

## Investigating the Process of Collaborative Reading among Young Iranian EFL Learners

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### Abstract

This study aimed to investigate collaborative reading in reading sessions among young Iranian EFL learners. It actually was an attempt to examine the process and components of collaborative reading which are expected to improve young learners' reading ability in the English language. To this purpose, a group of second year Iranian EFL young learners at a primary school in Tehran together with their teachers participated in the study. The young learners were around eight years old. The duration of the study was 12 weeks. Since the study was qualitative in nature, teachers' reflective journals, a number of observations and face-to-face interviews with teachers were used as instruments to collect the needed data. The analysis of the qualitatively-elicited data presented a in so far as reading processes and reading comprehension enhancement through collaborative deeper understanding of the importance of the process and components of collaborative reading. In fact, the findings revealed that collaborative reading promote young EFL learners' reading performance. Thus, the study has practical implications for both teachers and young EFL learners reading in terms of reading performance enhancement.

**Keyword:** *Collaborative reading, reading sessions, EFL learners, word recognition*

### Introduction

Knowing how to read at a young age is a very important aspect of language learning. In fact, teachers and educators must be aware that teaching the students how to read during the early years of study has a vital role in improving students' reading ability for their future progress in reading. In 1993, Anderson and Roit established an approach called Collaborative Strategy Instruction, which was designed to teach reading comprehension in the context of teacher-led discussions. Collaborative reading in reading sessions is one of the aspects of this approach, which has been examined by many researchers. Generally, peer interaction is a significant facet which promotes young learners' reading in English.

In the current research, collaborative reading sessions is defined as a process of a reading with a complete and specific task and activity that the teacher exactly knows what to do in the class. During reading sessions, teachers use collaborative reading activities in order to enhance their students' reading skill through managing and controlling their reading. In fact, teachers share their reading experiences with their students to promote their reading proficiency. Generally speaking, collaborative reading can be understood in terms of student/student, that is, peer interaction, as well as teacher/student contribution in the class.

Based on what was mentioned above, the importance of the present study lies in the following issues: First, this kind of study has scarcely been carried out in relation to English language teaching in Iran. Second, a considerable bulk of research (e.g., Stevens et al, 1991; Anderson and Roit, 1993; Seng and Hashim, 2006) has shown that collaborative reading leads to better understanding of a text than traditional methods to teaching reading comprehension. Third, many English language teachers in Iran are still dedicated to traditional methods to language teaching, especially to teacher-centered approaches, the results of which remain unsatisfactory with respect to both academic achievements in general and language learning in particular.

A final word to this sketchy introduction is that boundless studies conducted before lead us to the assumption that collaborative learning is an operative pedagogical approach in numerous EFL contexts (Bejarano, 1987; Roskams, 1999; Lan, Sung and Chang, 2006; Chen and Hird, 2006), and thus, a pressing need is felt for investigating this issue to see whether collaborative learning is a suitable method in Iranian EFL teaching context too, and if so, how its potential can be developed. With this in mind, the researcher addressed the following research question:

### **Research question**

**RQ.** What processes does collaborative reading involve to improve young learners' reading ability in reading sessions?

### **Background of the Study**

Klingner et al. (1998) believe that collaborative reading has positive effect on students' reading achievement in foreign and second language. Gani, Yusuf and Susiani (2016), who have investigated the effect of using Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) on teaching reading to EFL learners as well as the students' response to the implementation of collaborative strategic reading in foreign language, have concluded that the students replied positively to the use of CSR. They have also indicated that the learners who were taught through collaborative reading scored higher than those who were taught through traditional methods. Many other researchers have conducted studies on collaborative reading. For example, Stevens et al (1991) examined the influence of direct instruction on reading comprehension strategies and the degree to which cooperative learning processes improve students' learning of these strategies. Their findings showed that the students engaged in cooperative learning with direct instruction on reading comprehension strategies and those with direct instruction alone outperformed those in the control group in identifying the main ideas of passages. They indicated, therefore, that collaborative reading should comprise both reading comprehension strategy instruction and cooperative learning.

As for young EFL learners, focused in the present study, the theoretical approach is socio-cultural theory. The underlying scheme of this theory was that student/student interaction can enhance young learners' reading in foreign language. In fact, socio-cultural theory basically highlights the role of social interaction and language as key mediators of the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). As mentioned by Lantolf and Thorne (2006) and Clark and Graves (2004), the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a main conception in socio-cultural theory that clarifies the imperative role of educators as mediators and is at the core of the concept of scaffolding. Socio-cultural theory, posited by Vygotsky (1978), seems to afford explanations for the role of teachers in the development of young learners' reading. It actually provides an approach for predicting how teachers are engaged with students in the process of learning. This is why this theory has been regarded as the basis for the current research.

### **Method**

The method used in the current study is qualitative in nature, involving face to face interview, observation and interaction with teachers to get insider's perspective.

### **Participants**

The participants of this study were twofold: 2 Iranian teachers selected from a primary school in Tehran, and 16 Iranian primary school students in grade two. They were both randomly selected for the purposes of this study.

### **Instruments**

The instruments used in this study were face-to-face interviews, teachers' reflective journal, and participant observation in some sessions. Through these instruments, the researchers analyzed and described the collected data.

### **Procedures**

In this study, collaborative reading activities were used by the two participant teachers, that is, short stories using picture flash cards were the central focus of the study. The teachers actually used this activity to investigate how collaborative reading and reading aloud across collaborative activities promote students' reading in the foreign language. Before reading the short story passages, they asked the students to scan the topic, heading, pictures in each passage. In this manner, they prompted the students to review what they already recognized, and asked them to share their ideas with their classmates. Then, during the reading process, they were asked to read each passage for a few minutes and apply a technique called Click and Clunk to examine comprehension and distinguish misunderstanding and unclear vocabularies or notions. When they completed a passage, they applied fix-up strategies to the unfamiliar vocabulary and notions: first they read the whole sentence with the clunk in it and described if they could understand and discover the meaning from contextual clues; second, they re-read the sentence with the clunk and the sentences before or after, looking for clues to help figure out the the meaning of the clunk.

After reading the passages, the students were required to try to answer some related questions and discern the main ideas in each passage. They were actually asked to think of easier questions which necessitated the comprehension of the passages based on their prior knowledge.

### **Data Analysis**

The process of data analysis was done by systematically arranging and presenting the obtained information. It should be mentioned here that in qualitative research, data arise in a diversity of forms such as transcribed recordings from interview transcribe, field observations, and teachers' journals. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), there is no single best way to analyze data in qualitative research. Thus, in the present study, the data were elicited through filed-notes collected from observation, teachers' reflections towards students' reading and face to face interviews, and qualitatively analyzed and interpreted to find answer to the posed research question.

### **Results and Discussion**

As was mentioned above, the data resulted from the observation of participants, face to face interviews and teachers' journals, in terms of such themes as predicting the storyline, guessing the meaning, and word recognition. Analysis of the data revealed the potential of teacher-student

reading interaction and peer interaction in fostering English reading among young Iranian learners.

### **Predict the storyline at pre-reading stage**

In collaborative reading sessions, pre-reading was a very important stage in which the topic and type of the text were first introduced to the students. In fact, reading with the teacher, collaborative reading and asking prediction questions (open-ended questions) in group work about the text encouraged the students to predict the storyline. Predicting the sequence of illustrations and pictures could help students to gain the meaning. In fact, it helped them learn how to examine their understanding of the text while thinking ahead to the next page. Also, the use of open-ended questions by teachers in the pre-reading stage, not only resulted in interaction between the students and the teacher, but also encouraged the students to provide clear answers to the questions. It also helped the students to predict the events of the text and become critical thinkers. Actually, the aim of pre-reading activities was to improve the interest of the students in the topic, lead them to make predictions, and activate their background knowledge. These findings are in line with those of Yeeding (2007) who investigated the effects of pre-reading activities on learners' motivation and reading comprehension ability and came to the conclusion that these activities highly motivate the learners and make them very enthusiastic to read. The findings also support Saricoban's (2002) research findings to the effect that pre-reading activities assist students to activate what they know about a topic and foresee what they will read or hear.

### **Guessing the meaning from the context at reading stage**

From the researchers' observation, in the collaborative reading sessions stage, teachers gave the opportunity to the students to guess the meaning of the words, wherever the students had difficulty in understanding the meaning of the words, the teachers used picture words to capture their attention to guess the meaning of the words. This encouraged the students to read the words and remember the meaning of them easily. Teachers expressed in their field notes that guessing meaning from the context is an important technique which will improve the students' reading skills. In addition, from the interviews and observations at this stage, it can be discerned that the students suffered from difficulties regarding the correct pronunciation of unknown words. These findings are in line with those of Rhalmi (2013), regarding the technique of guessing meaning from context. He states that guessing meanings of unfamiliar words from the context is a strategy which is worth developing. In the same line, Souhila (2014) argues that among the most useful strategies that enable EFL learners to achieve a good level of reading comprehension are inferring and guessing the meaning from the context.

In connection with the strategy of guessing the meaning from the context, reference should be made here to the use of picture books exploited in the current study and emphasized in Dual Coding Theory of Pivio (1971) who highlighted the importance of providing input for both the visual representational system and the verbal representational system, because image traces are remembered better than verbal components. According to this theory, and as was seen in the present study, there are numerous advantages of using picture books as a tool for improving EFL young learners' reading, since they help the learners to guess the meaning of unknown key vocabulary from the context and at the same time, save time in the comprehension process. Gairns and Redman (1986) state that using picture dictionary, asking open-ended questions, making use of context to infer meaning and guessing can be good activities to understand the meaning of the words. In this study too, by using pictorial clues, teachers helped the students to guess the meaning of the words. Actually, reading aloud the picture books and short stories for

EFL young learners in every session could build up the students' imagination and create a good communication between teachers and young learners. This is accentuated by Siahaan (2012) who believe that reading short stories and picture books can be a good way to get students involved in reading without any limitation.

### **Word recognition**

Teachers used picture clues for word recognition and helped the students to recognize unfamiliar words in reading sessions. Looking at the pictures was one of the most important things that teachers did collaboratively with their students. As an example, Nila (teacher) put the picture flash card of a Monkey on the board and read it aloud to her students. She also wrote the letters of the Monkey. She actually helped her students to say the right sound when they read it. In fact, through reading short stories using picture flash cards, the students were able to recognize the words by distinguishing the letters in collaborative and individual reading. In effect, they were able to decode and sound out the words correctly. The findings illustrated that words with pictures were recognized and learned quickly, because young learners made a connection between the picture and the letter of the word. In this respect, previous research has shown that if word recognition processes do not control proficiently, reading will be extremely inefficient. Juel (1991) conducted a study and discovered that word recognition is a strong predictor of later reading comprehension. In addition, Lang and Solman (1979) investigated the capability of young learners to recognize and read the words without pictures and the words with pictures. Their findings illustrated that words with pictures were recognized and learned more quickly because young learners made a connection between the picture and the letter of the word. Levin, Shatil-Carmon and Asif-Rave (2006) too, state that teaching both on sounds and on letters enhances word recognition and clarification of written words. Their findings prove that letters and sounds awareness among young learners is one of the most crucial predictors of reading achievement later in school.

### **Conclusions**

As was mentioned above, this qualitative study was conducted to investigate collaborative reading in reading sessions among young EFL learners. Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that socio-cultural theory can be used to illuminate the way EFL reading tasks and materials must be designed. Actually, the obtained results of the study showed that young EFL learners benefit from collaborative reading which is based on socio-cultural theory. In fact, it was revealed that collaborative reading activities could promote students' reading in the English language. Moreover, the findings showed that in collaborative reading sessions process, pre-reading was a very important stage in which the topic and type of the text were introduced by the teacher, prediction questions about the text encouraged the students to predict the storyline, and pictures helped the students to gain the meaning. Furthermore, pre-reading helped the students to predict the events of the text and become critical thinkers.

The findings also showed that reading sessions across collaborative reading activities provided an opportunity for the students to engage in collaboration with peers in reading process, and this taught them to take responsibility for their learning and become independent readers, that is, during reading sessions, instead of depending too much on the teacher, they learned from each other and tried to read independently. For the rest, in the process of reading sessions, in while-reading stage, teachers gave the opportunity to students to guess from the context the meanings of the words which were difficult for them to understand. Also, where the students suffered from difficulties in pronouncing unfamiliar words, the teachers used picture words to capture their

attention to guess the meanings of the words. This encouraged the students to read the words and remember their meanings easily. Also, through reading short stories using picture flash cards, the students were able to recognize the words by distinguishing the letters. In fact, the students were able to decode and sound out the words correctly, because they made a connection between pictures and the letters of words.

As a final word, the findings of this study may have practical implications for both teachers and young EFL learners in so far as reading processes and reading performance enhancement are concerned.

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