

Reading Intervention Programmes Employed in EFL Reading Contexts: A Review Article

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ABSTRACT

Among the four major language skills, reading serves as an important tool for successful academic achievement. Various studies in EFL contexts have focused on the effect of some types of instruction on EFL students' reading comprehension. The purpose of this paper is to review these studies which have examined the effect of some instructional inputs on the development of reading comprehension among EFL students at both school and tertiary levels. This study is valuable as it sheds lights on intervention programmes that have been employed for the sake of improving reading comprehension in EFL contexts. It further provides some insights that can be useful for future researchers who intend to use reading intervention programmes. This review article has revealed that most of these studies have focused on EFL students in schools. Additionally, this review has shown that most of these studies have not employed full intervention programmes that pay attention to the improvement of students' reading skills. Rather, each of these studies has just focused on one aspect and examined its effect on students' reading comprehension. For example, while some studies examined the effect of extensive reading, others have focused on the effect of a selection of cognitive strategies on EFL students' reading comprehension. This study highlights the need for more studies that should consider the effect of instructional packages such as Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA), task-based instruction, Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI), extensive reading, and cooperative learning on the development of EFL students' reading comprehension.

Key words: EFL, intervention programme, reading comprehension, review

INTRODUCTION

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, it is generally believed that reading is an important skill and it is one of the fundamental skills that EFL students at tertiary level need for learning and success (Mehrdad, Ahghar, & Ahghar, 2012; Sen, 2009). According to Grabe (2009), reading skill refers to “the process of receiving and interpreting information encoded in language form via the medium of print” (p.14). Grabe also argued that reading comprehension depends on the extraction and integration of readers' background knowledge and the information embedded in the text in their hands. The importance of reading in developing and enhancing EFL students' vocabulary has been also pointed out by several researchers, including researchers in EFL contexts such as Al-Qahtani (2015) and Tweissi (1998).

Furthermore, Torki, Kasmani, and Valipour (2014) have pointed out that EFL learners rely on reading skills to acquire knowledge as there are few opportunities for them to use English outside classrooms. Additionally, reading skill is an important element in EFL classroom contexts as it is believed that the development of reading skills can have its positive effects on students' motivation and learning (Shang, Briody, & Lin, 2007).

To this end, this study reviewed 73 research articles that have reported experimental/quasi-experimental studies on the effect of some instructional treatments on the improvement of EFL students' reading comprehension. Also, studies reviewed in this article were published between 1988 and 2017. As the studies reviewed in this paper were conducted in various EFL contexts, the authors preferred to review them based on the contexts of the studies. The researchers used Google Scholar to search for studies in which the improvement of reading comprehension was examined. The key words that were used in retrieving research articles are EFL, reading comprehension, effect, impact, and intervention programme. The total number of studies that were downloaded and analysed to write this review article are 73.

STUDIES IN EFL CONTEXTS

This section deals with reviewing studies that have examined the effect of some treatments on the performance of EFL students in reading. The major instructional input or the treatment programmes that have been used in EFL contexts for the improvement of EFL reading comprehension are extensive reading, explicit instruction of reading strategies, intervention programmes adapted from first language contexts, texts modifications, assessment types, vocabulary knowledge, task-based instruction, discourse markers, text types, metacognitive strategies, and cooperative learning. Figure 1 below shows the number of studies carried out in each context. Each one of these studies has focused on the effect of a particular intervention programme or variable on reading comprehension. Most of the studies reviewed in this article were conducted in Iran. Thus, the researchers grouped the studies according to their weightage in the EFL context.

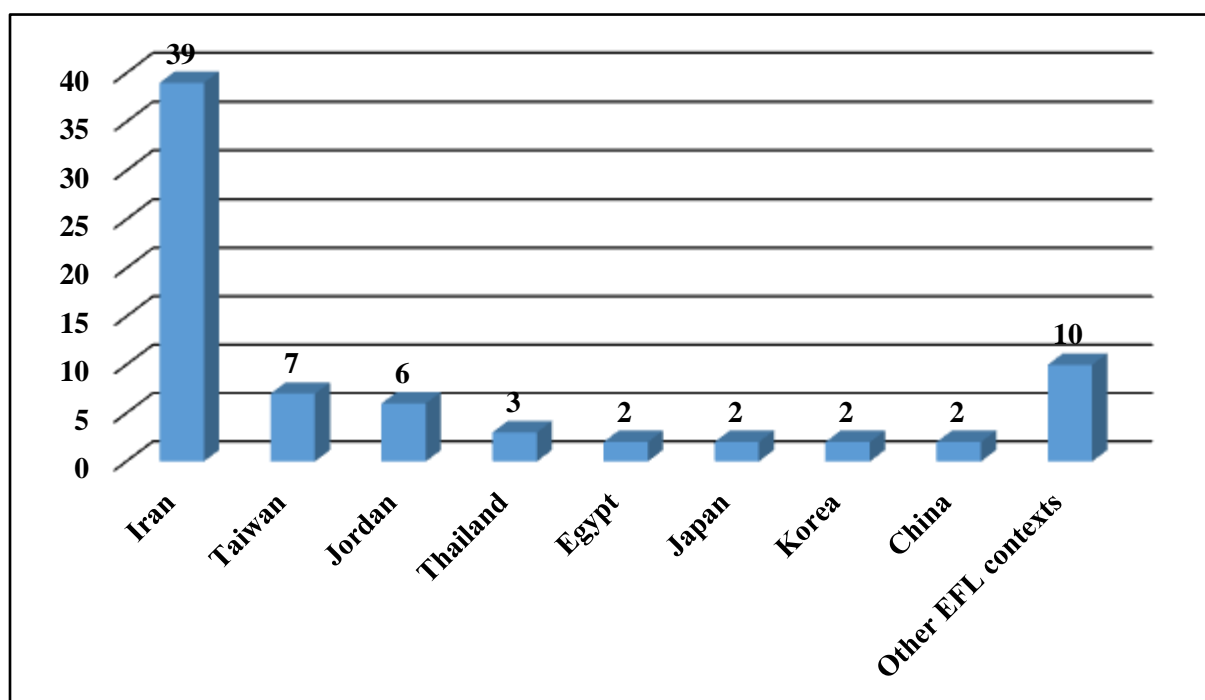


Figure 1: Distribution of studies based on contexts

STUDIES IN THE EFL IRANIAN CONTEXT

In Iran, there are a good number of studies that have been conducted on examining the effect of some variables on improving students' reading comprehension. We found 39 research articles that have been conducted in the Iranian EFL context.

Three studies have been conducted on the effect of summarisation strategy instruction on reading comprehension in Iran. These studies are Ghabanchi and Mirza (2010), Khoshsima and Rezaeian Tiyar (2014), and Shokrpour, Sadeghi, and Seddigh (2013). Ghabanchi and Mirza (2010), focused on the effect of summarisation as a generative learning strategy of readers' performance in reading comprehension. The analysis of the data collected before and after the treatment did not show any improvement in readers' performance on display and inferential questions. However, some significant effects were revealed in referential questions after instruction on the use of summarisation. In another study, Shokrpour et al. (2013) examined how teaching students summary writing can be effective in developing reading comprehension. They found that the students in the experimental group improved their reading comprehension after receiving instruction on summary writing. Khoshsima and Rezaeian Tiyar (2014) examined the effect of summarising strategy on reading comprehension of 61 Iranian intermediate EFL students. They reported that summarising strategy had a significant impact on learners' reading comprehension. Thus, it can be understood that teaching EFL students how to summarise texts can be an effective intervention programme for developing EFL students' reading comprehension. However, researchers who intend to employ this intervention programme must provide details on how to prepare lesson plans and select materials for the programme.

In EFL contexts, metacognitive and cognitive strategies have been used as variables for examining their effect on reading comprehension. For example, Takallou (2011) is a very important study as it considered the effect of the instruction of metacognitive strategies — one on planning and the other on self-monitoring strategy, which were based on the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) — on EFL students' reading comprehension. In another study, Aghaie and Zhang (2012) conducted a study that focused on the effects of strategy instruction on Iranian high school students' reading comprehension. They reported that the treatment group achieved significantly better results than the contrast group after four months of strategy-based instruction. Recently, Roohani and Asiabani (2015) showed that the strategic-based instruction had a positive impact on the participants' reading comprehension of argumentative texts. While strategy training appeared to raise students' awareness of reading strategies and could encourage strategy use by some students, the reading strategy instruction was not able to enhance students' reading performance (Soleimani & Hajghani, 2013). Although Mahdavi-Zafarghandi, Hasaskhah, and Montaghani (2016) recently found that teaching online metacognitive strategies was beneficial for students to improve their reading comprehension, Mehrdad et al. (2012) reported that there was no significant effect of teaching cognitive and metacognitive strategies on the reading comprehension of EFL students in some elementary schools in Iran. Thus, studies that have examined the effect of teaching cognitive and metacognitive strategies on reading comprehension of EFL students have reported controversial findings. This issue can be considered by future researchers in EFL contexts.

The effect of strategy instruction was also used as a variable in the Iranian EFL context. Two recent studies were conducted to investigate the effect of teaching some reading strategies on reading comprehension. Ghafoori, Eslami, and Bagheri (2016) examined the

effect of strategy instruction on the frequency of reading strategy use as reported by Iranian EFL learners. The intervention programme included giving students instruction of the most commonly used reading strategies for three months. The study reported the effectiveness of strategy instruction for the improvement of EFL university students' use of reading strategies. In another recent study, Karizak and Khojasteh (2016) investigated the effect of an intervention programme which was based on three kinds of reading strategies. The three strategies selected by these researchers are skimming, scanning, and locating the main idea and supporting details. The results of the study showed that there was a significant effect of the explicit teaching of reading strategies on EFL students' reading comprehension ability.

In some studies in the Iranian EFL context, the focus was on the effect of some types of cooperative learning on reading comprehension. Avazpour and Bahrani (2015) recently carried out an experimental study that included three groups where each group received different instruction. While the first group received instruction through cooperative learning, the second group received instruction through Student Team Achievement Divisions (STAD). However, the third group received instruction through Group Instruction (GI). The study showed the important effects of STAD on EFL learners' reading comprehension. Among other types of cooperative learning, Avazpour and Bahrani (2015) claimed that STAD can be regarded as the best technique of cooperative learning. In another study, Jalilifar (2010) investigated the impact of STAD and GI on Iranian EFL students' reading achievement. The study reported the effectiveness of STAD. Thus, although it can be claimed that cooperative learning is beneficial, the types of the tasks given to the students and the way of leading the cooperative learning was not clear in these studies.

Other issues that have been employed as independent variables in the Iranian EFL context are genre structure (Kalali & Pishkar, 2015; Marzban & Seifi, 2013), teaching collocations (Sadat Kiaee, Moghaddam, & Moheb Hoseini, 2013), general and specific vocabulary knowledge (Mehrpour & Rahimi, 2010), (Mehrpour & Rahimi, 2010), unknown vocabulary density (Keshavarz & Mohammadi, 2009), textual cohesive reference instruction (Aidinlou, Khodamard, & Azami, 2012), dynamic assessment (Ajideh @ Nourdad, 2012 and meta-discourse markers (Hassanein, 2016) . Studies that examined the effect of genre structure have shown that teaching students about the genre structure of reading texts helped them to improve their reading comprehension. Furthermore, studies that have focused on the impact of vocabulary on students' reading comprehension have revealed some positive results. Ajideh and Nourdad (2012) focused on examining the effect of dynamic assessment on EFL learners' reading comprehension. They revealed that the dynamic assessment improved both immediate and delayed effect on learners' reading comprehension at all proficiency levels. However, the study showed that this type of assessment did not show significant differences among the proficiency groups. Recently, Hassanein (2016) examined the effect of employing an intervention programme that was based on interactional meta-discourse markers on EFL majors' reading comprehension. The study showed the significant effect of using interactional meta-discourse markers on EFL students' reading comprehension. Thus, direct teaching of interactional meta-discourse markers proved to be effective in improving EFL students' reading comprehension abilities.

STUDIES IN EFL ARAB CONTEXTS

Although the concern of developing EFL students' reading comprehension has a long history in the EFL Arab contexts, studies that have been published are very few. This can be attributed to the lack of attention given to publishing the findings of dissertations and theses carried out in EFL Arab contexts. Most of the studies that have been published on the effect

of some instructional inputs on reading comprehension were conducted in the Jordanian EFL context. These studies are Ghaith and El-Malak (2004), Abdelhafez (2006), Baniabdelrahman (2010), Safadi and Rababah (2012), Smadi and Alshra'ah (2015), and Alhabahba, Pandian, and Mahfoodh (2016). Ghaith and El-Malak (2004) examined the effect of the cooperative Jigsaw II method on improving forty-eight EFL students' literal and higher order reading comprehension. The study showed that there was no statistically significant difference between the control and experimental group in terms of the dependent variables of overall reading comprehension and literal comprehension. The study also revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in favour of the experimental group on the variable of higher order comprehension. Abdelhafez (2006) reported that training in metacognitive language learning strategies had some positive effects on developing Jordanian EFL students' reading skills. In another study, student self-assessment through one-minute papers and rating-scale sheets was employed by Baniabdelrahman (2010). The findings of the study revealed that student self-assessment had positive effects on students' achievement in reading. Safadi and Rababah (2012), examined the effect of a scaffolding instruction programme on 11th grade Jordanian EFL reading comprehension skills. They found that there were significant differences in students' reading comprehension. Recently, Alhabahba et al. (2016) carried out a quasi-experimental study that examined the effect of concept-oriented reading instruction (CORI) on fifth grade students' reading comprehension. They found that students' reading comprehension increased after giving students instruction using CORI. In another recent study in Jordan, Smadi and Alshra'ah (2015) examined the effect of a reading instructional programme based on the strategies of successful readers on Jordanian secondary stage students' reading comprehension. They reported that there was a significant difference between the two mean scores of the experimental and control groups after the intervention programme in favour of the experimental group due to the teaching strategy.

Other studies in the EFL Arab contexts are Amer (1997) and Hassanein (2016) in Egypt; Msaddek (2016) in Morocco; Bell (2001) in Yemen; and Tweissi (1998) in Oman. Amer (1997) focused on the effect of teachers' reading aloud on reading comprehension of seventy-five 6th grade male students at an intermediate school in Cairo. The study reported that learners had better understanding of what they were reading in the teacher reading aloud situation than in the silent reading situation. Tweissi (1998) reported that simplification of texts helped EFL students to improve their reading comprehension. Msaddek (2016) reported the effect of metacognitive strategy instruction. In Yemen, Bell (2001) investigated the effect of extensive reading on reading speed and reading comprehension with two groups of EFL students at the British Council English Language Centre. The study showed that Yemeni EFL students' reading speed and comprehension improved. However, generalizations of the findings are questionable because there was insufficient data about the students except that they were "young adult students working in various government ministries" (p. 1). Furthermore, there was lack of sufficient description of how reading comprehension was measured. Considering the poor performance of EFL Saudi students in reading comprehension, Al-Qahtani (2015) hypothesized that training EFL students on the use of discourse markers could improve their reading abilities. They reported positive effect of the explicit instruction of discourse markers on low-proficiency EFL learners' reading comprehension.

RELATED STUDIES IN OTHER EFL CONTEXTS

Other countries in which the improvement of reading comprehension skills among EFL students was examined after some intervention programmes are China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea,

Columbia, Germany, and Spain. For example, Lee (2007) conducted a quasi-experimental study to investigate the impact of the inclusion of grammatical elements into meaning-focused reading classes. The results revealed that textual enhancement helped students to learn the target forms. However, there were no significant effects of this treatment on meaning comprehension. Although topic familiarity helped students to improve their comprehension, it was ineffective in terms of their learning of form.

In the Japanese context, Beglar, Hunt, and Kite (2012) investigated the effect of the pleasure reading of both simplified and un-simplified books on the development of EFL students' reading rates. The analysis of data using the effect size found that the addition of out-of-class pleasure reading brought about a moderate effect on increasing reading rate gains. The study also revealed that reading primarily large numbers of simplified books for pleasure is a good effective strategy for achieving reading rate gains.

In Taiwan, Fan (2010) examined the effect of the Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR), which is a type of strategy based instruction, on developing EFL learners' reading comprehension. The statistical analysis of the data showed that CSR did not result in enhancement of Taiwanese EFL learners' strategic reading competence in terms of the skills of predicting, making inferences and dealing with vocabulary problems. However, the study revealed that CSR had a more positive impact on the students' ability to get the main idea and find the supporting details.

In Spain, Gayo, Deaño, Ribeiro, Cadime, and Alfonso (2014) used an intervention programme to investigate the effects of strategic and metacognitive instruction on reading comprehension processes and strategies among 94 students (49 from the fifth grade and 45 from the sixth grade). The analysis of the data collected before and after the treatment revealed that the students in the fifth grade class showed improvement in their reading comprehension after receiving strategy instruction. One common characteristic among all intervention programmes that have been used to improve EFL students' reading comprehension is the delivery of instruction. All the studies reviewed in this article have used pre-and post-tests to measure the improvement of students' performance. However, researchers should pay attention to the variety in the degree of the explicitness of describing the research design used in each study.

CONCLUSION

Researchers, teachers and educators have been very much concerned about how to increase reading comprehension ability. To achieve this goal, various methods and approaches have been employed in research and practice, ranging from traditional methods to alternative ones. While some researchers employed programmes that have focused on extensive reading to improve EFL students' reading abilities, some other researchers found that task-based instruction, strategy training, and direct instructions of reading strategies, can substitute traditional language teaching methods in teaching English and reading comprehension. Overall, research has shown that there are some gaps that deserve researchers' attention.

An issue revealed by our review is that some of the studies have focused on EFL students in schools. For example, the participants in Gayo et al. (2014) were 94 students, 49 from 5th grade and 45 from 6th grade in schools in Spain. Zuo (2011) selected 100 students from high school students in China. The participants in Amer (1997), Alhabahba et al. (2016), and Safadi and Rababah (2012), which were conducted in the EFL Arab contexts, were students in schools. Furthermore, in the Iranian EFL context, in some studies the participants were neither school students nor university students. Rather, the participants in these particular

studies were selected from language centres that included students from different backgrounds with varied age ranges. Examples of these studies in the Iranian EFL context are Jahangard, Moinzadeh, and Karimi (2012), Sadat Kiaee et al. (2013), Roohani and Asiabani (2015), and Mahdavi-Zafarghandi et al. (2016). Moreover, the issue of the effect of reading materials that were used to improve EFL students' reading comprehension in digital environments is a critical issue that deserves further research. One of the studies that had considered this issue is Mahdavi-Zafarghandi et al. (2016).

It is worthy to mention that most of the studies reviewed in this article were conducted in the Iranian EFL context. Very few studies had been carried out in the EFL Arab contexts. This obviously shows the importance of the need for more studies in EFL Arab contexts — studies that should use some instructional programmes that concentrate on the development and enhancement of EFL Arab students' reading comprehension. Furthermore, it may be claimed that in the EFL Arab contexts there are various theses and dissertations on the implementation of some intervention programmes with their important findings. However, we argue here that since these theses and dissertations are not published, researchers, educators and teachers in the EFL Arab contexts will not have access to what has been tried for the development of reading comprehension. Researchers in the EFL Arab contexts should be encouraged and supported to reveal their findings through publishing in various international and regional journals.

Our review has revealed that the majority of studies which have examined the effect of some intervention programmes on reading comprehension in the EFL contexts have not focused on the comprehension of academic texts in university contexts. Thus, there is a need for highly controlled and observed intervention programmes that are not only limited to quantitative data, but also focus on the qualitative data which would give access to the researchers to reveal the effectiveness of the intervention programmes from the participants' perspectives. With respect to the valuable findings reported in previous studies on the efficacy of various reading programmes in EFL reading contexts, what is still a moot point is creating innovative intervention programmes that can enhance EFL reading comprehension in university environments where students are required to basically use their reading and writing skills in order to read a huge amount of academic texts. There is a paucity of research with respect to this domain of educational significance. To sum up, there is a need for more intervention programmes that should be established and employed to improve EFL university students' reading comprehension of academic texts and to improve their receptive vocabulary knowledge.

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