

# COMPARISON OF INTENSIVE AND NON-INTENSIVE ENGLISH COURSES AND THEIR EFFECTS ON THE STUDENT'S PERFORMANCE IN AN EFL UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

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## Abstract

The aim of this study was to assess the students' performance in the intensive and non-intensive English courses in an EFL university context. More specifically, it aimed at determining whether the students attending the intensive course had a better gain than those in non-intensive one or not. To achieve the goal, 170 freshmen students at the international branch of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences were given a pre-test. Based on the results, they were divided into two groups. The cut off point for the division was considered 40 out of 100. Those falling below the cut-off point participated in the intensive course to be taught a pre-reading course as well as the required reading course, attending 10 hours a week. The ones above the cut-off point, however, participated in the non-intensive course, being held 4 hours a week. The same book, improving reading skills was thought in both classes. The course lasted 68 hours for non-intensive and twice as much for the intensive course. The achievement test at the end of the course was considered as the post-test. In order to analyze the data, Paired t-test was administered on the data. The results, in spite of what was expected, did not reveal a significant difference, i.e. the intensive course did not lead to the students' outperformance, and neither did it compensate their weakness. Therefore, this paves the way for more research taking factors such as the students' attitude about intensive courses into consideration.

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**Keywords:** Intensive EFL course, Non-intensive EFL course, English language

## Introduction

Traditionally, reading has been the most emphasized skill in EFL contexts. It is obvious that reading is an invaluable skill in a context where exposure to the target language is limited, especially for foreign language learners who wish to continue developing their vocabulary and general proficiency. Reading in a communicative classroom, is a process where background and language knowledge interact so the reader actively constructs meaning (Carpenter, 2002). In order to facilitate this process, the authorities of language centers ought to organize optimal schedules based on the learners' needs and talents. In a foreign context, therefore, reading needs to be focused on, due to the lack of sufficient exposure to the language by the learners. Students in Iran, where English is considered as a foreign language, attend English courses in their academic education for two years the guidance school which is followed by another 3 or 4 years of their high school with English as one of their compulsory courses in which reading is a basic component. In order to attend the university, the students have to take national entrance exams in which English is a very important section. The students who attend the university are also obliged to take general English as well as ESP courses. These above mentioned lines, thus, reveal the importance of English in the academic journey that enthusiastic students attempt to take. One important, though not the most important, skill they need in this path, is a good knowledge of English which would assist them not only during the academic years, but also in their job hunting, career performance, international conference participations, etc.. It is worth mentioning that, still after graduation, some students still fail to read their English textbooks and comprehend independently and properly. This inevitable need of the students to reading skill has led the instructors, professors, and the centers to take some steps in order to find and follow effective strategies which can meet the students' needs in reading and comprehending almost all English texts, particularly the scientific ones. In this respect, a lot have been done on the effect of strategies like learning strategies and reading strategies, as a part of that. Shokrpour and Nasiri (2011) investigated the effect of cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies on the students' performance in the reading section of IELTS. They found that all good and poor readers take advantage of cognitive strategies like resourcing, grouping, and note-taking, substituting, elaborating, summarizing, translating, transferring, and inferencing. However, metacognitive reading strategies such as planning, direct attention, self managing, self evaluating, and problem identifying are considerably used by good readers. Moreover, in another study conducted in Iran aiming at determining the effect of instruction in cognitive and metacognitive strategies on the students' self-esteem and academic success, it was found that

there was no significant difference between the self-esteem of those students who were taught cognitive and metacognitive strategies as compared to those taught traditionally. However, there were significant differences between their total scores in the course and their academic success. As to the cognitive and metacognitive groups, the students' scores in self-esteem, their total scores and academic success were equal. Pedagogical implications are provided. (Zarei, et al, 2012)

Taking context into account, it needs to be noted that some universities in Iran, which are established as an International branch of the top- ranked universities in the country, are located far from the main university. One example is the international branch of Shiraz Medical University, in which the present study was conducted. Both, the main university and the international branch, are organized on the same basis of academic schedules, and course designs. And this means that time planning and scheduling comes into account as a very important determinant. It is worth mentioning that the two centers are, geographically, located far apart from each other. Therefore, one big concern is the time strain, which could lead to a lot of inconvenience, if not properly managed. This time pressure, determines the time table. In other words, the time tables have to be set in a way that both professors and the students would benefit the most. Inevitably, though, the schedule planners have to think of ways to minimize this time problem in a way that the required courses are offered in the right time and by the right person. One intervention, employed presently in the above mentioned university, is offering some English Reading courses on a 4 or 5- session – per- week schedule, known as intensive program.

Intensive courses- also known as accelerated, time- shortened, block format, compressed course, flexible, as well as alternative (Scott & Conrad, 1992; Wodkowski, 2003) are the courses in which the number of sessions or the length of course or class time is shorter than the usual format of the schedule. Block scheduling, for example, which is designed to optimize the learning time, refers to longer blocks of time per subject, resulting in a reduced number of classes that the students take and that teachers teach per day to roughly four to five a day (Jenkins, Queen, Algozzie, 2002). Like for any other new trend, there have been several pros and cons since the introduction of intensive courses.

On the positive side, the rationale for introducing intensive courses in schools is embedded in the area that teachers do not have enough time to teach using more effective, active learning methods in the usual traditional schedules. But something deserving notice is that some school districts and principals have implemented block intensive scheduling, like block, without sufficient understanding of the implications (Marchant & Paulson, 2001; Veal

& Flinders, 2001; Lare, Jablonski & Salvaterra, 2002). Elsewhere, also, Intensive English Program (IEP) has been mentioned as an important step in developing not only the students' Basic Interpersonal Communications Skill (BICS), but more importantly their Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006). Taking the students' preparation and management into account, it is believed that students tend to prepare better for intensive sessions if they get their material early on (Burton & Nesbit, 2002) and the students' time management skills improve (Grant, 2001). It has been mentioned that students' motivation, commitment and engagement increase during programs conducted in intensive formats and students perceive intensive programs as much more intense, more stimulating, more exciting, more efficient, more integrated, more challenging and certainly more enjoyable. (Burton & Nesible, 2002; Scott and Conrad, 1991; Daniel, 2000). From the instructors' perspectives, faculties have reported that intensive sessions are more enjoyable, encouraging intense working relationships between instructors and students. (Grant, Bruce, 2001) Instructional time is also believed to increase (Henbery, 1997). Moreover, better attendance is encouraged, better student concentration is achieved and students participate in a more in-depth manner (Grant, 2001; Daniel, 2000). Jacques-Bilodea (2010) conducted a study on the long term effects of intensive English programs on secondary school ESL students. The findings of her study revealed that the intensive English program is a strong source of motivation for students to continue learning English at school and at home on a long-term basis. The majority of the participants felt that their oral competencies were better than other students who had not participated in intensive English programs. They also reported that they really enjoyed the intensive English classes.

On the negative side, however, there has been some resistance to and criticism of intensive programs. Carrington (2010) discusses the issue from psychological dimension. He mentions that psychological research as well as educational psychology suggests that learning is enhanced when new subjects are presented in spaced out sessions rather than compressed into fewer, longer sessions. This would suggest that students learn better when taking courses that are scheduled over longer time periods. Contrary to the success stories of academic achievement under block scheduling is Bateson's study (1990) in which students in traditional schools scored significantly higher than those attending compressed classes. Hnbery (1997) also believes that students have to move on to new material without having time to review or reread old material. Some students have complained that intensive courses are more stressful (Daniel, 2000) with too much work and material (Scott & Conrad, 1991). Faculty views of intensive courses indicate that they are critical of the fatigue, lack of time for the students to

digest concepts, lack of opportunities to cover extensive coverage, and too rapid assignments (Scott & Conrad,1991).

There have been some mixed views about the effectiveness of intensive courses as well. In other words, they do not believe in either intensive or non-intensive with nothing in between. To Carrington (2010), there are some courses which are not well suited for compressed or intensive scheduling. These courses include those which are part of a sequence and therefore require the students to make use of prior knowledge as well as courses which need more analysis than memorization. Investigating the impact of course scheduling on student success in accounting, Carrington (2010) found out that a significant association between course scheduling and student performance is found to exist. Gallow & Odu (2009) examined the relationship between scheduling of classes and achievement in college algebra and found that students' performance was lower when taking the course intensively. Van Scyoc & Gleason (1993) did a similar research in microeconomics. The study concluded that students in compressed courses learned and retained at least as much knowledge as students in the traditional length courses. Petrowsky (1996) who also examined microeconomics courses found that summer schedule (compressed) did better than spring (traditional schedule) on tests which involved simple recall of information but worse on tests which involved comprehension, application, and analysis.

### **Significance of the study**

Considering the context of foreign language learning and taking the context in which the present study is conducted into account, the significance of this study lies in the fact that it informs the professors as well as schedule designers of English reading course of such campuses of the way intensive courses work in such circumstances. This would give rise to proper scheduling-either intensive or non intensive-which would benefit the students, the professors, and the entire system to employ strategies which can have considerable contribution in maximizing the improvement of the students' English reading comprehension skill.

### **Research Question**

Is the students' English reading comprehension achievement enhanced through intensive courses?

### **Methodology**

#### ***Participants***

The participants of the study were selected among 150 students of medical, dentistry, and pharmacy majors at the international campus of Shiraz Medical University, located in *kish*

Island, Iran. The proficiency level of the students were scored pre-intermediate for most, although some had the experience of either living or studying abroad in either English or non-English speaking countries. Both male and female students took part in the study. Gender was not considered as a variable, however. The students' age ranged from 18 to 30 with the majority falling to mid 20s.

### **Instrument**

The instruments applied in the study included a self made proficiency test, comprising MC vocabularies, reading comprehension, T/F, cloze tests. Being piloted on 30 students, the reliability was measured to be 0.7. The source of the test was the book called” Improving Reading Skills” authored by the professors of the English Department. The other instrument was a test which was an achievement test given at the end of the course. It had also the identical format as the proficiency test. Like the proficiency test, the achievement test was piloted on another 30 students with the reliability of 0.67.

### **Procedure**

The proficiency test was given the day before the course began. The course was conducted in 68 hours during 17 weeks for the intensive group and 34 for non-intensive one. The students in the intensive group had to attend the class 4 sessions a week. Each session lasted 2 hours. The students were well informed of the goal of the intensive and non-intensive courses, so they were willing to take part in the study, since they knew they would benefit from the results. Both groups were taught by the same teacher, using the same book. The data were processed and analyzed through SPSS software using two-tailed t-test, mean and standard deviation.

### **Results**

In order to answer the research question, mean, standard deviation, as well as two-tailed T- test of the scores were measured. The results are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

group	mean	SD	P -value
Non intensive	16.85	1.81	

Intensive	13.39	2.42	0.000
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Table I shows the results of intensive and non- intensive groups, regardless of the majors. As shown in the Table, the mean difference and p- value between the two intensive and non- intensive groups are significant. That is, the students in the usual, two- session – per- week group have outperformed the ones in the intensive group.

Table 2. Comparison of mean, SD and p-value in the intensive and non-intensive courses

Major	Group	Mean	SD	p-value
Medical	Non-intensive	16.99	1.56	0.000
Medical	Intensive	13.36	2.7	
Dentistry	Non-intensive	16.58	2.07	0.000
dentistry	Intensive	13.26	2.00	
pharmacy	Non-intensive	17.26	1.54	0.000
pharmacy	Intensive	13.47	2.5	

Table 2, however, goes through more details. In other words, it shows the differences between intensive and non intensive groups in mean and standard deviation and the p- value. The way the two Tables differ from one another is that the second table deals with the majors as well. As one can observe from Table 2, in all medical, dentistry, and pharmacy majors, the differences in mean, SD and the p- value between intensive and non- intensive groups are significant. In other words, medical, dentistry, and pharmacy students in non intensive groups have had a better achievement than their counterparts in the intensive groups.

## Discussion

As the findings shown in Table 1 reveal, the intensive group has the lower mean and higher SD, which is in contrast to the findings for non- intensive group. It means that the students in the non-intensive two- day- per- week classes have achieved more. Regarding the data more specifically, Table 2 shows that among the students of the three mentioned majors, the pharmacy students taking part in the non- intensive class have the highest mean and the lowest SD of all. This means they have taken the most advantage of the non- intensive course. It might have been due to the fact that they had not had the time pressure as the ones in intensive classes. They are even the outperformers compared to the students of two other majors in the intensive group. This might be due to factors like the burden of other lessons that might have been a bit easier for pharmacy students. The second rank among all is gained by the medical students in the non- intensive class and the third by the students of dentistry in non-intensive class. Students taking part in the intensive classes fall in the second, lower half, of the range. More specifically, pharmacy students in the intensive class, stand fourth. The interesting thing is that pharmacy students rank first, in both groups, which can be, as mentioned before, due to the pharmacy students' more perseverance, their attitude toward English learning and reading, the role of the teacher, the extent of other lessons, etc. . Medical students, stand after the pharmacy students in the second half of the hierarchy and the dentistry students the last. All in all, this study supports the previous findings which declared the ineffectiveness of the intensive courses. Consistent with the results of this study is that of Gallow's (2009) stating that although many students may prefer intensive courses that minimize the time they have to spend in the campus, the option of intensive or compressed courses is not optimal for learning. There are, however, some studies inconsistent with the present study. Nagano (1995) found intensive English courses had positive effects on the students' achievements. He/she also reported positive impact of compressed courses on the students' attitude toward English. It is worth mentioning that he/she conducted his/her study on a one- week- intensive course requiring the students to attend the class several hours a week. Providing the course under his/her study had taken two or more months of heavily intensive instruction, the results might have been different. Spade & Lightbown (1994) also found that young learners in intensive English programs had superior outcomes than those instructed over the school year.

With respect to all the previous findings into account, it seems that time factor is vital to be noticed in schedule designing of the institutions of higher learning, especially those in which majors like medical, dentistry, and pharmacy are taught. This necessity can also be due

to the fact that students of these majors are exposed to a great pressure imposed on them by the courses they have to take and pass within a limited length of time. This may leave little time for the students to spend on improving their English, more specifically their English Reading. Therefore, in spite of the undeniable importance of English, it may not be taken as their top priority.

In order to help alleviate the mentioned problem, the following insights and implications are offered. The findings of this study suggest that English reading courses should be taken twice, rather than four or five times a week in campuses similar to the one in this study. Moreover, what may work in one district or area may not necessarily work in the other. Since this study took merely time factor into account, more research can be done on the same topic taking more factors like gender and age in to account. This study was on EFL, which paves the way for those with interest in taking a further step, taking first or even first language reading into account. More can also be done on intensive courses focusing on other skills than reading.

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