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Effect of Bias Tasks through Cooperative Learning on EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension Achievement: Gender in focus

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Abstract

Purpose: An important facet in learning a language is expanding reading comprehension capability. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the impact of implementation bias tasks through cooperative learning and gender on the reading comprehension process of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

Methodology: Two groups of 30 learners took part as a control group and an experimental group. Primarily the participants took The Preliminary English Test (PET) as a reading comprehension pretest. Then the experimental group instructed through the precepts of bias tasks in cooperative learning. However, the control group instructed through traditional instruction. Finally, the participants took the reading comprehension post-test.

Findings: The result of two-way ANCOVA revealed that bias tasks through cooperative learning improved EFL learners' reading comprehension skills.

Conclusion: Also, findings demonstrated that the means reading scores did not differ noticeably between male and female groups on both pretest and posttest. This task in cooperative learning can be utilized either in the classroom or in instructors' training.

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1. Introduction

Process of teaching consists of more than an interpretation, a sourcebook, some exercises and an exam to classify students. This process doesn't involve the realization of students' weaknesses and strengths as well as the best techniques to improve their learning process. In practice, many challenges appear during instructing foreign language. One of the most difficult tasks is to teach learners how to read effectively. This skill has become a challenging ability to be developed in students as it requires efficient knowledge of the foreign language and high levels of comprehension transcending the simple act of interpreting words. It is a fact that since reading performs a momentous role in getting information and knowledge from original resources, foreign language teachers should notice to the way of the teaching this skill in their classes. Instructors allow leaners to demonstrate what they learn according to their preferences during reading texts. It means, teaching one reading part and assigning the different students' needs in a group by establishing different ways for the learning (Adams, Pierce & Pierce, 2006).

English Reading skill is one of the four main skills needed to improve effectively in any language, especially when learners can't understand the main idea of the reading text. Reading is regarded as multiple acts of interpretation in which various variables (e.g. textual, contextual, and cognitive) interact to make an understanding possible (Roe, Smith & Burns, 2005). Of course, reading involves a holistic comprehension process that goes beyond the understanding of detached items. Reading comprehension mentions to the capability to obtain meaning from what one has read (Hallahan, Kauffman & Pullen, 2009). According to MacNamara (2007), "… for some readers, comprehension is always challenging. They may understand each word independently, but associating them together into meaningful ideas often does not happen as it should" It is usual that in today's classrooms many students experience difficulty developing their reading comprehension skills, a problem which seems to emerge from methods of instruction that fail to address learners' reading needs. So, language instructors must accommodate their instruction, making changes, and specifically, have to know how to address different learning styles, preferences, and backgrounds, and important gender differences in today's classrooms. When teaching reading comprehension skills, a teacher should consider effective instruction for all types of readers. His/her classroom may include virtual nonreaders, developing readers, and more advanced readers (Gregory & Chapman, 2007).

Intrinsically, instruction needs to be adapted to provide for students' multiplicity and classes should become differentiated and flexible spaces to ensure that all students, grow as much as they possibly can each day, each week and throughout the year. These learners' demands are just a few of the problems instructors meet every day, but now instructors are discovering a new method of instructing that will assist them to master these tackles. There are many methods and tactics that can sublimate the reading of EFL learners. Task-based Instruction (TBI) as a methodology, pinpoints on functional tasks and encourages students to apply language for the real world which "starts with a task-based needs inquiry to identify the target tasks for a particular pair of learners- what they need to be able to do in the new language" (Long, 2015). Definitely, in EFL environments where learners are obliged on their availability to use the target language, it is needed for EFL students to be given real connections to be familiar with language use in the classroom (Rashtchi & Keyvanfar, 2010).

New probe in different educational settings has furnished maintenance for the use of collaborative tasks in which students consciously consider their own language, especially by producing language-related episodes. Cooperative instructing performs as a substitute method for teaching by elevating speech and social interaction (Hernández & Boero, 2018; Russell, 2018). It also suggested that CL enhanced learners' English skills, self-belief, and expanded their correlation with their partners (Alghadmy, 2019). Lai and Li (2011) believed tasks must be observed as "holistic activities in which learners make use of their language and (cross) cultural and communicative resources to achieve some nonlinguistic outcome through stretching their linguistic, (cross-cultural), internet-based communication, and digital literacy skills" There are some changes in amending methods of instructing EFL students recently based on their proficiency levels. Bowler

and Parminter (2002), and Ur (1996) pinpointed, the advantage of incorporating the task types in promoting learners' participation in the reading activities. There are two tasks that cause the participation of all learners in their classroom: tiered tasks and bias tasks. Tiered tasks are parallel tasks with different amounts of scaffolding, and support, that learners work together on distinct levels of activities with the same aim. Bias tasks refer to a variety of tasks that instructors provide for weak, mid, and strong students in mixed-level classrooms for the purpose of adapting reading activities for all students and provide them with a sense of achievement. In framing such tasks, bias tasks are specifically important as they are designed in accordance with the needs of particular groups of students (Bowler & Parminter, 2002).

One technique of attaining the purpose of the demands of language students at various levels of proficiency is to carry out bias tasks and activities (Rost, 2002). Biasing implies instructing the consistent material to the learners but give them different tasks according to their proficiency levels. It is necessary to investigate how bias tasks through cooperative learning can cope with learner differentiation in English classes at intermediate level settings. On this basis, this study aims to deal with the application of bias tasks in cooperative learning for teaching Iranian EFL students to check whether utilizing bias tasks in CL has any crucial effect on improving the learners' reading ability, or not. Moreover, the target of this research is to assess gender differences towards utilizing bias tasks through CL for instructing English per utilizing comprehension within the Iranian private English institute. Accordingly, the following research questions were composed to attain the goals of the research:Research Question One: Does the use of bias tasks in cooperative learning affect EFL students' reading comprehension?

Research Question Two: Do bias tasks through cooperative learning have the same effect on male and female EFL learners' reading comprehension? And two null hypotheses were formulated: Research Hypothesis 1. The use of bias tasks in cooperative learning doesn't affect EFL students' reading comprehension. Research Hypothesis 2. Bias tasks through Cooperative learning do not have the same effect on male and female EFL learners' reading comprehension. Cooperative learning is centered on Wittrock's Generative Learning Hypothesis and Vygotsky's idea of Zone of Proximal Advancement (Gonzales & Torres, 2015; McLeish, 2009; Pan & Wu, 2013).

It is a teaching method where learners work in groups on an established activity in order to emphasize one another's learning and to accomplish destined goals (Nasri & Biria, 2017). Participants must work together, offer assistance in accomplishing particular reachable learning targets. It needs students' participation besides their confidence, class objectives, assignments, and requite structures (Macpherson, 2015). According to Ormord (2011) "approach to instruction in which students work with a little gather of peers to realize a common objective and offer assistance one another learn" CL methods share the idea that learners work in groups to gain a collective goal; at the same time, however, they are quite different from one another as individuals (Slavin, 1991 as cited in Das, 1988).

CL is a learning scheme that emphasizes learners' learning-related collaborative activities in the form of small groups, utilizing distinct learning tasks (methods) to enhance students' abilities in comprehending the learner matter and solving problems collectively.There have been many studies that have placed a high value on cooperative learning. CL aims at learner-centered learning and claims to expand the level of understanding and reasoning, develop critical thinking, and increase the accuracy of long–term retention (Koppenhaver & Shrader, 2003). In addition, Johnson, Johnson, and Stanne (2000) reveal that cooperative learning is absorbed in the mainstream of educational practice because it is a theoretically-based approach that has been verified to be highly effective in improving student learning and enhancing social relations compared to other non-cooperative instructional methods, and there are lots of cooperative learning techniques available to be employed by teachers. It is further assumed that active participation in the learning experience will result in an improvement in academic performance. In addition, in this approach, an "atmosphere of achievement" is created because learners will work on the assigned task until all members of the group achieve the aim of successfully understanding and completing the assignment (Panitz, 1996).

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Bourner (1997) asserted "instructing methods are not an end in themselves, but a means to an end, they are the vehicle (s) we use to lead our students to particular learning results." Today's education practices are increasingly paying attention to the individual characteristics of students and the impacts such aspects could have on their learning. More specifically, "instructors can no longer instruct 'the lesson' and hope that everyone gets it. Educators must consider each child based on his or her needs, readiness, preferences, and interests" (Gregory & Chapman, 2007, p. 2). Definitely, it is the instructor's duty to make the classroom a place where students can explore different strategies to succeed in developing their various skills and abilities such as reading comprehension.

As Tomlinson states (1999), "in a differentiated classroom, the instructor can fully fashion instruction around essential concepts, principles and skills of each student" (p. 9). One of the ways that could contribute to differentiated instruction is cooperative learning. In cooperative learning-based classrooms, students are free to express what they have in mind to complete the tasks given during the instruction. Learners need to work in groups and assist each other in gaining particular learning goals. Therefore, to make all learners stimulated and excited in a course, would be completely important that instructors devise lessons with rich different tasks relating to different learning styles. Also, an important differentiating factor in group work is gender. The present research explored reading achievement, gender, and the relationship among them.

Today's institutes are in the fullness of mixed-ability classes instead of classrooms with only high, mid, or low learners. So, instructors should encounter the instant demands of all students that they can develop well (Tomlinson, 2000). Learners should have teachers notice them as individuals with individual demands. When it occurs, and the school plan is based on concern, teachers will extend productivity, and achievement while meeting students' demands (Tomlinson, C. A., Brighton, C., Hertberg, H., Callahan, C. M., Moon, T. R., Brimijoin, K., & Reynolds, T., 2003). Learners should have teachers notice them as individuals with individual demands. When it occurs, and the school plan is based on concern, instructors will extend productivity, and achievement while meeting students' demands (Tomlinson et al., 2003). Instructors can center their teaching plans based on learners' demands. Learners should move on a step that is appropriate for them so they do not devastate with the lesson plan. These learner's demands are just a few of the problems instructors meet every day, but now instructors are discovering a new method of instructing that will assist them master these tackles.

Differentiated Instruction (DI) needs the teacher to modify their teaching plan by adapting content, composing whole group instructions, open ended lessons, and altering learner answers (Johnsen, 2003). When this modifying occurs, learners' engagement raises because learners are tasking at their capability and attention ranks. DI profits learners with different levels, learning techniques, and permits them to effort at divergent abilities. DI is a way of life in a class that applies a mix of diverse instructing methods (The Connecting Link, 2003). DI will assist teachers encounter classroom difficulties because it is a proactive approach to develop learning for all learners. Instructors can be proactive because the method for mix ability levels instead of teaching to all learners in the same way (Tomlinson, 2001). Gillies believed that while instructors listened to their students carefully and simultaneously alleviated interpretation, their students became willing in their opinions (2016).

DI permits for divergent learning paces and preparing tasks at inconsistent complications. Each kid has a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) that is the zone where learners experience convenient performing difficult chore with assist (Morelock & Morrison, 1999). DI uses the ZPD to form its exercises so each learner prosperity. When there is support to assist learners feel prosperous, learning extends. There is a need for learners to learn at their capability levels to achieve high grades of extension. All students can become participated in their classes by providing them distinct choices and practices that they can work to learn together (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004).

Language teachers look for discovering implies, exercises, assignments that assist language learners accomplish their objectives in learning languages. In this way, the assignment holds a central part in language instructional method and SL/FL language investigation since it is utilized to survey what learners can do

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within the L2. Moreover, it affected educational arrangements in ESL/EFL classrooms. Task has been characterized in an unexpected way by distinctive specialists within the field (Lee, 2000; Long, 1985; Prabhu, 1987).

There are diverse kinds of tasks which can be utilized in an EFL environment, such as, jigsaw tasks, information-gap tasks, problem-solving assignments, decision-making assignments, opinion exchange task, etc. They are partitioned into educational assignments and real-world tasks. Ellis (2003) defines the pedagogical activity as "a work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve a result that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed" What these studies suggest is the significance of tasks in organizing classrooms. Following socio-cultural approaches; tasks are leading in learning as contribute to educational purposes. As some authors (e.g. Bowler & Parminter, 2002; Ur, 2005)

have theorized, there are tasks that more effectively engage learners in the teaching-learning process. More specifically, two task types encourage learners to participate: tiered tasks and bias tasks. Tiered tasks are like bias tasks (Bowler & Parminter, 2002). The tiered and bias tasks involve differentiated work that will focus on a specific pair of learners, in this case, students identified as high-, average-, and low-performing EFL learners. Bias tasks are differentiated, but complementary, tasks that begin with individual achievement and end with peer correction.

As pointed out by Tomlinson (2003), "there are strategies that guide the instructor is looking at learners in small groups or individuals rather than only as a whole class" (p. 16). These differentiated strategies generate different learning options or paths to learning so that learners may feel free to perform at their level. Such strategies include learning stations, learning centers, portfolios, and tiered tasks.

Learning stations: Utilizing stations includes setting up diverse spots within the classroom where students work on different tasks at the same time. These stations welcome adaptable gatherings because not all students need to go to all stations all the time (Tomlinson, 1999). Learning centers: They are classroom zones that contain a collection of exercises or materials outlined to teach, fortify, or amplify specific expertise or concept (Kaplan, Kaplan, Madsen & Gould, 1980 as cited in Tomlinson 1999).

Portfolios: it contains students' works, documents the learning process, and individual growth. In Tomlinson's view (1999) portfolios are "motivating because of the considerable emphasis on student choice. They also provide an ongoing channel of assessment, which helps instructors see students as individuals" (p. 93). Tiered tasks: According to Pierce and Adams (2004), it is "a differentiation strategy that addresses a particular standard, key concept, and generalization, but allows several pathways for learners to arrive at an understanding…" (p. 60). Therefore, the implementation of this strategy may allow teachers to meet learners' individual needs and foster motivation reading comprehension as well.

Bowler and Parminter (2002) suggested a sample for elaborating tiered tasks where three types of items with similar content were conducted for the weak, the average, and the strong students. For weak learners simple matching items were prepared which seemed an easy test format to work on; for mid students, multiple-choice items were prepared each with 3 options; and for the strong students, open-ended items were designed.

In another study, Willard-Holt (2003) presented a group of tiered tasks for the science course of the 4th-grade students in the K-12 schooling system in Australia. In a mathematical task of Organizing and displaying data using illustrations, the high achieving students were required to draw a bar graph and a scatterplot diagram to demonstrate the average monthly temperatures and rainfall in Sydney and New York. To do this assignment, the students had to collect the weather reports data before they incorporate them into a bar graph and a scatterplot diagram. The mid achieving students were asked to transfer the logged verbal information into graphics in order to show the proportion of rainy days to sunny days and the average rainfall in Sydney and New York. Finally, the low achieving students were given the illustrations followed by a number of multiple-choice items that required them to simply check-in and check-out the given information on temperature and rainfall statistics in Sydney and New York, illustrated in the graphs. In both

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experiments, significant progress was reported in the individual students regarding both their written and oral productions (Bowler & Parminter, 2002) and analytical performance and academic writing (Willard-Holt, 2003).

Similarly, educators may employ tiered tasks to focus on a particular skill (Tomlinson, 1999). Based on the premise that each individual learns at a different pace, utilizing varied learning styles and strategies, tiered lessons can be a way to ensure that all learners are learning regardless of their abilities. For instance, in a reading lesson, all students can learn about a topic by applying leveled reading texts that fit their distinctive abilities. Consequently, a class can aim at the same goal, but following different ways (Conklin, 2009).

Agreeing to an etymological word reference of the English Dictionary (Skeat, 2005), the word bias comes from a French beginning and passes on different implications. Those who appear to fit superior into the concept of this think about are those who characterize the term as being anything that turns a man to a specific course, or gives the direction to his measures or to give a bias or one-sided tendency, or to slant to one side (p. 166). As result, a bias task would attempt to direct a given student to something that influences, motivates, and suits his/her abilities while putting the student in line with the general trend of classroom development.

Bowler and Parminter (2002) introduce and describe the concept of bias tasks by referring to it as "[a] pie sliced unequally in two […]. The bigger slice of the pie is for those with bigger appetites. The smaller slice is for those with smaller appetites (weaker students). Bias tasks produce complementary results" (p. 13). This comparison portrays bias tasks as adaptive to the particular case of learners. Similar to tiered tasks, this second typology utilizes more challenging, more difficult, and more accessible activities that guarantee success for learners who may have more difficulties with EFL. Thus, students need to analyze their work in order to understand their mistakes and correct items in their peers' language production. This also adds some responsibility to both parties and introduces a method of correction that will be new to learners, forcing them to take a different role in the classroom.

Therefore, although bias tasks rely on individual abilities, they also focus on learners' ability to work in pairs and groups. In the collaborative scheme, a slow learner can enjoy the advantage of being directly in contact with more strong learners and this option could serve as a motivating factor. This strategy not only challenges the student who bests masters the students but also supports and motivates the student who does not perform classroom activities sufficiently. This method pays specific attention to pairs of students who would help each other, communicate, and have debated the stories, while contributing positively to peer work.

The application of bias tasks is expected to positively inspire learners by fostering their sense of commitment. Furthermore, the practice of this strategy may influence both learners who participate directly in differentiated bias tasks, and those who, in a more indirect way, receive the benefits of collaborative work. Lomakina & Hordiienkoe, (2015) underscores the last point:" The instructor has to meet the needs of all the students of the class, thus in the process of acquiring knowledge, it is crucial to organize the pair work in such a way that students start learning from each other" (p. 40). Rose (1997) points out that when learners realize that tasks can appear in different versions (e.g. a simpler version or a more challenging one) they will be able to choose the version of their preference. According to Rose, students can primarily choose the version that is best suited to them, but eventually, they will feel the need to be challenged and will not limit themselves to tasks at the same level. A biased lesson focuses on a key concept but permits several trails for learners to reach a comprehension of these constituents.

On the same line of the research to incorporate the bias task in an EFL classroom with mixed-ability students, the present research was administered to monitor their participants' reading comprehension improvement. The primary objective of this research was to develop differentiated instructions in terms of bias reading tasks that would challenge and enhance language learning for individual students into a mixed-

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ability EFL classroom. The researchers designed and applied bias tasks that were differentiated in three complexity levels of high, mid, and low-achieving learners.

2. Methodology

Participants of this research composed of 60 intermediate EFL learners of Nasr Zabangostar Institute, Mazandaran, Iran. The students' status being intermediate refer to the number of semesters they have gone through studying English at this institute. Hence, the members are named intermediate by ideals of their enrollment in a tenth-semester undergrad institute language course. They were both males and females extending in age from 17 to 32. They were studying English two sessions each ninety minutes per week. The course consisted of 20 sessions, and 10 sessions were relegated for the treatment. Besides, a group of 20 intermediate participants with similar characteristics and the same language proficiency level as the target test took part in the piloting of the PET test.

The PET reading comprehension test included 5 texts that followed by twenty-six reading items were utilized within the research. The length of the passages used in the reading comprehension tests was 180-230 words and the number of T units extended from 14 to 26. The test piloted on a group of 20 learners with similar features to the final one. The reliability of this test was 0/69 which was based on Alpha Cronbach that demonstrates an acceptable reliability coefficient. This test applied to attain one objective: to check the reading comprehension of EFL learners before and after instructional treatment.

A 50 item TOEFL test utilized to rate the proficiency level of the participants in the experimental group. The test consisted of 20 listening comprehension items, 15 grammar items, and 15 reading items. The participants' scores on a PBT test divided the experimental group into three divisions of strong learners (scores ranged from 50.00 to 40.00), mid learners (score ranged of 39.00 to 25.00), and low students (score ranged of 24.00 to 0.00). It administered as a pilot test among 10 EFL to examine the reliability of the test. The reliability coefficient was 0/76 which was based on Alpha Cronbach that indicates a high and acceptable reliability coefficient.

The subjects were 60 intermediate EFL learners. The intermediate level students divided into two distinct groups, one control group (N= 30) and the other experimental group (N= 30). A PET reading test was given to both groups which comprised five writings of twenty-six multiple-choice items. The experimental group instructed with bias tasks through CL and the control group instructed via traditional instruction. The subjects in the experimental group informed about the CL process and bias tasks. The instructional materials used in both groups were the reading contents of the EFL learners' coursebook "American English File3".

The participants of the experimental group experienced 10 sessions of CL with bias tasks before the post-tests. Each task was done in separate weeks and to meet the features of tasks the researcher provided the necessary assistance and guidance appropriate for test-takers in three proficiency groups of high, mid, and low. Participants in the experimental group took part in the PBT TOEFL test which served as a placement test to group the participants into three types of strong, mid, and low achieving learners. The students classified into these groups according to their PBT test scores. Then they divided into five groups of six learners that each group consisted of two strong, two mid, and two weak students. The five groups in the experimental group received three kinds of bias tasks due to their different proficiency levels. The research continued for 10 weeks of two sessions per week. Ten sessions devoted to the treatment. Within the first session, the researcher educated the experimental group around the bias task and CL in which they utilized the treatment. At that point, every 2 sessions, one reading part of the American English file 3 was chosen for groups. Ten reading parts selected with the titles of Mood food, TV host's Amazon challenge, Men talk just as much as women, Commando Dad, If I bounce the ball five times, Love at Exit 19, Do you want to practice for five hours or six, Tchaikovsky house, The king of Complainer, and Shark Tank. The test items identified in three forms, questions for strong, mid, and weak learners. The questions items presented as

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paper A for strong learners, paper B for mid learners, and paper C for weak learners. The questions were different for each proficiency level, for every reading part based on learners' abilities. (See appendix A)

The instructor in the experimental group prepared different questions based on the reading part for different proficiency levels, and learners in the five groups replied individually on their papers. After that researcher asked them to share their answers in their groups, and pair individuals talked about and compared their answers with each other, and at last, the students clarified their last replies about the content of the reading part. The students in the control group maintained their usual class procedures until the posttests. The control group was educating traditionally by means of teacher-based instruction through which the instructor read a text, and posed a question from the content, and called one of the participants to reply to the question without any debate, and counseling with the other peers. Each of the control and experimental group received a total of instruction given by the same teacher.

The control group was instructed according to the following framework of lesson planning: established by Philips (1984). Pre-teaching/preparation. The participants brainstorm ideas as they look at headlines, titles, and charts to predict and hypothesize what the text may be about. Skimming/scanning. The participants determined the gist of readings and paragraphs, selected the best paraphrase from multiple-choice options of main ideas in the text, created titles and headlines for passages, and filled in charts and forms with key concepts. Decoding/intensive reading. The learners practice learning to read rather than reading to learn; they do this by guessing meaning from context and identifying the overall discourse structure.

Comprehension. The participant's complete various comprehension checks, such as question answer, fill-in-the-blanks, and completion of schematic diagrams and graphic organizers. Transferable integrating of skills. The learners go beyond the confines of the text to practice effective reading strategies such as contextual guessing, selective reading for main ideas, appropriate dictionary use, and re-reading strategies to confirm hypotheses. Meanwhile, the experimental group taught by biased tasks through CL (Bowler & Parminter 2002): Pre-teaching/preparation. The participants receive the same reading text and accompanying worksheets based on their proficiency level to facilitate comprehension of concepts and ideas in the materials.Do the activity individually. Each learner receives a task paper that is based on her/his proficiency level and answer the questions individually

Assignment of students to teams. The total number of students in the E group (n = 30) is divided into five groups. Each group includes six members, two strong learners, two mid learners, and two weak members. After working individually, they check their answers in their group. Group discussion: Students with the same topics meet together to discuss inquiries in groups and check worksheets. Comprehension. The student's complete various comprehension checks, such as question-answer, fill-in-the-blanks that follow the reading part. To observe the effect of bias tasks and group work and to create the scores as reliable as possible the researcher prevented any assistance in that test session and the test takers of the experimental group got to resort to their past experience of taking the test and get the help of the key points of those sessions and appear the amount they have learned from sessions. Then all the subjects took the Reading Comprehension posttest in order to find out whether the bias tasks procedure leads to any improvement in participants' reading achievement.

The research utilized the pre-test post-test control group design, which is the ordinarily utilized quasi-experimental examination design (Best & Kahn, 2006). After acquiring the learners' scores in both pretest and post-test, they were under inquiry utilizing SPSS 24. The researcher utilized a quantitative approach. This method utilizes objective measurement in a controlled situation to collect numeric data utilized to reply to questions or hypotheses. It is a more formal, objective, and systematic process (Burns & Grove, 2005). The result of the reading comprehension tests analyzed by Two-way ANCOVA.

3. Findings

In order to observe how independent variables, influence the dependent variables, the raw scores of the

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learners were fed into the computer software SPSS (version 24.0) to compute the required statistical analyses in order to address the research questions of this study. For data analysis, a series of Two-way ANCOVA was utilized to discover the impact of bias tasks on the reading achievement. Table 1 below represented the number of students, mean, and the standard deviation for reading comprehension scores in the experimental and control groups on the pretest. As it's evident from Table 1, the mean of reading comprehension in the experimental group ($\bar{x} = 13.90$, $SD = 2.43$) and control group ($\bar{x} = 14.30$, $SD = 2.25$) do not look far from each other on the pretest. Similarly, the table shows that the mean of reading comprehension for the male ($\bar{x} = 13.84$, $SD = 2.50$) and female students ($\bar{x} = 14.29$, $SD = 2.25$) are close to each other on the pretest.

The descriptive statistics for reading comprehension scores in the experimental and control groups acquired on the posttest are represented in Table 1 below. Table 1 reveals reading comprehension's mean in experimental group ($\bar{x} = 17.57$, $SD = 2.79$) seems highly larger than the control group ($\bar{x} = 16.13$, $SD = 2.30$) on the posttest. Also, as evident from Table 1, the mean of reading comprehension for the male ($\bar{x} = 16.31$, $SD = 2.45$) and female pupils ($\bar{x} = 17.26$, $SD = 2.73$) do not seem far from each other on the post-test, though the mean for the female group is higher than the male group in amount.

Table 1. Reading Comprehension Scores on Posttest (Scores out of 25)

Pair	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experimental	Male	13	17.00	2.799
	Female	17	18.00	2.784
	Total	30	17.57	2.788
Control	Male	13	15.62	1.895
	Female	17	16.53	2.552
	Total	30	16.13	2.300
Total	Male	26	16.31	2.446
	Female	34	17.26	2.734
	Total	60	16.85	2.635

A Bar Graph (Figure 1) was drawn to portray the reading comprehension results for both experimental and control groups and in both genders on the pretest and posttest. In fact, the Bar Graph shows that the means of reading comprehension are nearly the same on the pretest, however, on the posttest; the mean for the experimental group is outstandingly higher than the control group. Also, the Bar Graph demonstrates that the means reading scores do not differ noticeably between the male and female groups on both pretest and posttest.

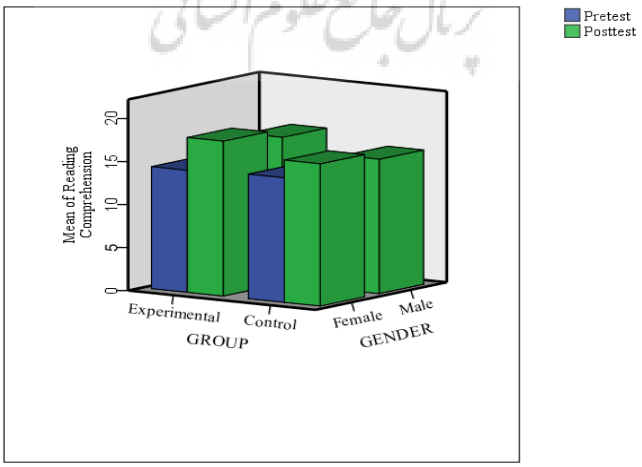

Figure 1. Two groups' means of reading comprehension by gender (pretest & posttest**)**

The results of ANCOVA showed that, there was a significant difference (F (1, 55) = 40.04, p = .006, p < .05, partial eta squared = .13) between the two groups' reading comprehension scores on the posttest. Testing assumptions: According to Hatch and Lazarton (1991), the assumptions of homogeneity of variances and homogeneity of regression slopes must be examined before applying ANCOVA. To assess the assumption of the linear relationship between the dependent variable (reading comprehension posttest) covariates (reading comprehension pretest) in the two pairs, the current researcher checked the distribution of scores (Figure 2). Reading comprehension scores indicated that there was a linear relationship between the two pairs. Therefore, the data for reading comprehension has enjoyed the assumption of a linear relationship.

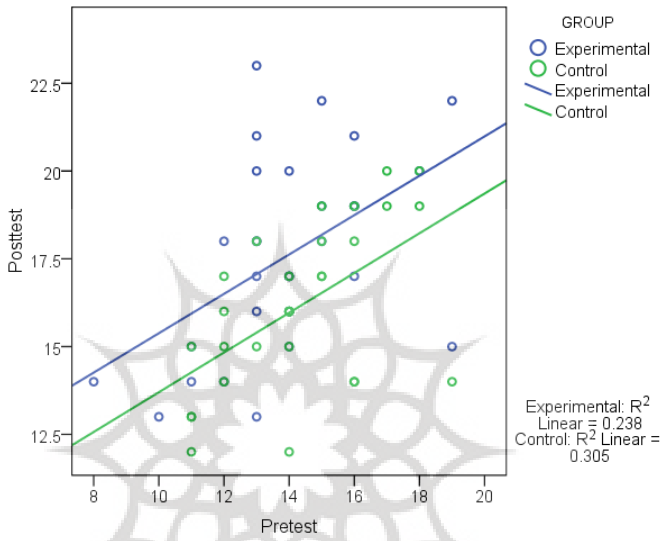

Figure2. Linearity distribution between the pretest and posttest of reading comprehension scores

As seen in Table 3, the significant value associated with Levene's test (.78) was higher than the selected significant level (.05). For this reason, the homogeneity of variance assumption was not violated for reading comprehension scores in the two groups.

Table 2. Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances for Reading Comprehension Scores

Levene Statistic	*df1*	*df2*	*Sig.*
.359	3	56	.783

The fourth assumption relates to the homogeneity of regression slopes. As laid out in Table 3 below, the results showed that the significance level of the interaction between group, gender, and the pretest of reading comprehension was above .05 ($F = 26.19$, $p = .72$, $p > .05$) and so not statistically significant, leading to the conclusion that the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes was met for the pretest and posttest of reading comprehension scores in the two groups and for the males and females.

Table 3. Tests of Between-Students Effects of CL through Bias Tasks on Reading Comprehension (1)

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	141.988[a]	5	28.398	5.729	.000	.347
Intercept	127.074	1	127.074	25.637	.000	.322
GROUP	1.217	1	1.217	.245	.622	.005
PRETEST	92.390	1	92.390	18.639	.000	.257
GROUP * GENDER * PRETEST	10.660	3	3.553	.717	.546	.038
Error	267.662	54	4.957			
Total	17445.000	60				
Corrected Total	409.650	59				

A Two-way ANCOVA was utilized to explore the effectiveness of CL through bias tasks on the reading comprehension of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. The independent variable is using CL through bias tasks (Group), and the dependent variable is Reading comprehension. Participants' scores on the pretest of reading comprehension are used as the covariate in this analysis. The results of the ANCOVA are summarized in Table 3 below. As seen in Table 4, after adjusting for the reading comprehension scores on the pretest, there was a significant difference *(F* (1, 55) = 40.04, p = .006, p < .05, partial eta squared = .13) between the two groups' reading comprehension scores on the posttest; accordingly, the first null hypothesis of the present study that stated, " The use of bias tasks in Cooperative learning does not affect EFL learners' L2 reading comprehension" was rejected and so it could be claimed that bias tasks through cooperative learning can improve EFL learners' L2 reading comprehension.

Moreover, as demonstrated in Table 5, ANCOVA failed to find a statistically significant difference *(F* (1, 55) = 6.62, p = .25, p >.05, partial eta squared = .02) in reading comprehension scores between the male and female students after adjusting for the reading comprehension scores for both genders on the pretest; consequently, the researcher could retain the second null hypothesis of the present study that stated, " Bias tasks through Cooperative learning do not have the same effect on male and female EFL learners' L2 reading comprehension" and therefore it could be asserted that bias tasks in cooperative learning influences male and female EFL learners' L2 reading comprehension similarly.

Table 4. ANCOVA: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects of Bias Tasks on Reading Comprehension (2)

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	137.965[a]	4	34.491	6.982	.000	.337
Intercept	127.296	1	127.296	25.770	.000	.319
PRETEST	93.627	1	93.627	18.954	.000	.255
GROUP	40.044	1	40.044	8.107	.006	.128
GENDER	6.625	1	6.626	1.341	.252	.024
GROUP * GENDER	.008	1	.008	.002	.965	.000
Error	271.685	55	4.940			
Total	17445.000	60				
Corrected Total	409.650	59				

Besides, as it is observable from Table 5 above, there was seen a strong relationship between the pre-intervention and post-intervention scores on the reading comprehension test, as shown by a p value of .000, F (1, 55) = 93.63, and a partial eta squared value of 25. Finally, based on the results provided in Table 5, the results of ANCOVA indicated that there was no significant interaction effect for GROUP*GENDER *(F* (1, 55) = .008, p = .96, p >.05, partial eta squared = .000).

4. Discussion

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The present research explored the possible effects of bias tasks through CL on EFL students' reading achievement and the effects of these tasks on male and female EFL learners' reading skills. Bias tasks implemented in CL propose an eminent teaching tactic that quenches the different needs of students who may have different levels of English proficiency in a heterogeneous environment. The findings of this research showed that CL through bias tasks can enhance EFL students' reading skills. Also, it revealed that bias tasks through CL influence male and female EFL students' reading comprehension skills similarly.

The experimental group in this study who experienced bias task through CL indicated superiority over the control group and acquired stronger results in the reading test than those who performed in the control group. The posttest score mean of the experimental group was considerably greater than that of the control group. In the experimental classroom, all learners are presented to a learning environment, which assists and fosters personal, and community growth. Some learners' motivation to halt in the institute and effort heavily at classwork seems to be very receptive to the human climate of caring and support they feel from their instructors and peers. Bias tasks through CL are a probable instructing method that may address the distinct demands of the learners with mingled degrees of English ability in a heterogeneous class. Some researchers maintain that applying tasks in CL during instruction, increasing the performance of all students in the group and enhancing the productivity of the content knowledge (Vrhovec, 2015). It is the most excellent choice for all students because it stresses vigorous interaction between students of several capabilities (Tsai, 1998; Wei, 1997; Yu, 2004).

Findings of the study revealed that there was no fixed significant difference between the control groups' pre-test and post-test in reading comprehension tests. The reason can be that, the control group didn't have opportunities to do their own reading tasks and assignments cooperatively as it is used in the experimental group. So the control group that instructed through the traditional method couldn't develop their reading comprehension skills as the experimental group. Researchers (Namaziandost & Rahimi Esfahani, 2018; Woods, 2013) argue that traditional methods are insufficient because they do not help learners use the target language more, where they need to communicate effectively with their classmates.

Based on the results, bias tasks through CL had a positive impact on the experimental group student's reading skills. The main differences between the experimental group and the control group could be assigned many grounds; firstly, the learners in the experimental group had their own reading questions based on their English knowledge that it caused all of the pair members to participate in the classroom activity so they became confident to answer reading questions. It is similar to the study of Anderson (2019), who believed learners who worked in groups for general targets, were observed very actively in helping and promoting each other because after all, it's all the learners that will succeed or fail together.

Secondly, all of the experimental group learners divided into distinct groups according to their language knowledge. Learners in the experimental group answered their papers individually then they replied and discussed questions cooperatively. It provided the students with opportunities to participate in most of the reading practices. Also, individual collaboration in the experimental group can be used as a strong forecaster of reading comprehension growth. This is because persons in groups appreciate their learning more, and are more eager in finishing tasks in group work (Fisher & Frey, 2008). Because of that in the experimental group, all of the students encouraged to be active so they became more confident and more willing to answer; But the control group followed the traditional method, did not have more opportunities to be very active in their classroom. Finally, the learner-centered instructing method helped improve the students' understanding of the target language because it established a more strongly learning environment within which learners had more occasions and took pleasure in the freedom to use more the target language.

The findings of the first research question that bias task through CL was better than traditional instruction in developing reading comprehension achievement supports the outcomes of numerous studies that exposed the productive utilize of tasks in progressing language learning. In reality, the results of this research shown learner's reading comprehension abilities within the experimental group who received bias

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tasks had powerfully advanced after the treatment. This result is in line with Zand Moghaddams' research (2007) who moreover discovered the TBI may positively influence EFL students' reading abilities and vocabulary retention. Our outcomes were moreover back what Fani, H., Ghiasi, P., & Ghaneh, Z. (2011) said about the impact of task on the reading ability of learners, as they revealed utilizing tasks are successful in progressing the students' reading aptitude. Additionally, the findings of the present research affirm the outcomes of Rahimi and Azhegh's (2011) examination who found that designing understudies can profit TBLT in their reading course. Also, it supported Alrayah's (2018) study who demonstrated specific tasks through CL can improve pair interaction and assist the learning of new content. The results may be useful to language instructors at different levels. The research seems to empower them to convert "teacher-centered" strategies to "learner-centered" ones.

The second research question was related to the difference between males and females in terms of using bias tasks in developing reading comprehension skills. There was no statistically significant difference between males and females in their improvement in the reading tests. This finding supports the study of Asgarabadi, Rouhi and Jafarigohar (2015) who found no significant difference between males and females with respect to their reading comprehension as well as use of reading strategies. The authors attributed this result to the fact that both male and female students were in the same field of study and had a common background in which they dealt with reading comprehension problems in similar ways. The same situation may hold true for Iranian EFL learners in the current study. The finding also seems to support the Gender Similarities Hypothesis proposed by Hyde (2005). Hyde conducted meta-analyses to determine whether or not males and females are similar to each other on several psychological variables such as cognitive, verbal or nonverbal communication, social or personality variables, psychological well-being, motor behaviors, along with miscellaneous variables, such as moral reasoning. Her findings showed that males and females were similar with respect to some domains, which included reading comprehension as well. As a consequence, instructors should provide tasks that are based on learners' proficiency levels. These tasks motivate learners to participate in their groups and the reading exercises. As Merisuo-Storm (2006) states “One has to know what texts appeal to pupils to be able to motivate them to continue reading.” (p.7 To sum up, the present research indicates that bias tasks through CL may have a momentous role in intermediate EFL learners' reading improvement, because of the findings that using bias tasks through CL was better than traditional teaching in improving learners' reading comprehension skill. In other words, in a convenient situation such as cooperative learning, the learners in the experimental group had a higher participation in responding reading questions, and more improvement in reading achievement, which is related to their statistically significant gain in reading comprehension.

Conclusion

The present research revealed the significant impact of utilizing bias tasks in CL on intermediate Iranian EFL students' reading comprehension. The results of this study sustained additional understandings into the validities of using tasks through CL in instructing the reading skill to Iranian EFL students in which English is essentially considered as an EFL language mostly pertinent for distributing knowledge and negotiating with people around the world. This study also explored that there is no dissimilarity between males and females in using bias tasks and both can profit from this approach.

In summary, using tasks in CL as a learner-centered approach improves the reading skills between the students in this study. The results obtained have implications at different levels of education in the EFL and ESL context. Institute instructors can use this approach in their teaching way. Instructors must provide a variety of learning alternatives, utilizing different instructing strategies, and materials in their classes (Saracho, 1997, p. 171). So, instructors in English institutes, need to be aware of the benefits of utilizing tasks in CL. This way of teaching caused that all of the learners try to participate in the reading exercises because the reading questions are based on their proficiency level. Also, positive changes can occur when teachers adapt their teaching methods towards a more student-centered approach.

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Teachers need to master providing different types of reading questions for different abilities learners and plan how to implement bias tasks with the CL method. The importance of tasks through CL in advancing language learning of EFL learners at establishing reading material and materials developers additionally syllabus creators are empowered to embed more assignments within the textbooks. By providing different tasks, teachers not only cater to different students' needs but also allow learners to illustrate what they have come to get and learn when reading a section. Therefore, teachers are fostered to practice this method repeatedly. The study could encourage them to transform "teacher-centered" methods into "student-centered" ones.

This study encountered some limitations throughout its conduction, and these limitations should be taken into account in interpreting the findings. As the current study managed with a restricted quantity of members and it did not last for numerous sessions, for validating the results of the study more longitudinal study obtaining an account of more participants is required. The application of the bias tasks through CL method tested just for intermediate language learners, and on reading skill, it should be examined at different levels of instruction, such as pre-intermediate and advanced instruction, and other disciplines. Also, this study applies quantitative method; so, future researchers should apply mixed methods research designs including both quantitative data and qualitative data in a separate study. From what has been asserted above, the researcher concluded that the implementation of bias tasks through CL during reading instruction elaborates the reading comprehension process. In this case, the use of bias tasks through CL as a way to differentiate reading instruction sustained learners' growth in responding to reading questions and consequently elaborating the reading comprehension process.

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