

The effectiveness of collaborative reading in tertiary level EFL teaching in Iran

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Abstract

This research addressed four questions:

1. Does collaborative reading lead to greater comprehension of a text than private reading?

If so:

2. Does this effect vary according to students' competence in reading comprehension?

3. What strategies are used by the students during collaborative reading, and

4. In what ways might these strategies contribute to the higher level of comprehension?

The study sample comprised two groups of students in two different universities. The major intervention consisted of four texts of equal length. Each class read two of the texts collaboratively in small groups and the other two privately. After reading the text the participants took a comprehension test. Collaborative reading resulted in consistently higher scores than private reading for all four texts. Group interactions during collaborative reading were tape recorded and transcribed. Analysis of the transcriptions revealed that collaborative readers were involved in five major processes of collaborative reading, namely: brainstorming, clarifying the language, paraphrasing, summarizing, and interaction management.

Keywords: collaborative reading, private reading, EFL (English as a foreign language) reading comprehension

Introduction

The research is an investigation into the effectiveness of collaborative reading, a specific application of collaborative learning, in tertiary level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Iran. The research was motivated by a perceived failure in the traditional approaches to teaching reading comprehension to achieve the goal of developing independent readers of English.

There is a great deal of research evidence to support the assumption that collaborative learning is an effective pedagogical approach in various EFL contexts (Bejarano, 1987; Roskams, 1999; Lan, Sung, & Chang, 2006; Chen & Hird, 2006). However, there have been few studies of collaborative learning in general (e.g., Baleghizadeh, 2010) and none in collaborative reading in particular, in relation to the teaching of EFL in Iran. There is a pressing need for research in these areas in order to ascertain whether collaborative learning is an appropriate approach in Iranian EFL teaching contexts, and if so, how its potential can be developed. The present study was designed in order to begin to meet that need.

The study focuses on the teaching of EFL reading comprehension at the university level. The first aim was to find out whether collaborative reading had positive effects on developing the EFL reading comprehension ability of a pilot group of students. The second was to explore the extent to which any such effects varied according to the students' competence in reading comprehension. The third and fourth aims were to explore the processes and strategies which might contribute to making collaborative reading effective and how they might do so, as a basis on which further refinement and improvements to the approach could be made in future.

With the growing importance of English as the most important foreign language in Iran, especially because of its role in global communication and connectivity via the internet, Iranian young people are in urgent need of developing both accuracy and fluency in basic English language skills. Reading comprehension skills are thus an appropriate focus of research in the field of English teaching. Iranian English teachers, as professionals, are expected to reflect on their teaching methods and seek to engage in professional development to keep abreast of new pedagogic approaches.

In the past decade, there has been an increasing body of research into reading comprehension skills in the Iranian EFL context. However, no empirical studies of collaborative reading have been published in the major EFL research journals scrutinising the potential of collaborative

learning in teaching reading comprehension in Iran. The present study attempted to establish an evidence base which can stimulate and inform future developments in research into this issue. In particular, it investigated whether or not collaborative reading holds potential, and whether or not collaborative reading can make reading comprehension courses more effective and the learning more enjoyable.

Unsystematic observation by the researcher over a number of years' teaching in tertiary level EFL in Iran supported by anecdotal evidence from practicing teachers suggest that pedagogical approaches to teaching reading comprehension in Iran (in accordance with the predominant structural syllabus) are teacher-centred and teacher-fronted. As a result, little opportunity is left for students to be actively involved in co-constructing the meaning of texts. The pedagogical approach is in part determined by the large class sizes (30 to 50 students) in both high schools and universities, which make it very difficult for teachers to cater for the different needs of individual students or involve them in classroom activities. Furthermore, most students have not been taught how to assume responsibility for their own learning; they tend to remain dependent on their teachers with regard to the meaning of the reading texts. In these circumstances, many of the students do not develop sufficient interest or motivation to become independent readers.

As a matter of fact, the students are not autonomous in making sense of what they read and having access to other sources of knowledge, including their knowledgeable peers. This background provided the rationale for the research. The rationale for this research arose from the present writer's aspiration to explore a new approach to teaching reading comprehension against the background of the perceived inadequacies of the current approaches in this area.

The research was significant for a number of reasons. First, this type of systematic study has not been carried out in relation to English teaching in Iran. Secondly, there is substantial body of research evidence (e.g., Stevens et al, 1991; Anderson and Roit, 1993; Seng and Hashim, 2006) indicating that collaborative reading leads to greater comprehension of a text than traditional approaches to teaching reading comprehension. Thirdly, as described above, the majority of English teachers in Iran are still committed to traditional approaches to language teaching in general and, specifically, to teacher-centred approaches, the results of which remain unsatisfactory with respect to both academic achievement in general and language learning in particular. This may be due to the the culture of the Iranian educational system, which is dominated by a top-down curriculum in which the teacher is the sole authority in the

classroom and the students are not expected to be involved in collaborative teaching and learning activities.

Literature Review

A number of studies have provided empirical evidence highlighting the role of social interaction (either in a teacher-led or peer-led discussion) in assisting students to co-construct meaning from texts. Stevens et al (1991) conducted research to investigate the impact of direct instruction on reading comprehension strategies and the degree to which cooperative learning processes enhance students' learning of these strategies. The results indicated that students involved in cooperative learning with direct instruction on reading comprehension strategies and those with direct instruction alone outperformed control students in identifying main ideas of passages.

Palincsar and Brown (1984) conducted their research in order to record and study student talk in the group Reciprocal Teaching sessions and to monitor individual students' performance on daily comprehension measures. The data analysis revealed that students' comprehension improved, both in their dialogue within the group discussions and in individual comprehension assessments.

Anderson and Roit (1993) developed an approach called Collaborative Strategy Instruction, which was designed to teach reading comprehension in the context of teacher-led discussions. In their study, the experimental groups, i.e., teachers and students in Collaborative Strategy Instruction groups, outperformed the control groups in every aspect related to shared constructive attempts to understand the ideas of the text (Anderson and Roit, 1993, p. 134).

Almasi (1995) compared the effects of teaching fourth graders through peer-led discussion with those of teacher-led discussions. The results suggest that decentralised participation structures produced discussions that were richer and more complex than centralised discussions, resulting in internalisation of the cognitive processes associated with engaged reading.

Beck et al. (1996) developed an approach (Questioning the Author) for assisting students to understand important information in text in the context of a teacher-led discussion. In their research, analyses of transcripts of videotaped lessons and classroom observations indicated that teacher talk decreased in quantity and increased in quality with more emphasis on

questions focused on constructing and extending meaning and more skill in refining and using students' comments in discussion. There were also some changes in the content of student talk, which included an increase in the number and complexity of student initiated questions and evidence of the development of student collaboration.

Seng and Hashim (2006) conducted a study in Malaysia into the extent to which first language is used in reading second language texts in a collaborative classroom of tertiary ESL learners. The findings of the research indicated that a certain degree of L1 use is necessary to comprehend the L2 texts effectively. This resolves difficulties of vocabulary and concepts and reduces affective barriers.

Such studies have implications for the design of the present study. For instance, the studies carried out by Stevens et al (1991) and Anderson and Roit (1993) imply the necessity of incorporating direct instruction on reading comprehension strategies prior to involving students in reading the texts collaboratively. Almasi (1995) found out that decentralised (peer-led) participation structures produced discussions that were richer than centralised (teacher-led) discussions. This informed the design of the present study in that the teacher's role was limited to allow for peer-led small group discussions to occur thus providing the teacher with the opportunity to focus on the quality and nature of the students' interactions. Similarly, the teacher's limited role in the present study is consonant with "Questioning the author" approach (Beck et al., 1996) in which the teacher talk decreased in quantity. Palincsar and Brown (1984) conducted their research in order to record and study student talk in the group Reciprocal Teaching sessions and to monitor individual students' performance on daily comprehension measures. Similarly, in the present study, the intra-group collaborative discussions were recorded and students took an individual comprehension test after they read the texts. Seng and Hashim (2006) concluded that a certain degree of L1 use facilitates L2 text comprehension. In the present study, the participants were allowed to choose the medium of communication themselves. Thus, they were permitted to use L1 (Farsi) , L2 (English) or both in their group discussions.

The studies reported have all provided empirical evidence of the positive role of social interaction (inherent in collaborative reading) in enhancing the reading comprehension ability of EFL/ESL students. Nevertheless, most studies of CL and reading comprehension in ESL/EFL settings have focused on the effectiveness of particular treatments on the subjects' performance through comparing and contrasting the pre- and post-test results. Few studies

have focused on identifying the specific strategies the ESL/EFL learners utilise in the process of collaborating with the teacher and their peers. The present study was designed to add to the literature and contribute to an undeveloped area of research in the Iranian EFL context by investigating whether collaborative reading leads to greater comprehension of a text than private reading, and if so whether the effect of collaborative reading varies according to students' competence in reading comprehension. It also explored the strategies the EFL learners use in their collaborative effort to comprehend English texts, and how such strategies might lead to higher levels of comprehension.

Research Questions

On the basis of the review of the literature, the following research questions were formulated to guide the research:

1. Does collaborative reading lead to greater comprehension of a text than private reading?
(Comprehension is defined in terms of students' grasp of:
 - the communicative function of discrete linguistic elements in particular lexical items and syntactic structures;
 - the communicative function of the whole text.)

If so:

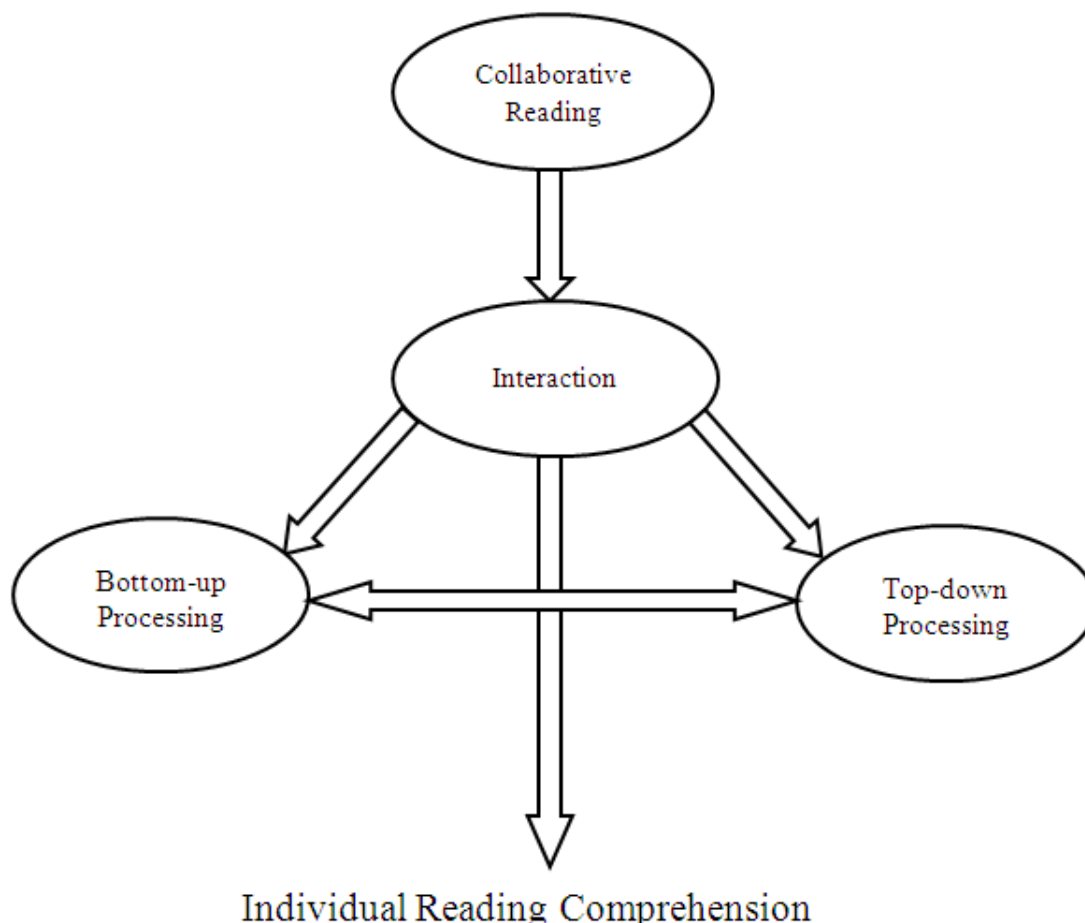
2. Does this effect vary according to students' competence in reading comprehension?
3. What strategies are used by the students during collaborative reading, and
4. In what ways might these strategies contribute to the higher level of comprehension?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the study, the Collaborative-Interactive Model of Teaching ESL/EFL Reading Comprehension (Figure 1), draws primarily on Vygotskian socio-cultural theory or social constructivism, on the basis of which it can be postulated that social interaction and collaboration will play a crucial role in increasing reading comprehension in ESL/EFL learners. The theoretical framework of the study comprises two overarching elements: 1) socio-cultural theory or social constructivism and the role of interaction to support learning; and 2) interactive models of reading comprehension. This framework focuses on the following strands: collaboration (collaborative reading), interaction and both bottom-up and top-down oriented reading strategies. On the basis of this model, it is postulated that collaborative reading triggers social interaction, which in turn leads to both bottom-up and top-down processing of text comprehension. In short, individual reading comprehension is the output of

the simultaneous interaction between both bottom-up and top-down strategies initiated by social interaction inherent in collaborative reading.

Figure 1: *Collaborative-Interactive Model of Teaching ESL/EFL Reading Comprehension*



Research Method and Data Collection

Participants and Settings

A total of 52 students in two groups participated in this study. They were all second-year students majoring in English, and had already passed two reading comprehension courses in the first year of their studies. These two groups were chosen to provide a comparison between state-run and private universities in Iran, which represent two different types of students with potentially different levels of competence in reading comprehension. Despite efforts to promote the quality of teaching and learning at the private sector universities (including the Islamic Azad University), most students enrolled in state-run universities as English majors achieve a higher level of English language proficiency in general and reading proficiency in particular. This is mostly due to the fact that matriculation in state-run universities is more competitive than that of private universities. According to the constitution the admitted students at state-run

universities are not required to pay tuition fees for higher education. As a result, secondary education high achievers prefer to study at state-run universities. Confirmation of the generally acknowledged difference in levels was borne out by the pre-test results. Since the second research question relates to the comparison between subjects from the public and private sector universities in Iran, it was decided to choose a group from a highly prestigious university to represent a predicted higher level of reading proficiency and a group from a private sector university to represent a predicted lower level of reading proficiency.

Pilot Studies

The first round of pilot studies was concerned with the creation of reading materials. Four texts, of approximately equal length, were chosen for the study. In order to minimise any possible influence of the text itself on the outcomes, they were all of the same genre (literary-journalistic essays), about which the students (majoring in TEFL, a subfield of arts and social sciences) were expected to have some background knowledge, by contrast for example with scientific texts, for which could not be assumed to have the necessary background knowledge. In order to ensure that they would challenge the comprehension skills of undergraduate university EFL majors, the texts were selected and modified to make certain that two were conceptually easy and linguistically difficult, and two were linguistically easy and conceptually difficult.

The texts were subsequently tested in a pilot study. Two groups of judges were selected for this purpose. The first comprised five Iranian undergraduate students who had recently arrived in the UK. They were given a rating form comprising two parts. In the first part they were asked to rate how easy or difficult they found the language (words, grammar, etc) of each of the four texts. In the second part, they were asked to rate how easy or difficult they found it to grasp the overall purpose or meaning of each. The second group comprised two university lecturers who had experience of teaching reading comprehension courses in EFL contexts. They were given the same form with slightly different instructions: to rate how easy or difficult they thought their students would find both the language of each text and the overall purpose or meaning. The results of the pilot study confirmed the initial classification.

The second round of pilot studies related to time management and comprehension tests. Each text was followed by ten multiple-choice comprehension questions. Based on the definition of “comprehension” adopted for the purpose of this study, the questions targeted 4

items of vocabulary knowledge, 1 item of grammatical knowledge, and 5 items related to textual concepts.

Before the major study began, a further pilot study was conducted at the Islamic Azad University of Malayer, involving two reading comprehension classes which were at approximately the same reading proficiency levels as those who were to be involved in the main study. The pilot study precisely followed the design of the main study; it was carried out for two purposes, namely time management and computing the reliability of the comprehension measure (the multiple-choice items). This second pilot study indicated approximately how much time was needed for different parts of the major intervention.

To test the reliability of the four sets of multiple-choice items, which had been prepared for the four texts, the Cronbach's Alpha available in SPSS software was computed. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient for the comprehension measure was .79, which suggested that the four sets of test items had relatively high internal consistency. This further pilot study, which included both modes of reading (collaborative and private), informed the planning of the main study in terms of time management and comprehension measure reliability.

The major intervention

To answer the first two research questions, a simple quasi-experimental design was used. This was, in effect, a substantially modified form of the group comparison methods in that participants in each class were assigned as both experimental and control groups in alternate sessions. In other words, participants in each class were involved in both collaborative reading (experimental) and private reading (control) equally in alternate sessions.

In order to control the reading comprehension proficiency variable, all students were pretested using an available standardised test at the research site. The pre-test, selected from a previous TOEFL test (2004), included four reading comprehension passages, each of which had ten comprehension questions. Thus, two homogeneous classes in terms of reading comprehension ability were formed in each of the study sites.

After allocating the participants to the small groups, the researcher taught the students Klingner and Vaughn (1998) Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) strategies to enable them to read a text collaboratively. The researcher spent two sessions in exploring (in the students'

native language, i.e., Farsi) the four CSR strategies as they were presented in the original article, duplicated for all the participants, and the ways they were to be adapted to suit the purpose of this study. The strategies taught included: Preview, Respond to text by saying Click (meaning 'I got it') and Clunk (meaning 'I don't get it'), Get the gist and Wrap-up.

Once the CSR strategies had been introduced, the students in each class were involved in two types of reading activity in alternate sessions (see tables 2 & 3). In one session, they were engaged in private reading and in the following session they read collaboratively in the allocated groups. After reading the text the participants were asked to answer in writing ten comprehension questions.

At the conclusion of all the sessions, 16 participants (10 from the first setting and 6 from the second) were interviewed. The interview schedule was semi-structured, and probed the interviewees' feelings, reactions and attitudes towards reading the texts collaboratively and privately.

After the pre-comprehension tests, quantitative data was collected to measure ongoing comprehension test scores across reading mode (collaborative versus private) using an independent-samples t-test. In both groups collaborative readers obtained consistently higher scores than private readers for all four texts. However, it was necessary to determine significance. Therefore, an independent-samples t-test was used to compare the mean scores of two groups on a given variable.

The results of the comprehension measure (Table 1) in the Lower Proficiency Group (LPG) indicated that collaborative reading led to consistently higher scores than private reading, for all four texts, although in one case the difference was not statistically significant. The results of the comprehension measure in the Higher Proficiency Group (HPG) showed that collaborative reading led to consistently higher scores than private reading, for all four texts; however, in only one case was the difference statistically significant. The results are presented in Table 1. Application of the independent-samples t-tests revealed that in Lower Proficiency Group (LPG) the difference was significant for texts 1, 2 and 4. The difference with regard to text 3 was not statistically significant. Therefore, in the LPG the results of the quantitative data analysis suggest that the answer to the first research question was affirmative. Collaborative reading did overall lead to greater comprehension of a text than private reading in the case of the LPG.

Table 1. *Independent-samples t-tests (Group statistics)*

	Test	Reading Mode	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation.	Sig.
LPG	1	Cl	18	2.5	8.75	6.0139	1.7750	.001*
		Pr	18	2.00	7.5	3.8750	1.8135	
	2	Pr	18	1.25	8.75	5.3750	2.2804	.010*
		Cl	18	2.50	10.00	7.2500	1.8251	
	3	Pr	18	1.25	8.75	5.8472	2.3951	.471
		Cl	18	3.75	10.00	6.4028	2.1729	
	4	Cl	18	2.75	8.75	7.1250	1.5840	.000*
		Pr	18	1.25	8.75	4.1111	2.4257	
HPG	1	Cl	8	5.00	8.75	6.7200	1.3253	.740
		Pr	8	3.75	10.00	6.4063	2.2597	
	2	Pr	8	5.00	10.00	7.1875	2.0863	.483
		Cl	8	6.25	10.00	7.8125	1.2939	
	3	Pr	8	3.75	8.75	7.0313	2.2097	.741
		Cl	8	5.00	8.75	7.3438	1.4075	
	4	Cl	8	5.00	8.75	7.5000	1.3363	.003*
		Pr	8	3.75	7.50	5.0000	1.4940	

P < .05

Cl=Collaborative Pr=Private *= Significant

In the HPG the scores obtained by students reading collaboratively were consistently higher than those for private reading, across all four texts. However, the difference was significant for only one of the texts, namely text 4. Therefore, in the HPG the results of the quantitative data indicate that although collaborative readers performed consistently better than private readers, higher proficiency learners achieved comprehension from both private and collaborative approaches, albeit to a slightly higher level in collaborative settings. The results of the quantitative data analysis provide evidence to respond to the second research question (Does collaborative reading effect vary according to students' competence in reading

comprehension?) indicating that collaborative reading was more effective for the students in the LPG than those in the HPG.

Qualitative methods were employed to answer the third and fourth questions. Two kinds of data were collected. First, group interactions during collaborative reading were tape recorded, with the participants' permission. Second, one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 students: 10 from the two classes of the LPG and 6 from the two classes of the HPG.

The recorded interactions of the collaborative reading groups were transcribed verbatim using a broad transcription system, which omitted prosodic features. Throughout the group interactions the collaborative readers were free to choose the language of communication themselves. The students' utterances in Farsi were translated into English and typed in italics.

The researcher carried out a thorough analysis of the transcripts of the students' collaborative interactions and identified patterns of interaction. The categorisation emerged from the data itself. This analysis revealed that students were engaged in producing various types of utterances in their attempt to comprehend the texts.

To capture a broader pattern of interaction, these utterance types were consolidated into five major interaction categories identified as: brainstorming, clarifying the language, summarising, paraphrasing, and interaction management. Other minor, infrequent interaction types were also identified, such as making positive/ negative claims to understand, eliciting confirmation, and confirming.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming was manifested in a number of ways. First, a student made an initial TIU (text interpreting utterance). Then, other students made other types of TIUs such as convergent expanding TIU, confirming TIU, and divergent TIU. Some TIUs included utterances which asked for explanation, utterances explaining something, and utterances in the form of questions and answers.

In the following example taken from Transcript 1.3 (HPG), student A initiates "brainstorming" by posing a question about the status of children in rich families. Students B and C try to answer the question by focusing on a specific idea with respect to the status of such children. For instance, student B underlines the point that children in rich families always depend on

their parents' wealth and money, which corrupts them (in her view) and does not let them make progress in life. Student A himself adds the point that rich families misuse their money. Student C attributes the problems of such children to the exertion of too much control over them which causes their freedom to be limited. So, in this way students rely on one another's understanding of the text and add more detailed information to previously stated utterances, which in turn builds up their comprehension. In other words, the students are engaged in a joint effort to "scaffold" each other for the purpose of understanding the meaning of the text which provides evidence of co-constructed meaning. Rosenshine and Meister (1992, p. 26) define scaffolds as forms of support by the teacher or another student to help students bridge the gap between their current abilities and the intended goal.

1.3. (HPG) A: Have you noticed that the members of very rich families rarely become great social, political, or moral, or religious leaders and rarely become known themselves as great businessmen or explorers? TIU [initial, asking a question]

1.3. (HPG) B: I think ... what it mentions is that most of the ... children of people who have good wealth and they are rich ... aren't so successful and they aren't ... become famous because I think their wealth and money pollutes them and don't let them ... improve themselves and they are always depend on their money, rely on the money that their parents has...their parents have. [answering the question]

1.3. (HPG) A: I agree up to a point. But the thing is that money and wealth should bring more ... more happiness, more advantages to life. But, the thing is that, for example, rich families use their money or let's say misuse their money, abuse their money and, not consciously of course, but they do so and the result is that they make problems with their children. In this case from what I got from the text ... affluent children should be able to do much more of their lives ... but because ... er ... they're sort of dependent on their family and their family's money, they always stick to those family's rules and all that ... all those borders and all that ... and so they don't find ... they cannot realise the opportunities they have in life. TIU [convergent, expanding]

1.3. (HPG) C: What can I see in this set of material is that it discuss about two things, rich families and middle-class families, but ... mostly about the rich families and ...

it says that if you have realised that in rich families we can't see many leaders, businessmen or some people that have create influence in the society and ... TIU [convergent, expanding]

What can be the reason of this? TIU [asking a question]

One of the reasons that here mentions and also I think is that the rich families have the money and they control ... overcontrol their children and they limit ... somehow. Limit their freedom to choose as in one of the paragraphs we can see that it says that one of the children of the rich family had many facilities, but she can't choose what major she wants to continue. And at the end of the passage he talks about some problems ... about middle class or lower class families also ... that they have also their own problems. TIU [answering the question]

Another interaction pattern observed in the students' brainstorming was corrective feedback to support textual meaning. This occurred when students noticed errors made by other group members, which provided instant feedback in support of understanding. In the following extract from Transcript 1.2 (LPG) student C provides such a corrective feedback for student B in relation to middle class families.

1.2. (LPG) B: I think it means that in rich families ... the mothers ... TIU [incomplete]

1.2. (LPG) C: No, in middle class. TIU [divergent, correcting]

1.2. (LPG) B: Yes, in middle class the family complain about the behaviour of the children because they are independent and ... the children don't attention to the family and they do everything that they like. TIU [convergent, expanding]

In some cases, while brainstorming for text comprehension, students made meta-linguistic utterances (MUs), such as explicit requests for assistance with regard to the meaning of a particular word, phrase or sentence in the text. The collaborative group members appeared to feel responsible and care for one another; they normally provided an instant response to such an appeal. This extract exemplifies mediated learning within individual student zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). In the following extract from Transcript 4.1 (LPG) student B appeals for assistance with respect to the meaning of a sentence and student A provides assistance immediately.

4.1. (LPG) A: I think, I think he believed that the way he asked his request was wrong because maybe the shopkeeper misunderstood him. Because he couldn't receive what he wanted as a response to his aim. TIU [convergent, expanding]

4.1. (LPG) B: "I was no nearer having my request acceded to" What does it mean? TIU [asking for explanation]

4.1. (LPG) A: It means he wasn't near to what he wanted, to his request. He thought maybe he was wrong ... so, he decided to change the way of asking about his request. TIU [explaining]

In a few cases, the group members while brainstorming happened to be involved in self-correction with regards to comprehension. In the following extract taken from Transcript 2.3 (HPG) student A corrects herself and receives confirmation feedback for this correction by student B.

2.3. (HPG) B: Why ... why do you think? What do you think about it? TIU [question]

2.3. (HPG) A: I think this burglary is just about some people who knew her. TIU [answer]

2.3. (HPG) C: So, you mean the situation of her flat annoyed her? TIU [question]

2.3. (HPG) A: Yes, it was on purpose and it was for their own benefit. But, they knew the situation of her flat, actually. TIU [answer]

2.3. (HPG) B: Yes, they didn't know her. They knew the situation of her flat. TIU [convergent, expanding]

Clarifying the Language

One phenomenon observed in the students' interactions was bottom-up strategy of using utterances which functioned to clarify the language of the texts in terms of grammar and vocabulary. Such MUs functioned to:

- Ascertain the meaning of an unknown lexical item

- Clarify the part of speech of a word
- Specify the reference of a pronoun
- Ascertain the pronunciation of a word

MUs were used extensively by the LPG, as a means to draw on each other's linguistic knowledge to comprehend the texts, as shown in the following example.

1.1. (LPG) C: *What does "rely on" mean?*

1.1. (LPG) B: /tekye kardan / [Farsi equivalent]

Here, the students provided literal translation to make the meaning of unfamiliar word clear.

In some cases the students provided both the English and Farsi equivalents:

1.2. (LPG) B: Sorry, what's the meaning of "inspire"?

1.2. (LPG) C: I think it means encourage. /tashvigh kardan/ [Farsi equivalent]

1.2. (LPG) D: What's the meaning of "respect"?

1.2. (LPG) A: Respect? ... means having good behaviour towards someone. R respect someone means /ehteram ghozashtan be kesi/ [Farsi translation]

In a few cases the students appealed for assistance from more knowledgeable others (i.e., ZPD) with regard to referents of particular pronouns:

1.1. (LPG) C: "Their" (line 5) *refers to what?*

1.1. (LPG) B: "Their" *refers to* multimillionaires.

The students in both groups were encouraged to use *The Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. In many cases they consulted this dictionary to ascertain the meaning of an unknown lexical item, clarify the part of speech of a word or ascertain the pronunciation of certain words as in the following examples:

2.2. (LPG) A: precautions?

2.2. (LPG) B: Action done to avoid possible trouble

4.2. (LPG) A: My demeanour ... What does it mean?

4.2. (LPG) B: It means behaviour.

In a few cases, students provided each other with corrective feedback in relation to grammatical features of the texts and the meaning of words and phrases as in the following examples from Transcripts 3.1 (LPG), 4.2 (LPG), and 1.4 (HPG).

3.1. (LPG) C: Effect natural

3.1. (LPG) A: No, natural effect

3.1. (LPG) C: Oh, yes. Natural effect

4.2. (LPG) A: ... asked the shopkeeper, "Are you interested to buy it?"

4.2. (LPG) B: ... in buying.

4.2. (LPG) A: ... in buying the chair...

4.2. (LPG) B: ... fiver?

4.2. (LPG) C: Favour

4.2. (LPG) A: No, it means five pound note.

1.4. (HPG) C: The generation gap ... I think it means the gap that exists between higher classes and...

1.4. (HPG) A: No, no. the distance between parents and the kids.

Summarizing

In most cases, the groups involved in the collaborative reading while applying the "Get the Gist" strategy attempted to summarize the texts paragraph by paragraph. It was the recorder's responsibility to make a written record of the summary of the paragraphs already agreed by all members of the group. The summary was supposed to include the main idea(s) of the paragraphs. The following examples show how the collaborative readers wrote summaries collectively.

1.1. B: [probably to the reporter] Write the main idea in this way:

The children from middle classes are more independent than the children from rich families.

4.2. (LPG) B: [probably to the reporter] Write in this way:

He went to several shops hurriedly.

4.2. (LPG) A: He entered the first shop.

4.2. (LPG) A: Write in this way:

He went to several shops. After the third and fourth shops, he realised his way of requesting was wrong.

4.2. (LPG) C: I write no shopkeeper accepted the chair. The answers in several shops were the same and shopkeepers did not accept him. So, he thought there is something wrong with the request.

Paraphrasing

The students sometimes used paraphrasing, which took the form of rephrasing either the ideas presented by other students or the original sentences in the text. In the following example, student C rephrases the idea that the children in middle classes are more independent than those in rich families, which provides greater clarity for the other members of the group. This can be interpreted as another form of scaffolding which manifests itself in group dynamics.

1.1. (LPG) A: *As soon as the children in middle classes go to school, they feel they are independent ...*

1.1. (LPG) C: *The extent of their freedom of action is more in middle classes.*

In the following example, student C rephrases the idea that the children in rich families are protected and controlled by their parents and those who are near them, which, similarly to the above example, provides greater clarity for the other group members.

1.2. (LPG) A: It means that ... I think I want to add something else. It means that even they don't have any independency in their town because all the time they should be near their families and if they, for example, go somewhere, again they are under the control of their parents. If they go to a tree, their parents control them by somebody else. If they have, I don't know, a kind of teacher, again that teacher because of ... I mean his or her parents, control that person.

1.2. (LPG) C: *I think it means in rich families everything is provided for them at home. For example, now the private teacher is inside their home. I don't know ... all facilities are provided in their home. And they are so close to their parents and controlled by them that they get dependent on them.*

The same phenomenon (greater clarity of concepts) is achieved, in relation to the timing of the second burglary and the arrest of the burglar in the sixth burglary, in the following exchanges.

2.1. (LPG) A: *In spite of this, nine days after the first burglary she suffered from the second burglary.*

2.1. (LPG) B: *It means that the second burglary happened nine days after the first.*

2.2. (LPG) A: *Although, miraculously, nothing special happened ... the sixth burglary happened, but the police succeeded in arresting him.*

2.2. (LPG) B: *I think the police catch him ...*

2.2. (LPG) A: *... can catch him in sixth attempt for burglary ...*

Interaction Management Utterances (IMU)

The management of interaction or learning is fundamental to collaborative learning in general and collaborative reading in particular since it is embedded in this pedagogic approach. Specific roles were allocated to students in their collaborative reading groups. Each group had a leader, a recorder (or reporter) and two or more collaborators. To play their roles appropriately, every student had to make use of certain IMUs, to manage the interactions properly in terms of turn-taking, i.e., who should speak first, and who should speak next. They are also used to specify what each member of the discussion group should do at various points of the group discussion. Based on the strategy instruction, the leader of the group manages and leads the interaction. Interaction management was the dominant discourse strategy identified in the students' collaborative interactions. To manage the intra-group interactions, the students in both groups of the study made use of IMUs appropriate to their roles within the group. Examples are provided from some of the transcripts below:

1.1. (LPG) B: [probably to the reporter] *Write the definition of use something up.*

1.1. (LPG) B: *Now the words*

1.2. (LPG) A: [Probably to student B] *Sheida, do you want to continue? So, what is the gist of this paragraph? Who can ...?*

1.2. (LPG) A: *Yes exactly. So, next paragraph. Zahra, please you.*

2.1. (LPG) C: *"Previous" means? Didn't you look it up?*

2.1. (LPG) B: *We have to write what we have understood. [Probably to the reporter] Write the main idea in this way:*

Other Minor Interaction Types

All transcripts contained some minor interaction types including “making positive/negative claim to understand”, “eliciting confirmation” and “confirming”. They are labelled “minor” because their frequency of occurrence was low compared with the major ones presented above and they appear to play a less significant function in comprehending the texts. Examples from some of the transcripts are provided below:

- 1.1. (LPG) C: Clunk. I have problem with the last sentence. [Negative claim to understand]
- 1.2. (LPG) B: Is it right? [Eliciting confirmation]
- 1.2. (LPG) A: Yes, that’s it. It is correct. [Confirming]
- 2.2. (LPG) A: nine days after the first she stoled again. I mean she suffered from second burglary.
OK? [Eliciting confirmation]
- 2.2. (LPG) B: MP refers to what?
- 2.2. A: I don’t know. [Negative claim to understand]

The Interview Data

In order to understand the affordances and constraints of the different approaches (i.e. private and collaborative contexts), semi-structured interviews were carried out with a range of students from both LPG and HPG. In both groups, the interviews were conducted in Farsi and recorded with the participants’ permission and transcribed.

A thematic analysis was conducted of the transcripts. Attempts were made to identify and group together the co-occurring and similar statements under general themes. Eventually eight themes emerged of which two (Affect and Multiple Perspectives) were dominant.

Affect

Almost all of the interviewees stated that collaborative reading provided them with an enjoyable, non-threatening and relaxed learning environment, which led to the removal of affective and psychological barriers.

Multiple Perspectives

A large number of the students acknowledged that through collaborative reading they were able to gain access to multiple perspectives, which in turn made learning more effective for them.

Student Group Interaction

Studies reported in collaborative learning literature (Roskams, 1999; Lan, Sung, & Chang, 2006; Chen & Hird, 2006) indicate that learning is both a *social* and a psychological process. This resonates with the social constructivist paradigm within which this research is rooted. A few of the students believed that it was simply the social interaction available in collaborative reading that made learning fun for them.

Efficiency

Some students stressed the efficiency of collaborative reading, especially with regard to saving time and energy.

Motivation

Some of the interviewees said that they were better motivated when they were reading the texts collaboratively.

Development of Team Work Skills

Another theme emerging from the interviews was the development of team work skills. For example, one student maintained:

“When you are in a group, you learn team-work and collaborating with others.”

Reservations

Despite the fact that almost all of the interviewees expressed a positive attitude towards collaborative reading, some of them pointed out some of the limitations they had observed in their experience of collaborative reading. For example, one interviewee said:

“We felt we needed more time for reading strategy training and more practice in applying the strategies.”

Discussion of Findings

The study found evidence for a number of benefits of collaborative reading, some of which are objectively measurable and some are subjectively describable. They can be grouped under two broad headings: (1) the socio-cognitive benefits; (2) the affective benefits.

The Socio-Cognitive Benefits

Socio-Cognitive benefits are manifested in the application of comprehension and discourse strategies identified in the study. These are inherently social-interactive strategies. As

mentioned above, the principal comprehension strategies were, in order of frequency: brainstorming, clarifying the language, summarising, and paraphrasing. While applying these strategies, some major patterns of collaborative behaviours were identified. These patterns were corrective feedback; elaboration and explanation; scaffolding; and appeal for assistance.

Corrective feedback: In the collaborative reading class students had opportunities to receive feedback and modelling from their peers. As some of the interviewees emphasised, the interactive and supportive atmosphere available in collaborative reading enabled their conceptual and linguistic errors to be corrected without embarrassment. In the small group interactions, some evidence (see above) was found that students sometimes provided corrective feedback on their peers' linguistic and conceptual errors.

Elaboration and explanation: Much of the value of collaborative reading appears to lie in the way that group activities encouraged students to engage in high level cognitive skills such as explaining and elaborating. This was manifested in the present study when collaborative readers brainstormed and expanded upon one another's explanations in interpreting the text meaning.

Scaffolding: In the present study, the intervention by the teacher was strictly limited, and therefore students were put in a position where they developed their own scaffolding through mutual support and sharing of knowledge.

Appeal for assistance: It was noticeable that, during the group interactions, the students frequently appealed for assistance from the other members of the group. Since all the group members felt responsible for their own learning as well as that of their peers, when a request for help was uttered, it was immediately followed by a quick response.

Affective Benefits

Supportive and communicative learning was assumed in the collaborative reading context. This enabled the students to reduce their affective and psychological barriers, enhance their motivation, and enjoy their learning.

Limitations of the study

Despite the generally clear findings, and notwithstanding the gains achieved by the students reading the texts collaboratively, a number of limitations of the study can be identified as follows.

1. The numbers of participants were restricted to two classes totalling 36 students in the LPG of the study and two classes totalling 16 students in the HPG. With such a small sample, one must be careful about drawing conclusions from the outcomes with respect to other populations. Further studies involving greater numbers of student participants in collaborative reading in a greater variety of classes and levels of reading proficiency, as well as a wider range of test types, are needed in order to provide more evidence on the effectiveness of collaborative reading in Iranian EFL teaching.
2. The extent of the teacher's intervention was limited to briefly introducing the texts to the students both orally and in written form, chairing the whole-class discussion, and answering the possible questions only after the comprehension tests. This restricted intervention might not have been sufficient to resolve conflicts and help remove the possible obstacles to the group and whole-class discussion. As Battistich et al. (1993, p. 29) remark:

Teachers can ... unobtrusively monitor group activities so as to provide the appropriate level of help at the appropriate time (i.e., after the group member have had some time to try to solve the problem on their own, but before the group dissolves in frustration).

Further studies, involving more proactive involvement by the teacher, should be conducted to explore the value of the resolution of conflicts and removal of linguistic and conceptual barriers to learning.
3. This study focussed on general comparisons across the reading mode i.e., between collaborative and private reading. No account was taken of the differences between individuals in terms of linguistic abilities and collaborative performance. In other words, it did not focus on the behaviour and talk of either individual students or each of the groups separately. There would be value in building on the findings of the present study to design future research into the effects of collaborative reading on different kinds of individual learners.

Implications for EFL Teaching in Iran

The findings of the research bear a number of pedagogical implications for reading comprehension instruction in the Iranian EFL context. The positive impact of collaborative reading for the LPG subjects implies that Iranian EFL teachers can use this potentially effective teaching method in helping their students improve their reading comprehension. Nevertheless, the cognitive-interpretative benefits of collaborative reading appear to decrease with reading proficiency. Although all groups reading the texts collaboratively consistently outperformed those reading them privately, the difference between collaborative and private readers was not statistically significant in all comprehension measures.

Given the facts that (a) the students in the HPG were more proficient in reading than the students in LPG, (b) their mode of interaction involved less focus on language forms, and (c) the differences between their comprehension scores for private reading and collaborative reading were noticeably less, it appears that the benefits of collaborative reading are greater for less proficient readers than for more proficient ones. The research points to a significant difference in effectiveness between collaborative reading and private reading for the less proficient readers in the LPG, whereas there was a significant difference on only one test for HPG. From a theoretical perspective then, one could argue that the less proficient readers benefited from collaborative reading because they were still at the inter-psychological stage of the development. By contrast, the more proficient readers did not actually need collaboration regardless of the affective benefits it brought because they could read “effectively”, autonomously and independently (i.e. without collaboration). In other words, at higher levels of reading proficiency, in Vygotskian terms, the students seem to have already internalised some reading comprehension strategies, which they can apply when working alone. This was evidenced in the present study: the data from the group interactions showed that the more proficient students did not apply thoroughly and explicitly the four CSR comprehension strategies in which they had been instructed.

Nevertheless, collaborative reading still brings benefits to more advanced students: most students in HPG of the study revealed in the interviews that collaborative reading was more enjoyable to engage in than private reading. This implies that collaborative reading could be more appealing as a pedagogical approach, even at higher reading proficiency levels.

It appears that, at least for less proficient readers (at the university level), collaborative reading provides a more effective instruction approach than the traditional teacher-centred teaching

methods, where students attend the class passively without any interaction with their peers. In collaborative reading the students are provided with the opportunity to pool their linguistic and world knowledge to apply to the reading comprehension tasks and achieve text comprehension through collective thinking and peer scaffolding. While they are in the process of co-constructing the meaning, they show a great deal of mutual scaffolding and corrective feedback, and thus are able to internalise their learning by engaging in social interaction with their peers (Vygotsky, 1978, Donato, 1994).

With regard to the qualitative data, it was shown that the collaborative readers in the LPG of the study relied heavily on the use of MUs while their counterparts in the HPG made no or very little use of such utterances. This suggests that, with respect to linguistic knowledge, students who are less proficient in reading can benefit from the collaborative reading method more than those who are more proficient. On the other hand, the collaborative readers in the HPG made use of text interpreting utterances approximately twice as much as their counterparts in the LPG, which suggests that more proficient readers tend to focus on the conceptual aspects of the texts more than less proficient ones.

Students received direct instruction on specific reading comprehension strategies for only two sessions. As some of the LPG students noted in the interviews, they would have liked more time for strategy training and practice in strategy application. This implies that direct teaching of reading comprehension strategies should be long enough for the Iranian English majors at lower levels of language proficiency if they are to make maximally effective use of their team work skills.

There was a noticeable tendency in the LPG for students to make use both of strategies and of L1, no doubt because of their more limited capacity to express themselves in English. They found it easier to use their mother tongue to manage the reading tasks and share their ideas with one another as they attempted to comprehend the texts. This suggests that in lower levels of reading proficiency, the use of the mother tongue can function as a significant scaffolding feature by which students in small groups can negotiate and collaboratively construct meaning from texts.

Whilst the choice of language for discussing the texts was left to the students in both groups, those in the HPG tended to use English in their interactions for text comprehension. However, it might be interesting in the future to investigate how learning to use the strategies in English

might assist the lower proficient students in terms of linguistic progression and use of language for authentic purposes.

To sum up, as Vacca and Vacca (2009, p. 373) assert, an effective content area class, which is organized around text lessons and units of study, develops collaborative interactions between teacher and students and between students themselves. These interactions are based on the principles of small-group processes and CL. Nevertheless, it is important to maintain perspective. This study investigated the relative effectiveness of collaborative reading in an EFL context and hence does not demonstrate that collaborative reading is a better method than private reading. Rather, each mode of reading might prove useful in different contexts, serve different purposes, and suit different personality types. Collaborative or private reading may be more efficient in some content area courses and not in others. Private reading may be more effective in extensive reading while collaborative reading may serve intensive reading more efficiently. Certain personality types such as shy and introverted people may prefer to read privately rather than collaboratively. Students who are highly proficient and fluent in EFL reading may also prefer private reading to collaborative reading.

On the basis of the evidence from the study, it is both desirable and achievable for Iranian English teachers and lecturers to experiment further by introducing collaborative reading into their teaching methodology. For this to happen, however, it will be necessary to develop means of professional education, such as in-service courses, with respect to CL in general and collaborative reading in particular.

Biodata

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