This step helps make the text frame template explicit for students, second, during the post-reading phase, the researcher assigned the reading selection and ask students to retell what they read, third, during the post-reading phase, the researcher presented the story or paragraph frame to students and ask them to fill in the missing information, the researcher encouraged students to discuss information not mentioned in the frame. The frame should was adapted and tailored as needed to fit the current topic, the participants completed the paragraph frames chorally or individually whereas the participants of control group was taught in conventional techniques.

Finally, the two groups were given similar post-test, including multiple choice items and true-false items. The obtained scores of the two groups were compared to determine the possible differences among the experimental and control group. Statistic Package for Social Science for Windows (SPSS) was used to compute the data collected from reading comprehension pre-and post-tests I conducted the independent samples *t*-tests and paired *t*-tests to investigate whether there are differences between the experimental and control groups on reading comprehension tests after reading performance.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of within groups' performances on the pre-test and post-test

Groups	Tests	Mean	SD	T-test	df	Level of significance	Critical <i>t</i>
Control group	Pre-test	19.13	4.948	-1.994	22	.000	2.074
	Post-test	19.52	4.804				
Experimental group	Pre-test	20.48	4.718	-15.348	22	.000	2.074
	Post-test	34.39	3.738				

4. Results

4.1. Reading comprehension pre-and post-tests

Moreover, in order to see if the null hypothesis of the present study is verified or rejected, a *t*-test was run between the mean scores gained by story or paragraph frames -receivers on the pretest and on the post-test. The findings showed that there was a significant difference between the performances of the experimental group on the pretest and posttest. As is demonstrated in Table 1

below, by having considered the *p* value or the common error margin of 0.05, and comparing the computed *t*-test of (-15.384) to the critical *t*-value (-15.384 > critical *t*=2.074), it can be confirmed that story or paragraph frames-receivers had performed much better on the posttest, pointing out that story or paragraph frames instruction described in the procedure section was effective on the comprehending reading texts. These findings reveal that the null hypothesis which hypothesizes that there is no significant difference between performances of story or paragraph frames-receivers on pretest and on posttest is rejected. Therefore,

the above results led the researcher to draw the conclusion that the rationale behind this out-performance might be due to the effects of story or paragraph frames instruction within the experimental class as the treatment of the study.

On the other hand, another t-test was also carried out between the scores obtained by non-story or paragraph frames-receivers on the pretest versus the scores obtained by the same group on the posttest which points out that the mean score of their posttest was slightly higher than that of the pretest (the mean difference was .39); however, the computed *t*-test of (-1.994) proves that this difference is not statically significant to be greater than the *t*-value stated in the table of critical value (-1.994 < critical *t*=2.074) which indicates that the instruction (comprehending reading texts along with their Persian translation) was not so effective to bring about a significant difference between non-story or paragraph frames-receivers' performances on pre- and post tests. Table 4.2 displays the results of the two groups on both tests.

The difference between the scores of the story or paragraph frame-receivers on the pretest and post-test was high enough at the *p*-value of .000 to reject the null hypothesis.

5. Discussion and conclusion

It is possible to argue that the rationale behind this difference seems to be the fact that story or paragraph frames-receivers had an opportunity to review the main idea of the story, clarify parts they may not have understood. The outcomes of this study support this notion.

Due to the mentioned results, discussing the details of stories improves students' understanding about text, and so do the knowledge of text structures. In general, the story or paragraph frame technique was a valuable addition to L2 reading comprehension instruction. The story or paragraph frame technique can enhance language learners' ability to comprehend a text at its discourse level, focus the readers' attention on the key content of the text, train readers to use known contextual cues to infer new lexical meanings and help readers distinguish between main ideas and details in the text. Specifically, the story or paragraph frame technique can best enhance learners' understanding of general concepts in the text after reading. In addition, story or paragraph frames are excellent tools for the development of students' reading performance at the "main idea" level. In order to help the students avoid the word-by-word reading process, the teacher should focus on helping students gain "main idea" comprehension rather than word-level comprehension. In this study, the results of the reading comprehension strategy revealed that the students who used story or paragraph frames could understand the basic idea of the text, and that they could obtain a general impression of what they had read after reading it. These findings suggest that story or paragraph frames be pertinent to students' conceptual comprehension; students

can use these frames to comprehend the text concept-by-concept rather than word-by-word. The instructor can teach the students to use these frames to foster the students' conceptual comprehension and thus read text more effectively.

In general, the results of the current study confirm the positive effects of the story or paragraph frames technique on Iranian learners' reading comprehension of English passages. However, some limitations need to be noted. First, the sample size was 46 learners, if the sample size was increased, the result may display difference. Also, all of the subjects, for the sake of ease of the access, were female; with male participants different results and inferences may be drawn. Moreover, the number of passages used in this study was low. There were only two narrative texts and two expository texts, the period of practice and intervention lasted for eight weeks; consequently, the participants could not read more text, with these limitations in mind, future research should use more passages.

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