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Research Paper

Effect of Offline Newly-Developed Task Cycle (NDTC) on Iranian Medical Students' Reading Comprehension Performance

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Abstract

This study was conducted to explore the impact of integrating an evaluation cycle (Newly-developed Task Cycle) into Willis's task-based model on the improvement of Iranian medical students' reading comprehension. In this quasi-treatment study, 60 medical students were selected through convenience sampling from Jahrom University of Medical Sciences, Jahrom, Iran, and assigned to two groups of Willis and NDTC. The control group (Willis group) received the procedures of the task-based cycle proposed by Willis, and the treatment group (NDTC group) received the procedures of NDTC designed by the researchers of this study. Each group participated in 12 sessions with a focus on reading comprehension, which met twice a week for 90 minutes. Prior to starting the treatment, a pre-test was administered. Also, one week after the last session, a post-test was administered. The post-test scores were compared with pre-test scores in each group and finally with each other. The results obtained from the statistical analysis of the collected data revealed that while both frameworks were effective in improving the learners' reading skills, NDTC had a greater impact in this respect. The findings of the study have beneficial implications for teachers, researchers, and educational managers, should NDTC be infiltrated into teaching methods.

Keywords: *Newly-Developed Task Cycle, evaluation, reading comprehension*

Introduction

McLelland (2017) states that in the late twentieth century, ELT (English language teaching) developed rapidly and created challenges and changes. Communicative approaches



underwent a major transformation that is now used all over the world, particularly in the ESL and EFL classes. Reading skills were not exceptions. Reading skills are important, especially for language learners, because they enhance comprehension.

Proficiency in ESP can include a variety of skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) and components (structure, lexicon). However, the significance of reading skills has been stressed in recent years (Dreyer and Nel, 2003). According to Davari, (2013), the reading comprehension required for academic reading, especially in the context of ESP, is more complex than any other reading type. ESP textbooks are considered as the most visible parts of any ESP teaching program, especially in societies where English is a foreign language. Consequently, ESP classrooms may be almost the only source of English which plays a crucial role in exposing learners to the language, and certainly, the Iranian society as an EFL context is not an exception to this rule.

Task-based learning seems to be a suitable approach to develop students' reading comprehension, particularly ESP, among all the methods and approaches of language teaching. In this approach, the role of students as active participants in the process of learning is remarkable, thus, this participation motivates students and ultimately improves the comprehension process. The reason for paying attention to task-based approaches is the functional perspectives of the language and the actual language of communication. Task-based learning (TBL) is a process-based approach rather than a product-oriented approach in which communication tasks help improve second language learning (Nahavandi, 2013). It is supposed to develop students' reading comprehension. This strategy can assist teachers in giving the students an active role in participation and creation and hence increase their learning motivation. It involves the students in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. In contrast to the passive receiving knowledge from teacher-centered classes, this style of teaching provides the student with active, student-centered learning (Zhu and Mitchell, 2012).

The current study is an attempt to investigate whether the integration of another cycle into the Willis' task-based model known as NDTC could improve the reading comprehension of the medical students. Since the field of medicine is directly linked with resources, which are mostly in the English language such as textbooks, articles, etc. medical students were selected as the population of our study. In addition, as medical knowledge is growing very fast, knowledge of the English language among physicians can indirectly affect the application of new treatments and consequently the health of the society.

Based on what was mentioned above, the following research question was addressed in the present study.

RQ. Does the integration of a new evaluation cycle (Newly-developed Task Cycle, NDTC) into Willis's task-based model affect the improvement of Iranian medical students' reading comprehension performance?

Literature Review

Reading involves the use of elements including, context, accompanied by the knowledge of grammar, context, vocabulary, discourse conventions, metacognitive awareness to expand and reach the appropriate meaning (Minaabad and Khoshkholgh, 2012). The importance and status of the reading comprehension skill in Iranian academic contexts, like other EFL contexts, is undeniable. As Rahimi and Azhegh (2011) mention, reading comprehension is usually considered as the major purpose of learning English. Moreover, the structures and system of

existing course books in Iranian scholarly settings confirm the fundamental role of reading comprehension in improving this skill among language learners (Farhady, 2005). A common belief is that in the contexts where English is a Foreign Language (EFL), reading comprehension plays an important role. Moreover, since it is the main means for learning new information, it is considered as a highly regarded skill needed for the students' achievement and success (Iranmehr et al., 2011).

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has some advantages as well as challenges. Ellis (2009) lists the benefits of TBLT. He believes that TBLT gives the opportunity that natural learning occurs through the classroom context; it focuses on meaning rather than form and motivates the learners intrinsically. It is consistent with the philosophy of learner-focused education. However, it keeps the teachers' hands open for creativity, input, and guidance and considers both accuracy and fluency in improving communication. The most remarkable component of the TBLT is the task. In other words, TBLT revolves around the task. The term 'task' is at times replaced by a similar word, "activity". Breen (2012) defines the task as an organized framework to provide opportunities for the refinement of information and capacities involved in a new language and its utilization in communication. Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2013) view "a task as an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective" (Bygate et al., 2013, p.112). It is said that the use of different types of tasks in teaching a language makes the teaching of the language more communicative since the purpose of classroom activity is beyond the practice of language for itself (Richards and Rodgers, 2014).

ESP is not a matter of teaching "specialized varieties" of English because of the fact that language is used for a specific purpose. There are some features which can be identified as "typical" of a particular context of use, and which, later on, help learners to be prepared to meet in the target situation (Bensafa, 2017). There are some TBLT models, however; the focus of the current study is on Willis's task-based model since it explicitly concedes the existence of a mini-framework embedded within it, and we could simply embed the evaluation cycle to it.

Willis Model

The following task-based model outlined by Willis uses the format of the Pre-Task cycle, Task Cycle, and Language Focus (Willis, 1996).

Table 1

Willis' Framework (1996)

A. Pre task cycle

INTRODUCTION TO TOPIC AND TASK

The teacher explores the topic with the class, highlights useful words and phrases, and helps learners understand task instructions and prepares them. Learners may hear a recording of others doing a similar task, or read part of a text as a lead into a task.

B. Task Cycle

TASK	PLANNING	REPORTS
Students do the task, in pairs or small groups. The teacher monitors from a distance, encouraging all attempts at communication, not	Students prepare to report to the whole class (orally or in writing) how they did the task. Since the report stage is public, students will	Some groups present their reports to the class, or exchange written reports, and compare results. The teacher acts as a

correcting. Since this naturally want to be chairperson, and then situation has a "private" feel, accurate, so the teacher comments on the content of students feel free to stands by to give language the reports. experiment. advice.
Mistakes do not matter.

C. Language Focus

ANALYSIS

Students examine and then discuss specific features of the text or transcript of the recording. They can enter new words, phrases, and patterns in vocabulary books.

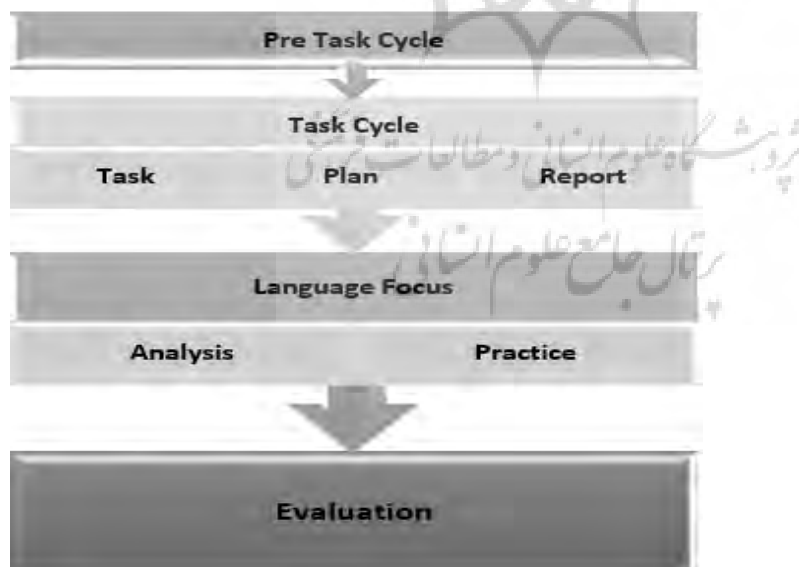
PRACTICE

The teacher conducts the practice of new words, phrases, and patterns occurring in the data, either during or after the Analysis.

Table 1 clearly shows three cycles: pre-task cycle, task cycle, and language focus. This model is the focus of the present study, in which three cycles and sub-cycles are described in detail. The pre-task cycle and the task cycle proposed below (Figure 1) take advantage of the sociolinguistic norms described above and ensure a smooth and natural transition from private to more public interaction. The complete framework aims to create the essential conditions for language learning in the classroom. Willis's task-based model does not address evaluation in completing the task. As the teachers observe the class while the students do the task, they actually perform a kind of informal evaluation and take indirect feedback. In the present study, another cycle, the Evaluation Cycle, was integrated into Willis' task-based model, and the model created was called NDTC. The kind of evaluation proposed is self-evaluation which provides students' feedbacks to the given task.

Figure 1

The NDTC Model



Here, the evaluation is done individually, even if students work in pairs or groups. In the offline NDTC, the evaluation is carried out at the end of the task when the students have completed all cycles. Ellis believes that evaluation can help students enhance their autonomy,

improve their reflective attitudes, and inspire settings towards their academic objectives (Ellis, 2003).

As a final word here, it should be stated that despite the importance of ESP courses for students in Iran, especially medical students, there have been very rare studies to generally and specifically examine the English language needs of medical students. English has so far been taught without a systematic survey of the needs of the medical students (Eslami, 2010; Karimkhanlouei, 2012). The purpose of this study is, therefore, to compare Willis' model and NDTC model, and considering today's needs for research to improve understanding of medical texts, to explore how and to what extent the implementation of NDTC in medical English classes helps students enhance their reading abilities at the university levels in Iran.

Method

Research design

This study was conducted under a quasi-treatment pre-test/post-test design, with the control and treatment groups.

Participants

The population of the study 60 medical students from Jahrom University of medical sciences, Jahrom, Iran. They were selected through convenience sampling and randomly allocated to Willis (control) and NDTC (treatment) groups. (12 male and 18 female students in each group). NDTC is of two types: offline and ongoing. In the ongoing NDTC, evaluation is performed at the end of each cycle; whereas, in the offline NDTC, evaluation is carried out at the end of the task. The focus of this study was on the offline NDTC. The inclusion criteria for this study were as follows: being a medical student and having passed a course in general English.

Instruments

The data collection tools used in the study were a test of reading comprehension, a pre-test, a post-test, and an evaluation checklist. The text of the reading test comprised 6 passages and 30 questions. These passages were chosen from a valid and reliable source (*Reading Matrix*, (Dastpak and Jamshidi, 2008), used professionally all over the world. This book includes IELTS and TOEFL reading texts. The pre-test (post-test) was researcher-made and was piloted prior to use. The reliability index for the pre- and post-test (0.76) revealed that the researcher-made test was suitable for the purpose of the study. Moreover, the test contents were validated regarding testing criteria--the relevance of questions to the content, its suitability to the research goals, objectives, and the suitability of the time allocated to the tests. The checklist included yes/no questions for each cycle to check whether or not the students completed the task thoroughly. In fact, after completing each cycle, they had to fill in the checklist and see whether they had completed that cycle or not; then, they would proceed to the next cycle.

Procedure

For the purposes of the study, the participants in the treatment and control groups received the principles of NDTC and Willis frameworks respectively. They were actually taught the reading passages based on the principles of the Willis and NDTC. The course met for twelve sessions, each session 90 minutes, twice a week at Jahrom University of Medical Sciences. The TBL framework proposed by Willis (1996) was adopted as the teaching basis (Willis, 1996). That is, after the presentation of a task (key words, phrases, and structural points), the students were asked to study the samples, and at the end of the task, they were asked to answer the yes/no

questions in the checklist they were given. If they had any problem, the teacher reviewed that part for clarification. Both groups were given a pre-test before the intervention, and the same test as a post-test a week after the last session. Finally, SPSS (version 16) was applied to analyze the data. A paired sample t-test was used to compare the pre and post-test results in each group, and an independent sample t-test was applied to do the between-group comparison.

Results

The results obtained from the analysis of the collected data are presented in this section. Table 2 below illustrates and compares the mean scores of the reading comprehension before and after the intervention. The table actually shows the difference between the post-test scores and the pre-test scores of each group. The P-value of this difference ($p=0.001$) was statistically significant ($p<0.05$).

Paired Samples Test										
	Paired Differences			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	Mean	SD	SEM	Lower	Upper					
				Offline NDTC	6.30				2.00	.360
Willis	4.033	1.47	0.26	-4.58	-3.48	-4.99	29	0.001		

To see which framework was more effective regarding the reading comprehension of the students, an independent sample t-test was run. Table 3 shows the results.

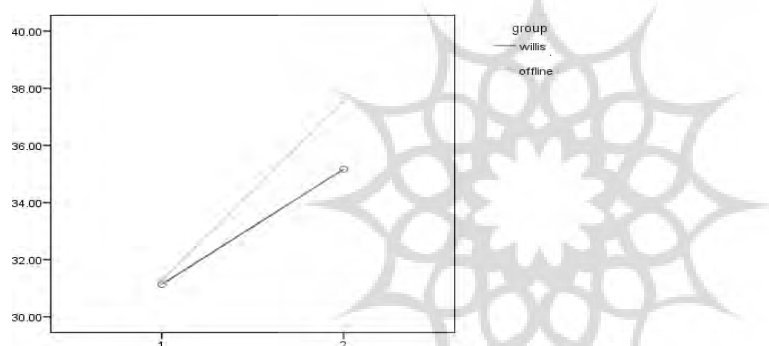
Stages	Groups	N	Mean	SD	SE	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min	Max	T	df	P
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound					
Pretest	Willis	30	31.13	3.29	.59	29.90	32.35	26.00	-0.16	-0.1	58	0.872
	NDTC	30	31.26	3.11	.57	30.10	32.43	25.00		6		
Post-test	Willis	30	35.16	3.20	.58	33.97	36.36	29.00	-2.96	-2.9	58	0.004
	NDTC	30	37.5	3.0	.5	36.41	38.71	32.0	46.0	6		

0	6	8	6	0	0
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This table demonstrates the means and standard deviations of each group. The post-test mean score (35.16 ± 3.20) of the participants in the Willis framework is higher than their mean score in the pre-test (31.13 ± 3.29). Likewise, in the NDTC, the mean score (37.563 ± 3.08) in the post-test is quite higher than the mean score in the pre-test (31.26 ± 3.11). As it is observed, the mean scores of the participants' reading comprehension in pre-tests show that the Willis and NDTC groups were very close to each other (31.13 and 31.26, respectively). So, there was no significant difference between the groups ($p=0.872$) in the pre-test. However, the mean scores of their reading comprehension in the post-tests demonstrate that NDTC could be more effective in improving the reading scores of the students (35.16 and 37.56, respectively). The results simply show that before the intervention, the participants of both groups did almost the same in reading comprehension; whereas, after the intervention, NDTC participants outperformed those of the Willis. Figure 2 below represents this.

Figure 2

The trend of two different groups on reading comprehension



As it is observed in Figure 2 and shown in Table 2 above, NDTC framework had a greater effect than that of Willis on the participants' reading comprehension.

Discussion

Based on the results obtained from the analysis of the data, it seems that integrating an evaluation cycle to the Willis model could significantly improve the participants' reading comprehension performance. In fact, compared with Willis' model, offline NDTC made caused a more significant improvement. This reiterates the fact that evaluation that leads to improving understanding goes beyond a simple evaluation and a unit-by-unit test. It yields comprehensive information to observe the students' progress in completing the task. Evaluation is also beneficial to the teacher in such a way that it gives the teachers an opportunity to detect the strengths and weaknesses of the students. It is to be noted, thus, that if evaluation is not done during the performance or at the end of the task, the teacher cannot detect how well students could complete the task. In fact, evaluation helps the students and the teachers direct the whole process much more efficiently. The results of this study confirm the fact that if the evaluation is performed, it can enhance the learners' reading comprehension ability more effectively. Offline NDTC can, therefore, be considered as a creative framework in improving the teaching quality of teachers and the reading comprehension performance of the students.

The findings of the present study are consistent with those of Zand Moghadam (2007), who also found that TBI could positively affect EFL learners' reading comprehension. The findings are also in line with those of Fani, et al. (2011) who examined the effect of TBLT on the reading ability of learners, and they found that using tasks is effective in improving the learners' reading comprehension skills. Moreover, the findings of this study confirm those of an investigation by Rahimi and Azhegh (2011), which showed that engineering students could benefit from TBLT in their reading courses. The findings also confirm those of Joe (1998), De la Fuente (2009), Iranmehr, et al. (2011), Malmir, Najafi Salem, and Ghasemi (2011), who examined the impact of TBLT on the learners' reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge (De la Fuente, 2009; Iranmehr et al., 2011; Joe, 1998; Malmir, et al. 2011).

Considering the findings of the present study and those of the previous similar studies, it can be argued that adding an evaluation cycle would yield better results in boosting the reading comprehension of the students. Probably one of the reasons is the rise in the students' general awareness towards the detection of their own weaknesses in reading comprehension, which can be revealed through evaluation. This can, in turn, help the students to get aware of their own situations and try harder to remove potential obstacles.

Conclusions

The issues analyzed in this article are important for those who teach ESP, especially in higher education. Actually, the frameworks discussed here (ongoing and offline NDTC) are believed to catch the attention and awareness of ESP teachers and trainers. Undoubtedly, ESP training involves a lot of tedious work for ESP teachers who need to invest a lot of time and effort in their education and career growth. Learning how to evaluate a task needs a lot of hard work. It seems that evaluation provides a reflection on the performance of the task cycles and enables the students and the teachers to receive independent feedback on the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and/or consistency of the task cycle. Evaluation is highly important since the students can be aware of their weaknesses in completing a task and try to remove them. In addition, English teachers can apply the framework applied in this study as an alternative that can be used in the teaching of reading comprehension. Seemingly, adding an evaluation cycle to Willis' model makes reading comprehension more enjoyable, boosts the related skills and finally, gives the students more active roles in learning reading comprehension. Generally-speaking, using offline NDTC can have a positive effect on the students' reading comprehension performance. As a final word, it is recommended that the applied framework be used with other language skills such as listening, speaking, and writing, and with learners of other fields at different levels of language proficiency.

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