

Comparative Critical Reading Strategy and Writing Achievement of Iranian EFL Learners

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The present study was undertaken to investigate the impact of comparative critical reading strategy on the writing ability of Iranian learners who were learning English as a foreign language (EFL). In order to carry on the study, 60 participants (25 males and 35 females aged between 19 to 27) at intermediate level of language proficiency were randomly assigned to two groups; that is, the experimental and control groups. The participants in the experimental group experienced critical reading by comparing texts, whereas the members of the control group practiced reading texts in the traditional way and answered comprehension questions. The results of the comparisons between the means of the two groups through t-tests proved that practicing comparative critical reading strategy had a significant effect on the improvement of the writing ability of the experimental group. However, the comparison between the means showed no significant difference in the reading ability of the two groups.

Keywords: Critical Reading, Comparative Strategy, Writing Ability

In the twentieth century, the ability to engage in careful, reflective thought has been viewed in various ways: as a

fundamental characteristic of a foreign language learner, as a requirement for responsible citizenship in a democratic society, and more recently, as an employability skill for an increasingly wide range of jobs. Luke and Elkins (2002) believe that teaching EFL learners to become effective thinkers is increasingly recognized as an immediate goal of teaching. If learners are to function successfully in a highly technical society, they must be equipped with life long thinking skills necessary to acquire and process information in an ever-changing world. Of the many concepts related to acquisition and improvement of critical thinking, self-awareness is one of the most important factors. Schallert and Reed (2004) subscribe to the view that reading skill as an evaluative tool can serve a pivotal role in bringing the spirit of self-awareness and criticality to language classes. Therefore, EFL learners should learn how to engage in the process of critical reading.

Ballard (1995) argues that effective reading requires two skills, technical ability and critical judgment. Technical reading skills necessitate language learners to understand what the author is saying. Critical judgment entails learners to engage in the text, use their prior knowledge and reasoning ability to interrogate what they are reading. Authors write texts in an effort to communicate. At one extreme, language learners can sit back and simply let the author's words wash over them as they mindlessly read the text. At the other extreme, they can engage in every word, challenge the author's word choice, word order and nuance, the hidden implications and possibly unintended meaning. Appropriate critical reading of academic writing falls between these two extremes.

Learning to compare and evaluate information from different sources requires readers to derive the main ideas from a text and focus on the method of organizing idea or thesis. This fundamental level of critical reading allows the reader to apply evaluative techniques such as comparing or contrasting what was read in order to solve and verify statements. The purpose of the present research was to determine whether the application of comparative critical reading activities affected writing achievement of Iranian EFL learners.

In Iran, as a matter of fact, critical reading strategies are not normally employed in language classes. Learners usually engage in reading through common reading practices. The activities which are used in our reading classes mostly include answering multiple choice questions, true-false statements, and supplying synonyms and antonyms for the new vocabulary of the lesson. By applying these activities teachers deal with the product rather than the process of reading ability. Additionally, teachers have a propensity for getting prompt feedback from learners' reading comprehension ability. It seems that teachers do not challenge the dominant *four skills* view or integrated approach common in teaching reading skill to learners. Consequently, participants do not express their opinions about the texts and are reluctant to discuss the underlying meaning of the texts or consider the topics of the texts in a broader social context. By utilizing these activities, participants pay attention to the structure of the texts and their style of writing.

Hirvela (2004) subscribes to the view that reading to write is based on the notion that reading supports and shapes L2 learners' writing through acquisition of language input while learners are performing reading tasks. Reading is not merely useful for enhancing L2 learners' writing ability in a general sense. Also, through reading, learners are given opportunities in writing classrooms to acquire knowledge of vocabulary, grammatical structures, or rhetorical features of the texts. Pedagogically, there are numerous teaching practices suggested for reading to write, including rhetorical reading, modeling approach, extensive reading, and critical reading as a recently far-reaching strategy in academic writing.

The term *critical* implies relating new knowledge to the knowledge of the world which the learner already possesses (Hall, 1999). Consequently, the learner is called on to evaluate both this new knowledge and their own knowledge. To the extent that a critical pedagogical approach entails the application of higher-order thinking skills, such an approach can also be justified in more specific terms for second language pedagogy. That is, critical reading is not only of value in itself, but also it facilitates language acquisition in a foreign language setting. In the

realization of this curriculum, the learners should be given as much opportunity as possible to develop their own ideas on the topic. The teacher should encourage learners to examine the texts for themselves and apply their own critical thought to this process. The teacher should facilitate classroom discussions rather than leading them to presupposed conclusions. Furthermore, either in free-discussions or in free-writing activities, the teacher should avoid imposing their own ideas on the learners. Rather than teaching a specific perspective, learners should be provided with those techniques that provoke analysis of the texts and question the assumptions of both readers and writers.

Learners should be given as much opportunity as possible to develop their own ideas on the topic in the realization of this metacognitive curriculum; additionally, in a constructivist perspective, the teacher should encourage learners to examine the texts for themselves and apply their own critical thought to this process (Van Lier, 2002). Many submissions speak of the role of teachers in facilitating classroom discussions rather than leading them to presupposed conclusions. It means that learners should be persuaded to question the assumptions of the writers rather than accepting them as established facts (Goatly, 2000).

Wallace (2002) believes that critical reading pays attention to social and ideological factors which mediate readers' access to text. Critical reading is concerned less with the individual author's communicative intent than with ideological effect: the claim is that readers need not accept the words on the page as given, but that a range of interpretations are legitimate. Second language (L2) readers may bring different kinds of cultural and ideological assumptions to bear on L2 texts, thereby offering fruitful challenges to mainstream or conventional readings. Sometimes we read just for pleasure or entertainment; sometimes we read to obtain information, taking it for granted that the information is reliable. However, critical reading means analyzing, evaluating, and making judgments on the basis of what we read.

According to Wallace (2003), critical reading has important payoffs in terms of foreign language learning in two particular ways. The first approach is downward-looking criticality which

refers to the extended discussion of texts which allows learners to draw more fully on their existing linguistic resources and to stretch them at the same time. In this approach, improved grammatical accuracy is a likely outcome as learners search for clarity and precision. Through the second approach called upward-looking criticality, language learners are encouraged to question the institutional frameworks of their classroom and their lives. Nonetheless, it should be noted that teachers are often less comfortable with the second approach. Since the class follows a socially constructed atmosphere, students may challenge the class and feel free to subvert the teacher's pre-determined practices.

Reading texts comparatively in a dialogical perspective (reader- author interaction) is considered as a key strategy for practicing critical reading in an EFL context. Discussing main ideas, distinguishing facts and opinions, and analyzing different endings by two different writers about the same topic provide more reliable links to other language skills. Furthermore, exploring likenesses and differences between texts can help readers understand them better. Comparative critical reading strategy, more than other strategies, offers opportunities to challenge writers' issues directly.

Tsui (2000) emphasizes writing as a language skill which employs factors more than simply having something to say besides knowing correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Writing, as Tsui (2000) argues, involves an understanding of how ideas can be pieced together to convey a broader meaning. Moreover, while language learners can learn much from experience and contact with good examples, they cannot consciously improve their writing without knowing how the language works to convey ideas to readers.

Comparative critical reading instruction is explicitly of dual-purpose. It serves both to improve learners' ability to understand texts that they read and to develop their own writing as a social act (Kurland, 2000). When language learners see how they draw meaning from others, they can see how to instill meaning in their own work. In other words, Flynn (1999) introduces comparative critical reading instruction as an explicitly

dual-purpose strategy which serves both to improve learners' ability to understand texts and to develop their writing ability.

At the start of 21st century, learner-centered courses have continued to dominate writing classes where writing is view as a social activity with communicative ends. Learning the processes of writing, particularly for learners in foreign language settings seems to be a very complex task. They have to make a great effort in dealing with structural issues such as selecting appropriate lexical items and grammatical structures and generating and developing ideas about different topics. Moreover, they have to overcome their problems with functional and authentic language use in different social contexts. Therefore, teachers should help the learners to express themselves freely, involve in classroom interaction, and develop their skills to become autonomous writers. The suggestion here is that by identifying constructive strategies, teachers can facilitate meaningful and productive writing. Comparative critical reading strategy is one of those strategies which is believed to foster writing in EFL learners.

Hence, this study set out to examine the effect of comparative critical reading strategy on intermediate Iranian EFL learners' writing achievement. In order to investigate the effect of such strategies on the writing ability of the learners the following research questions were proposed:

1-Is there any difference between the writing achievement of the students who read texts through comparative critical reading activities and those who practice reading through the traditional method?

2- Is there any difference between the reading ability of the students who read texts critically and those who read in the traditional method?

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were 60 adult Iranian EFL learners who were studying at a language center in Rasht. They were 25 male and 35 female students whose ages ranged from 19 to

27 and were at intermediate level of language proficiency. It is noteworthy that they were chosen based on their scores on a general proficiency test developed by the researchers. The participants were then divided randomly into two groups, that is, the experimental and control groups.

Instrumentation

A general proficiency test developed by the researchers was used to determine the homogeneity of the two groups before the treatment. A reading test was used to specifically verify the reading ability of the participants. This test was developed by the researchers and was mainly based on the previous materials the learners had studied. This test could reveal that any change in the reading ability of the participants was due to the treatment received. Additionally, the participants were asked to write a composition on a selected topic and those who scored one standard deviation above and below the mean were randomly assigned to two experimental and control groups. However, prior to administering the general proficiency and reading tests, the tests were piloted and proved to be reliable and valid measures of the traits they intended to measure. The reliability of the general proficiency test and the reading test estimated through Kuder-Richardson reliability coefficient (KR21) were 0.83 and 0.78 respectively (Table 1).

Furthermore, to ensure the homogeneity of the participants regarding their writing ability, they were asked to write a four-paragraph composition on: "Fiction or non-fiction: which kind of books do you prefer to read? Support your reasons". The writings, then, were rated by two raters based on the writing profile proposed by Jacobs, Zinkgraf, Wromuth, Hartfiel, and Hughey (1981). It is noteworthy that this method provides a holistic approach toward the evaluation of the writings because it takes into account the communicative effect that the written text produces in the reader. Jacobs et al. (1981) have proven that the method is reliable if the writings are corrected by two raters. The profile consists of five scales referring to the different aspects

which are important in the writing test including: content, organization, vocabulary, use of language and mechanics. Within each of these scales, there are four bands from excellent to very good, good to average, fair to poor, and very poor which give the raters clues how to evaluate the writings.

The writings were corrected by the two raters and the inter-rater reliability of 0.96 computed through Spearman Rank-order correlation coefficient showed a high consistency between the two sets of scores. The average of the two raters' scores turned out to be the writing score of each student. As the post test, the participants were asked to write another composition on the same topic as the pre-test after the treatment.

Procedure

This study was conducted in three main phases: pre-test, treatment, and post-test.

As mentioned earlier, a revised general proficiency test was given to a group of EFL learners and 25 out of 85 persons whose scores were too low or too high were excluded from the study. The remaining 60 learners formed the members of the two groups. Both groups were given a reading test to confirm their homogeneity.

This reading test was later used as a criterion measure for their improvement on reading skill after the treatment. The next step was to test the writing ability of the participants; therefore, they were asked to write a composition on the topic pointed out before.

The treatment took 7 weeks, 3 sessions per week, each session 90 minutes. The classes were divided into two main sections: approximately fifty minutes was allotted to academic reading as the main part of the class and 40 minutes to academic free discussion on the topics of the lessons. During each session, two articles by two different authors on the same topic were presented to the Experimental Group. The articles were mostly taken from two web sites: [http:// www.ielts-exam.net](http://www.ielts-exam.net) and <http://www.antiessays.com>. The members of the group were asked

to compare the introductory part of the two articles, identify their main ideas, and discuss their methods of support. Besides, they were asked to compare the conclusions drawn by each author and to identify their different perspectives. At the final stage, the learners were supposed to recognize the tone of the language of the passages and find out whether the author was biased. They were allowed to use a dictionary. In order to assess their understanding of passages, all learners in the experimental group were asked to fill in the Yes/No post-reading report related to each reading passage.

Alternatively, the participants in the Control Group read two different academic reading texts with different topics taken from the websites cited above. The routine activities of the class were reading, reviewing, reciting, and answering written questions. Similar to the Experimental Group, all the students in this group were asked to submit a Yes/No post-reading report. After 20 sessions, all of the students were asked to write a composition on the same topic they had written about at the pretest. The reason was to scrutinize their improvement on writing ability.

Results

An F-test was run to ensure the homogeneity of the participants. The results of the test $F(58, N=60) = 1.23, p < 0.05$ showed that the two groups were homogeneous in terms of their language proficiency. Additionally, an independent t-test was computed to compare the means of the two groups. The t-observed $(58, N=60) = 0.04, p < 0.05$ signified that there was not a statistically significant difference between the two groups regarding their language proficiency (Table 2). Furthermore, the writings of the participants were scored by two raters. The inter-rater reliability of (0.96) between the two sets of scores in both groups showed a high consistency between the two raters (Table 3). After computing the details of the pre-test writing including mean and variance, the t-test was carried out between the writing scores of the participants $(58, N=60) = 0.58, p < 0.05$ which showed that the participants were homogeneous as far as their

writing ability was concerned (Table 5).

Since another concern of the research was associated with participants' reading ability, the t-test between the means of the two groups on the reading test proved the homogeneity of subjects in reading skill, as well (Table 6).

After the treatment which took 21 sessions, the same pretest was given to the participants in order to capture the degree of achievement in the Experimental Group. The writings of the two groups were corrected by the same two raters who scored the pretest. After computing the inter-rater reliability (0.95) between the scores of the two raters (Table 4), an independent t-test was run to compare the means of the two groups. The t-observed (58, $N=60$) = 6.03, $p < 0.05$) signified that there was a statistically significant difference between the writing ability of the two groups (Table 6). Since the t-observed value at 58 degrees of freedom was greater than the t-critical value 2.02, the null hypothesis could safely be rejected at 0.05 level of significance. This finding led to the conclusion that the treatment was effective enough to bring about a significant difference between the writing ability of the two groups. On the other hand, the data analysis showed that the treatment did not result in any difference in the reading ability of the two groups (Table 6).

Discussion

Developing writing ability is not an easy task for most of the students especially in EFL contexts where exposure to language is limited to few hours in a week. The primary issue in this study is whether critical reading strategies can affect the writing ability of Iranian EFL learners. Since writing calls for mental involvement and self-awareness of the language learners, the positive answer to the first research question reveals that these strategies provide the required opportunity for the learners. Moreover, these strategies can increase the students' consciousness toward the lexical and grammatical structures of the texts and offer an invaluable practice to cater for awareness toward the rules and structures needed in writing.

Furthermore, by using these strategies in reading classes, teachers can budget their class time and simultaneously work on both reading and writing ability of their students. Teachers and practitioners should consider that this strategy not only buttresses the spirit of self-awareness and critical inquisitiveness among language learners, but also bridges the gap between reading and writing skills, especially by comparing texts which follow similar topics.

However, the negative answer to the second research question shows that using indirect strategies in reading classes are as effective as traditional reading activities. Perhaps, for tackling reading skill more effectively, direct strategies are necessary. Remarkably, the impact of critical reading strategies on the improvement of critical thinking of the learners could be a topic for further research.

The findings of this study suggest that with a critical focus on reading skill participants are given the opportunity to acquire how to participate in interactive reading, engage in academic writing, and question the underlying social and educational assumptions of the texts. However, achieving these major aims requires an extra effort on the part of material developers and language teachers to introduce the principle of criticality to the textbooks and classroom practices.

Table 1
Reliability of homogeneity tests

General Proficiency test			Reading test		
mean	variance	KR21	mean	variance	KR21
28.7	36	0.83	21	12.96	0.78

Table 2
General proficiency test

F observed	df	F-critical	t-observed	t-critical
1.23	58	4.08	0.04	2.02

Significant at $p < 0.05$

Table 3
Inter-rater reliability of pre and post writing

Pre writing				Post writing		
Raters	mean	variance	r_s	mean	variance	r_s
Rater 1	54.6	82.01	0.96	72.2	153.7	0.95
Rater 2	55.1	96		55.5	77.6	

Table 4
Pre-test writing

Group	N	Mean	Variance	df	F-observed	F-critical	t-observed	t-critical
Experimental Group	30	54.9	79.5	58	1.1	4.08	0.58	2.02
Control Group	30	54.8	98.01					

Significant at $p < 0.05$

Table 5
Pre-test reading

F- observed	df	F-critical	t-observed	t-critical
1.29	58	4.08	0.33	2.02

Significant at $p < 0.05$

Table 6
Post-test writing and reading

Group	N	Mean	Variance	df	t-observed writing	t-observed reading	t-critical
Experimental Group	30	72.03	153.7	58	6.03	0.74	2.02
Control Group	30	55.3	80.8				

Significant at $p < 0.05$

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