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Research Paper

Grade Twelve Iranian High School Students' Reading Comprehension: A Brief Look at Item Piloting

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Abstract
Iran's educational system has undergone new reforms during the last decades. To investigate the effectiveness of the new reform in English as the lingua franca of the world, the current study emphasizes the reading comprehension abilities of grade twelve Iranian female students in English as a foreign language. To this end, 167 students' responses per item of three tests of English reading comprehension were gathered from four different high schools of Malayer. Students' responses in three different item types (three literal, three reorganization, and three inferential comprehension items) from three different reading texts were analyzed altogether. A quantitative design was employed to descriptively analyze the students' responses. The results of the analysis revealed that grade 12 students in Malayer are stronger in literal comprehension compared to the other two comprehension levels: reorganizational and inferential items. This indicated the students' lack of skill in reading between the lines as well as the inability to synthesize and analyze different implicit information in the text that leads them to make meaning. The results can be beneficial for language institutes, English Teachers, and practitioners.

Keywords: *Inferential Comprehension, International Reading Comprehension Assessment, Reorganizational Comprehension*

توانایی درک خواندن دانش آموزان دختر پایه دوازدهم ایرانی در زبان انگلیسی به عنوان زبان خارجی
نظام آموزشی ایران طی دهه های گذشته دستخوش اصلاحات جدیدی شده است. برای بررسی اثربخشی اصلاحات جدید در زبان انگلیسی به عنوان زبان بین المللی ، مطالعه حاضر بر توانایی درک خواندن دانش آموزان دختر پایه دوازدهم ایرانی در زبان انگلیسی به عنوان زبان خارجی تأکید دارد. بدین منظور ، پاسخ167 دانش آموز، به سه نوع سوال آزمون درک مطلب انگلیسی، از چهار دبیرستان مختلف ملایر جمع آوری شد. پاسخ دانش آموزان در سه نوع سوال مجزا (سه مورد تحت اللفظی ، سه مورد سازماندهی مجدد و سه مورد درک استنباطی) از سه متن مختلف خواندن به طور کلی مورد بررسی قرار گرفت. از طرح کمی استفاده شد و نمرات دانش آموزان به صورت توصیفی مورد تجزیه و تحلیل قرار گرفت. این تجزیه و تحلیل نشان داد که دانش آموزان پایه 12 در ملایر، در درک مطلب تحت الفظی ، در مقایسه با دو سطح دیگر درک مطلب: سازماندهی مجدد و استنباطی، قوی تر هستند. این نشان دهنده عدم مهارت دانش آموزان در خواندن بین سطرها و همچنین ترکیب ، تجزیه و تحلیل اطلاعات ضمنی مختلف در متن است که آنها را به معنی می رساند.معلمان، مدرسان، و موسسه‌های مجری آموزش و یادگیری زبان خارجی، از نتایج تحقیق حاضر استفاده خواهندکرد.
واژگان کلیدی: درک استنباطی، ارزیابی درک خواندن بین المللی، سازماندهی مجدد

Introduction

The lack of an ELT evaluation model has made it necessary to re-examine the national-level policies (Atai & Mazlum, 2013). National assessment should be conducted not only to improve the quality of the students' learning from diverse social groups but also to inform governments about necessary reforms of curriculums (Tiwari, 2021). Additionally, as educational policymakers have recently embarked on a new English as a foreign language curriculum towards a communicative approach (Razavipour & Rezagah, 2018), investigating its impact on the students' different language skills seems necessary.

As an international organization, OECD (2019) defined reading literacy as understanding and engaging with written texts to reach goals and develop knowledge in the context of society. This definition regards *understanding* as *reading comprehension*, a preponderant skill of reading ability. Likewise, global reading assessment organizations such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) have set some criteria for reading comprehension and conducted the assessment accordingly.

Considering international criteria for reading comprehension, the present study sought to inspect the impact of the new communicative curriculum on the L2 comprehension of high school graduates in Iran. The following research question was, thus, addressed:

RQ. Which comprehension level of literal, reorganizational, and inferential is mostly touched by grade 12 students under the Iranian new communicative curriculum?

Literature Review

Every five years, a large-scale international assessment is being carried out by PIRLS with more than sixty countries. It assesses students' reading achievement in the fourth year of schooling. According to Tiwari (2021), IEA's (2015) definition of reading literacy includes understanding and using written language forms socially and/or individually. Readers are the source of meaning construction from texts. Sometimes, they want to learn, sometimes, to participate in communities of readers, and sometimes just to enjoy. The definition highlights the purpose of reading in different personal, academic, social, and recreational contexts.

Assessment of reading in the PIRLS framework consists of four comprehension processes: 1) finding explicitly stated information, 2) making straightforward inferences, 3) integrating ideas and information, and 4) evaluating content and textual elements. To construct meaning, readers, at first, focus on the text at the word, phrase, and sentence level. They may also focus on or retrieve pieces of information from different sections of the texts. Then, readers go beyond the sentence level and engage with the cognitive process of inferencing. For instance, what event caused another, what is the main point made by a series of sentences, what generalization is possible, or what is the relationship between two concepts stated separately in the text. In the third process of comprehension, readers make implicit connections and based on their perspective, interpret extra information. Finally, at the last step, they shift from constructing meaning to critically looking at the text itself such as its completeness or clarity. In other words, they judge the text, its title, and its literary features.

PISA's (2018) framework of reading introduces four cognitive processes: 1) locating information, 2) understanding the text, 3) evaluating, and 4) reading fluently. The last process i.e., reading fluently, underpins the other three cognitive processes. PISA (2018) has determined the load of these cognitive processes 25%, 45%, and 30% respectively.

CEFR (2020), mentioned reading comprehension levels as in the following table:

Table 1

CEFR Comprehension Levels

Pre A 1	Can deduce the meaning of words from an attached icon or photo
A 1	Can deduce the meaning of unknown words for concrete concepts in a simple text and on a popular subject
A 2	Can use an idea of the overall meaning of short texts and utterances on everyday concrete topics and drive the probable meaning from the context. Can exploit his known words to deduce meaning for unfamiliar words that occurred in short expressions in cliché everyday contexts Can use appearance and typographic features to identify the type of text: news story, article, promotional text, chat or forum, textbook, etc. Can use numbers, names, dates, and proper nouns to identify the topic of a text. Can deduce the meaning and function of unknown expressions from the context, for example: at the beginning or closing of a letter.
B 1	Can make use of numerical, temporal, logical connectors and the overall organization of the paragraphs to understand the argumentation in the texts better. Can discover the meaning of a part of the text by taking into account the text as a whole. Can identify the meaning of unfamiliar words from the context on topics and field he is interested in. Can extrapolate the meaning of occasional unknown words and sentences from the context if the topic is familiar for him. Can infer or predict the text content from its heading, titles, and headlines. Can follow the line of arguments and the sequence of the events in a story, by concentrating on common logical and temporal connectors. Can deduce the meaning of unknown words by knowing word formation principles.
B 2	Can use a variety of strategies to achieve comprehension, including skimming, scanning. Can monitor their comprehension using textual clues.
C 1	Can use contextual, grammatical, and lexical cues to infer the attitude, mood, and intentions of the writers. Can anticipate what will happen afterward.
C 2	Can use C1 strategies more skillfully almost like a native speaker.

(Source: Council of Europe, 2020)

In order to determine the reading processes that learners apply to comprehend the texts, PISA and PIRLS assessment frameworks, in line with different CEFR level classifications, can be exploited to develop items and reading tasks for the assessment of students' achievement.

Barrett's (1968) taxonomy can also help language teachers to design activities for teaching reading comprehension and develop comprehension tasks and items to assess students' comprehension cognitive process. In comparison with Bloom's taxonomy, Barret's taxonomy is more convenient as Barrett's taxonomy was originally coined concerning solely reading comprehension, while Bloom's taxonomy was not so (Anderson et al., 2001). Therefore, Barret's taxonomy is more compatible with analyzing students' comprehension.

The following table shows Barrett's five-level taxonomy of reading comprehension:

Table 2
Barrett's Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension

Level	Comprehension cognitive process	Elaboration
I	Literal comprehension	Finding explicitly stated ideas and information in the text
II	Reorganization	Analyzing, synthesizing, and organizing explicit ideas and information in the text
III	Inference	Connecting the explicit ideas and information in the text with their own intuition and personal experience to make meaning
IV	Evaluation	Making evaluative judgment by comparing ideas presented in the text
v	Appreciation	Dealing with the psychological and aesthetic impact of the text on the reader

Some comprehension questions need readers to 'read the lines', some others require 'reading between the lines, while others cannot be answers except readers know how to 'read beyond the lines' (Gray, 1960). Comparing these three levels to Barret's taxonomy, it can be concluded that 'reading the lines' is what happens in the first and second levels of Barrett classification; 'reading between the lines is the same as Barrett's third level of inference, and 'reading beyond the lines' corresponds to Barrett's evaluation and appreciation.

The broader categories of reading comprehension are the higher and lower level of processing (Tiwari, 2021). If readers can reach an overall understanding of paragraphs, they possess a higher process of comprehension. So, making inferences, reorganizing the information in the texts, evaluating, and appreciating are involved in higher-level reading comprehension. Together, these confirm Gray's (1960) reading between and beyond the lines. Conversely, lower-level processing calls upon recognizing and understanding words, and sentences. In order to have the whole-text processing, readers need to bridge the gap created by a discontinuity between sentence-by-sentence processing of L2 text, which is the result of the frontal lobe activities, and whole-text processing, which is associated with neural activities in the right frontal lobe of the brain (Robertson et al., 2000).

To sum up, students' first language has a determinant role in L2 reading comprehension. For example, when the first language typography does not use the Roman alphabet, decoding the scripts takes more time hence these readers move to the next level of whole-text processing later (Tiwari, 2021). As Weir (2005) stated, lower-level processes occur at the local level of comprehension, in contrast to global understanding which uses higher-level processing to apply information from the whole text, link it into other information like background knowledge, and deduce total meaning.

Methodology

Participants

The participants of the study were 167 non-English-major female high school graduates between 18 to 22 years old (mean age=19.5, SD= 1.51) from three different fields of study (mathematical sciences, experimental science, and humanities) in the city of Malayer, Iran. There was almost an equal proportion of the participant's field of study (mathematical science+ 32%, experimental science= 37%, humanities= 31%). These participants were available to the researcher at different high schools in different parts of Malayer. They had studied English for at least six years in a state educational setting.

Instrumentation

The utilized material in this study consisted of three selected reading passages adapted from the standard national examinations of EPT which are monthly held in Iran. These passages were chosen based on their three different comprehension processing items: literal, reorganizational, and inferential

comprehension, out of 24 EPT tests administered in recent years. The passages went under item specifications by seven EFL experts to confirm that they were at the CEFR intermediate level of difficulty.

Procedures

This study was performed in two phases. In the first phase, a group of seven EFL experts selected three different texts with their corresponding items from twenty-four series of EPT examinations which are held monthly in Iran. To ensure the texts' level of difficulty, the selected texts were analyzed using CEFR Text Analyzer Software. Depending on the level of comprehension each question was intended to measure, the items were coded as measuring literal, reorganizational, and inferential comprehension processes. In the second phase, a group of 167 female students from three different majors responded to the items in a 30-minute session. Their responses to each question were finally analyzed.

Data Analysis and Results

As previously stated, the tools for collecting data were nine items representing literal, reorganizational (Understanding facts, vocabulary, dates, times, and locations are referred to as literal comprehension), and inferential cognitive processes. These questions can be directly answered from the explicit information in the texts (Day & Park, 2005). The researchers also believed that if the students answer these types of questions, they have understood the text's surface meaning. PISA (2018) and PIRLS (2016) assessment frameworks introduce literal comprehension as locating information and explicitly stated information.

The skill of reconstructing pieces of information from different parts of the text to form a complete idea is believed to measure the students' reorganizational comprehension (Parkin &Pool, 2003). PISA assessment framework divided literal comprehension into two categories: scanning and selecting the relevant text. While the first category is regarded as literal comprehension, the second is related to the advanced type of literal comprehension_ reorganization. According to CEFR taxonomy, literal comprehension falls on A1, and reorganizational comprehension falls on the A2 level of understanding. In the PIRLS assessment framework, by literal comprehension, students focus on, and by reorganizational comprehension, they retrieve explicitly stated information.

Reviewing the past literature, inferential comprehension involves much more than just literal comprehension (Day & Park, 2005). Therefore, inference questions require the students to combine their advanced literal comprehension of the text with their background knowledge and experiences. This study focuses on the first level of inferential questions based on the CEFR B 1 level of understanding: making straightforward inferences as stated in the PIRLS assessment framework, too.

The corresponding reading texts, in addition to their relevant items, are as follows:

Text I

Skeletal muscles are connected to your bones by tough cords of tissue called tendons. As the muscle contracts, it pulls on the tendon, which moves the bone. Bones are connected to other bones by ligaments, which are like tendons and help hold your skeleton together. Smooth muscles are also called involuntary muscles since you have no control over them. Smooth muscles work in your digestive system to move food along and push waste out of our body. They also help keep our eyes focused without your having to think about it. Did you know your heart is also a muscle? It is a specialized type of involuntary muscle. It pumps blood through your body, changing its speed to keep up with the demands you put on it. It pumps more slowly when you are sitting or lying down, and faster when you are running or playing sports and your skeletal muscles need more blood to help them do their work.

Table 3
Items of Text I

Items	Comprehension Process
1. The word "it" in line 8 refers to ----------.	Literal
2. The paragraph mainly discusses----------.	Reorganizational comprehension
3. It can be inferred from the passage that ----------.	Inferential

Figure 1
Percentage of students who responded to the items of text 1

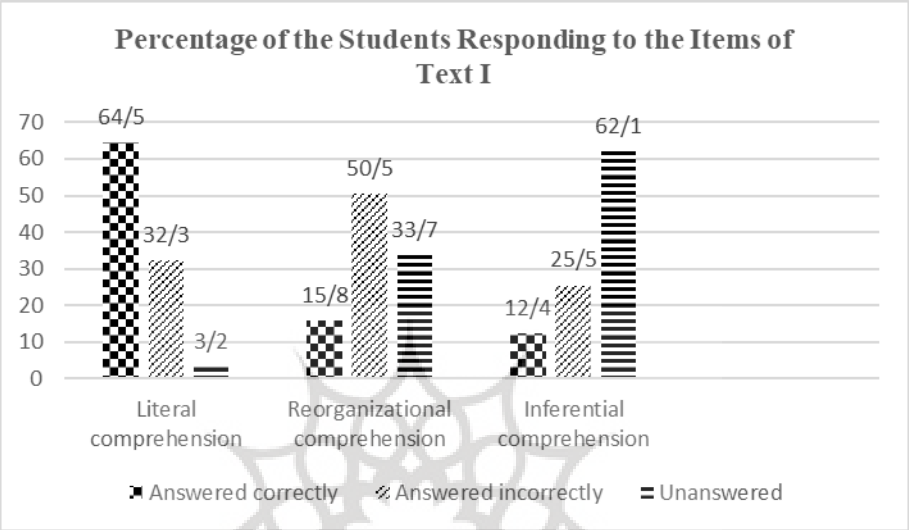


Figure 1 presents the data on the students' approach and scores obtained from text 1. About 64.5% (108) of the students responded to the item of literal comprehension; and 32.3 % (54) of them incorrectly responded to the item, while 3.2 % (5) dropped it. On the contrary, there were just 15.8 % of students (26) who responded to the item of reorganization. Unfortunately, about half of the students (84) answered the question incorrectly, and the rest of the students prefer not to answer the item. Referring to the item indicating inferential comprehension, it is apparent that 62.1 % (104) of the students could not even answer the question and left it unanswered. Only a small number of the learners (12.4%, 21) answered the question correctly, while a larger group of them (42) responded to the item incorrectly. Here, we can see a huge gap between the number of students who respond correctly to these three types of questions. In general, it can be concluded that reorganizational and inferential comprehension items are more difficult than the item of literal comprehension asked from the same reading material.

Text 2

John lived with his mother in a rather big house, and when she died, the house became too big for him so he bought a smaller one in the next street. There was a very nice old clock in his first house, and when the men came to take his furniture to the new house, John thought, "I'm not going to let them carry my beautiful old clock in their truck. Perhaps they'll break it, and then mending it will be very expensive." Therefore, he picked it up and began to carry it down the road in his arms.

It was heavy, so he stopped two or three times to have a rest. Then suddenly a small boy came along the road. He stopped and looked at John for a few seconds. Then he said to John, "You're a stupid man, aren't you? Why don't you buy a watch like everybody else?"

Table 4
Items of Text 2

Items	Comprehension Process
1. John bought a new house because ----------.	Literal
2. John seemed stupid to the boy because he -------.	Reorganizational
3. It can be inferred from the passage that ----------.	Inferential

Figure 2
Percentage of students who responded to the items of text 2

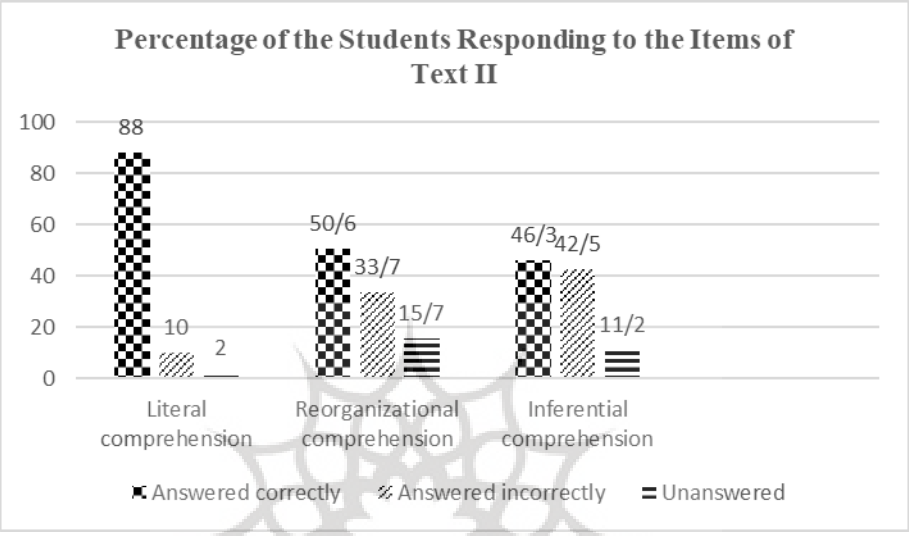


Figure 2 pinpoints exactly the percentage of the students who answered three sorts of questions based on the text given. Students' responses to literal comprehension items (88%) were more satisfactory compared with reorganizational comprehension questions (50.6). Nearly, the same number of correct answers can be seen for the inferential type of question (46.3); misunderstanding for the reorganizational item (33.7) was not as high as what is recorded for inferential item type (42.5). Results report less capable students on inferential comprehension items compared to the other types of literal and reorganizational comprehension ones.

Text 3

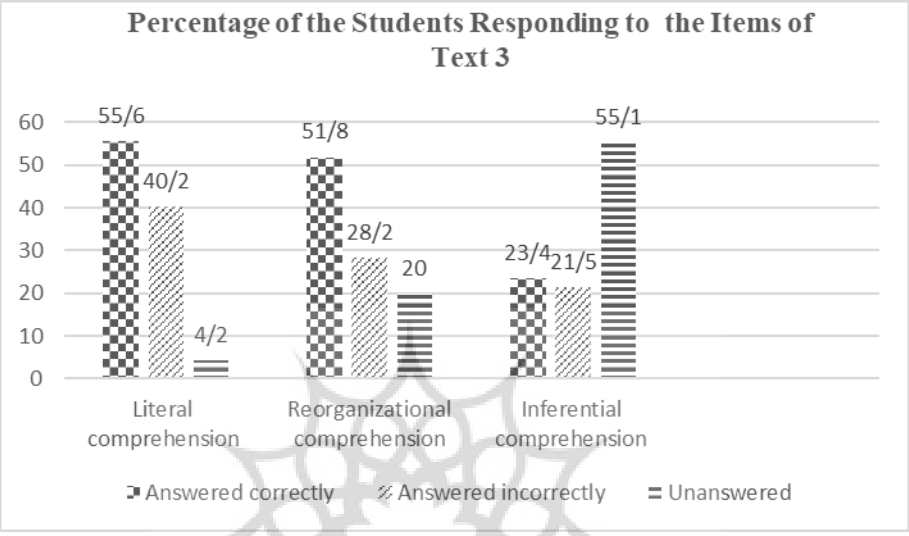
Despite our complex language skills, natural skills, and other natural means of communication such as body language, the face is still our primary means of identifying people, making contact, and checking if they are trustworthy. Our faces are so complex in appearance that we can spot a friend or a foe in a crowd. Indeed, our ability to recognize faces quickly in all sorts of conditions is arguably our most important and remarkable visual skill. Mothers can distinguish between identical twins, and classmates can recognize each other decades after they left school.

Thanks to its very elastic skin, animated by a complex musculature capable of an enormous range of intricate movements, the human face can quickly move from anger to laughter, guilt, to innocence, deep hurt to joyfulness, or from abstraction to intense concentration. We can read or misread faces, making judgments about them based on our experiences, without anything being said. This ability is the result of prolonged evolution- beginning with the head or skull.

Table 5
Items of Text 3

Items	Comprehension process
1. Our ability to recognize faces is because of our ----.	Literal
2. Which of the following abilities is Not mentioned in paragraph 1?	Reorganizational
3. Quickly moving from one feeling to another in our face is because of its skin ----------.	Inferential

Figure 3
Percentage of students who responded to the items of text 3



The students' responses to the items of text 3 are shown in figure 3. Based on the same reading stimulus, students answered the first item (literal), the second (reorganizational), and the third one (inferential) with the percentages of 55.6%, 51.8%, and 23.4% respectively. The figure is apparently showing that inferential items (the third item) are so challenging for the students that around 92 of them did not even approach the item. Considering the percentages shown in the present figure (4.2% and 20% unanswered for literal and reorganizational items, but 55.1% left unanswered for inferential comprehension items); again, it can be generalized that the high school curriculum was not so successful in preparing the students for inferential reading as compared to the other types of literal and reorganizational comprehension.

As mentioned before, reading comprehension involves two fundamental processes: literal and inferential. Furthermore, each one of these processes consists of subskills such as locating facts in a piece of text and combining facts from different parts of the same text under the low process of literal comprehension. Similarly, subskills such as making straightforward inferences, integrating, and interpreting implicit information are under the inferential comprehension dimension (IEA, 2015). The highest comprehension level which is called evaluating and reflecting the text urge readers to read beyond the text lines (OECD, 2019; IEA, 2015).

Both literal comprehension subskills were included in the items, but the primary level of inferential comprehension was added to the test. That was because of the ministry of education's policies towards teaching foreign languages in Iran. According to Hayati and Mashhadi (2010), "the proclaimed purpose of this course [English] is to enable students to read simple English texts and improve their reading comprehension through passages built around newly introduced vocabulary items" (p.34). This is despite Iran's 20-year vision plan that assumes students have a general competency to understand the depth of science through international foreign languages (Ebrahimi & Sahragard, 2016).

Finally, the results revealed that the participant students were able to answer more literal comprehension items correctly. Their responses to the items of all three texts show that they were even more confident to answer these types of items. Conversely, most inferential questions remained unanswered which indicates students' low level of reading comprehension at grade 12 of high school.

Discussion

The most remarkable result that emerged from data analysis was that not all grade 12 students can read the texts for the basic and surface meaning of the texts. Although most of the participants responded to the first-level literal item of text 2 correctly, about half of them answered the literal items of texts 1 and 3 incorrectly. Misunderstanding explicitly-stated information may have led to other reasons such as strong distracters, or the students' lack of reading strategies for answering these question types. Sometimes, they had difficulty understanding the test rubrics (Tiwari, 2021).

As suggested by other researchers, English courses in Iran are considered tools to enable students to access the material written and published in English, although the quality of teaching English at public schools is lower than desired (Farhady & Hedayati, 2009). The same corroboration was found in the present study. Students can hardly reach the desired level of comprehension to make use of scientific materials if they just rely on public school instructions (Razavipour & Rezagah, 2018).

Another point is that the students were unable to respond to synthesizing items i.e., reorganizational items. The results demonstrated that, in all three reorganizational questions, fewer participants answered the items correctly (15.8%, 50.6%, 51.8%) in comparison to literal comprehension items. Therefore, it can be argued that grade 12 students have difficulty understanding the whole texts, yet they are more successful in comprehending sentence-level meanings. This finding supports Walter's (2007) interpretation of reading skill as an already existing, non-linguistic skill that is believed to be responsible for the understanding of a whole text. The skill bridges the gap created by a discontinuity between sentence-by-sentence processing of L2 text, which is the result of the frontal lobe activities, and whole-text processing, which is associated with neural activities in the right frontal lobe brain (Robertson et al., 2000).

As the last point, the number of students responding to inferential questions was limited. The possible remedy is not only providing them with more instructions on strategies and reading skills but also convincing the teachers to buy into the reforms that are expected to be a departure from the grammar-translation approach towards a communicative one (Razavipour & Rezagah, 2018).

Conclusions

The current study aimed at investigating the extent to which the new reform in Iran's English curriculum has led to changes in EFL learners' reading comprehension proficiency level. As assessment practices are key to the success of the curriculum, the students' responses to three different item types of literal, reorganizational, and inferential comprehension were analyzed. The results revealed that graduate students are weaker in answering reorganizational and inferential item types compared to literal items. From this, we can conclude that graduated high school students are at the A1 level of CEFR reading proficiency which is opposed to the country's new foreign language policies (Razavipour & Rezagah, 2018). The students' weakness to answer reorganizational and inferential question types indicates a great gap between what was meant to be and what has been brought about. This must be a great issue in the field of teaching and learning L2 reading comprehension in language classes. Different dimensions of teaching and learning practices may be responsible for the students' low performance in the test. Students should be familiarized with reading skills, even in their L1, to overcome their obstacles in facing higher-level item types such as reorganization, inference, evaluation, and reflection. As Fullan (2007) stated, for educational reforms to set in properly, we have to first meet the relevance, readiness, and resources conditions.

Further studies can be conducted to investigate other dimensions of language pedagogy change in Iran's ministry of education curriculum, textbooks, hours dedicated, and other communicative language skills. It is to be finally noted that the present study was not based on a large sample data and the score analysis of a public high-stake test such as UEE or CEM, and that similar research can be conducted in different provinces and cities to compare the results and reach a more generalizable and reliable conclusion.

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