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# The Impact of Students' Training in Questioning the Author Technique on EFL Reading Comprehension

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**Abstract**

The purpose of the present study was to examine the effect of student-generated questions on reading comprehension of EFL students. Ninety-eight adult students participated in this study. There were three experimental groups and one control group. The participants in the first experimental group read two unmodified reading passages and answered fifteen multiple-choice comprehension questions. These participants were asked to generate a number of questions based on the given texts and discuss them with a peer before answering the reading comprehension questions. Similarly, the participants in the second experimental group were asked to generate a number of questions and discuss them with a partner. However, they were trained in Questioning the Author technique (QtA).The participants in the third experimental group read the simplified version of the same passages and answered the same comprehension questions without generating any questions. Finally, the participants in the control group read the unmodified texts and answered the same comprehension questions individually without any support. The results revealed that the participants in all the experimental groups outperformed their peers in the control group. Nevertheless, the participants' reading scores who had been trained in QtA were significantly higher than the scores of their peers in the other three groups. This indicates the value of training students in generating their own comprehension questions.

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## 1. Introduction

There is no doubt that developing the ability to read is a very important skill because literacy has always been described in terms of being able to read. Reading is a necessity in modern societies because we are all surrounded by print. We read newspapers to keep abreast of recent world news during the day. We read novels and short stories for pleasure at night before going to sleep. We read brochures and catalogues to decide whether to buy a specific product or not. In addition to all these, thanks to modern technology, we need to read other materials such as e-mails and short text messages. Given the importance of reading in our daily lives, there is little wonder why assisting English language learners in understanding reading comprehension texts has always been a major preoccupation for reading researchers and teachers.

Since the advent of communicative language teaching, second and foreign language teachers have often been advised to expose their learners to authentic materials, namely texts that are produced by and for native speakers of a given language inasmuch as they are "interesting, engaging, culturally enlightening, relevant, [and] motivating" (Day & Bamford, 1998, p.54). However, an important problem in this respect is that the use of authentic materials with less proficient learners is often frustrating. As Nuttall (1996) argues, linguistically difficult texts are likely to result in the use of translation and hence are not suitable for developing reading skills.

To overcome this problem, namely making authentic texts more comprehensible to learners, teachers have two options: they can either modify texts or engage learners in meaningful interaction with texts. Text modification is often carried out through simplification and learner engagement with texts is often implemented through maximizing peer interaction over comprehension questions. These two options will be briefly examined below.

## 2. Text modification

Text modification is often done in two directions: simplification and elaboration (Baleghizadeh & Borzabadi, 2007; Oh, 2001, Yano, Long & Ross, 1994).  In the former, difficult words and structures are replaced by simpler ones or at least those that are familiar to learners. In the latter, however, more information (e.g., synonyms and paraphrases) are added to texts to make them more comprehensible. Of these two options, it is simplification that seems to be more commonly known and widely practiced among teachers and materials writes.

Despite their popularity with many language learners and their widespread use among them, simplified materials are not favored by many language teaching researchers for a number of reasons. First, the use of limited vocabulary along with short simple sentences in simplified texts is likely to create choppy and unnatural discourse (Blau, 1982). Secondly, simplifying a text, ironically, makes it more difficult because it distorts "the system of references, repetition and redundancy as well as the discourse indicators" one often depends on while reading (Grellet, 1981, p. 7). Thirdly, replacing complex linguistic forms with more simple ones, a feature of most simplified texts, deprives learners of the opportunity to learn the natural forms of language (Long & Ross, 1993). And finally, as the findings of Young's (1999) study suggest, simplification is not recommended "if students are reading a text for comprehension, for the general idea, or for important information" (p. 361).

Despite the foregoing criticisms, simplified materials, particularly in the form of graded readers, continue to be published and used.  While there is some truth in the criticisms launched against simplified materials, it is not fair to make sweeping generalizations, since not all simplified materials are as poorly adapted as they are described by their critics. Moreover, simplified materials have a number of pedagogic advantages that should not be ignored. For example, they provide language learners with a rich source of extensive reading to be read on their own, hence giving them a sense of achievement and autonomy. More recently, and in a similar vein, Allan (2009) has argued that graded readers can be made into an appropriate corpus to be used by low-level learners. Her findings suggest that the lexical chunks used in graded readers reflect an acceptable balance of accessibility and authenticity.

## 3. Learner engagement

The second way to help learners with reading comprehension is to engage them in meaningful interaction with texts. The idea of promoting interaction while reading a text is partially rooted in Long's Interaction Hypothesis. As mentioned earlier, linguistic modification is not the only way to make input comprehensible. As far back as 1983, Long argued that input becomes comprehensible not only through simplification and contextual clues but also through modification of the interactional structure of conversation. These modifications occur when there is a communication problem, as a result of which the interactants try to negotiate solutions to it. As Pica (1994) has described it, "As they negotiate, they work linguistically to achieve the needed comprehensibility, whether repeating a message verbatim, adjusting its syntax, changing its words, or modifying its form and meaning in a host of other ways" (p. 494). According to Gass and Mackey (2007), negotiation strategies are the following "three Cs":

- Confirmation checks (expressions designed to elicit confirmation that an utterance has been understood correctly, e.g. *Is this what you mean?*).
- Clarification requests (expressions designed to seek clarification of the interlocutor's preceding utterance, e.g. *what did you say?*).
- Comprehension checks (expressions used to verify that an interlocutor has understood, e.g. *Did you understand?)*.

The literature of second language acquisition advises teachers to engage learners in tasks that involve a two-way exchange of information (e.g., spotting the differences between two nearly identical pictures) in that they lead to more negotiated interaction than do tasks involving a one-way exchange of information (e.g., giving a set of instructions). Thus, the more learners interact in pairs or small groups, the more they can provide each other with the feedback needed to make the given input comprehensible.

To date, most of the studies conducted to explore the differential effects of simplified input against negotiated interaction on learners' comprehension and subsequent acquisition have been conducted on oral discourse, namely on listening comprehension (e.g., see Mackey & Gass, 2006 for a comprehensive review). Nevertheless, there have been very few studies that have examined the differential effects of these two conditions on written discourse, namely reading comprehension.

Perhaps the first pioneering study in this respect was conducted by Van den Branden (2000), who examined the effect of negotiation for meaning on 151 EFL children's reading comprehension in primary schools in Belgium. The children in this study read an intriguing detective story and then answered a number of comprehension questions under four conditions: (a) the unmodified input condition, where the pupils read the original story; (b) the premodified input condition, where the pupils read the modified version of the story with simplified vocabulary, simplified syntax, and a greater proportion of anaphoric references; (c) the collective negotiation condition, where the pupils read the unmodified story and then negotiated about the meaning of unknown vocabulary with the teacher and the rest of the class; and (d) pair negotiation condition, where the pupils read the unmodified story but had an opportunity to negotiate about the meaning of difficult words with a fellow pupil. The results showed significantly higher comprehension scores for pupils who had read the simplified version of the story than those who had read the unmodified version. Moreover, the pupils who were given a chance to negotiate for meaning obtained significantly higher comprehension scores than those who had read the premodified or unmodified version of the story. The interesting finding of the study was the significantly higher comprehension scores for collective negotiation condition than the pair negotiation condition.

More recently, Baleghizadeh (2010) compared the reading comprehension performance of three groups of intermediate adult Iranian EFL learners on a rather long narrative reading passage under three input conditions: simplified condition characterized by both lexical and syntactic simplification, negotiated condition with no linguistic adjustments but with opportunities for interaction with the teacher through asking questions, and unmodified condition without any modification or intervention. The results of the study revealed that the participants in both simplified and negotiated conditions significantly outperformed their peers in the unmodified condition on the reading comprehension test. Moreover, the participants who had the opportunity to initiate interaction with the teacher achieved a significantly higher mean score than the participants who read the simplified

text. This suggests that opportunities for negotiation of meaning facilitate reading comprehension more than linguistic simplification.

In another recent study, Baleghizadeh (forthcoming) compared the effect of simplification with peer interaction prompted by student-generated questions on reading comprehension of 83 Iranian adult EFL students. This study involved three groups of participants. The participants in the first group read two unmodified narrative reading passages. Before answering the pertinent reading comprehension questions, the participants were asked to make a number of questions based on the given texts and discuss them with a partner. The participants in the second group read the simplified versions of the same passages and answered the same comprehension questions. Finally, the participants in the third group read the unmodified texts and answered the same questions without an opportunity for interaction. The results revealed that the participants in the first two groups outperformed their peers in the third group. Besides, the participants' reading comprehension scores who benefitted from peer interaction were significantly higher than those who read the simplified texts.

The findings of the three studies reported above consistently show that the opportunity for negotiated interaction through asking questions has a more significant impact on reading comprehension of EFL learners than simplification. While the participants in all the previous studies were encouraged to ask questions about the given texts, they did not receive any training in making effective questions, namely through Questioning the Author (QtA) technique. Thus, the majority of the questions generated addressed the meaning of unknown words in the selected passages. In addition, the reading passages that the learners were exposed to were narrative texts. Given the above circumstances, there is a need for a study that employs another text type, namely expository and investigates the effect of peer interaction on reading comprehension when learners receive training in asking effective questions. The purpose of the present study, therefore, is to compare the effect of simplification with peer interaction through student-generated questions in two modes (trained versus untrained) on reading comprehension of EFL learners. To this end, the following research questions were posed:

1. Do EFL learners comprehend simplified texts better than unmodified texts?
2. Do EFL learners comprehend unmodified texts discussed through their own questions better than unmodified texts with no discussion?
3. Do EFL learners comprehend unmodified texts discussed through their own questions better than simplified texts?
4. Do EFL learners who discuss texts through receiving training in QtA technique comprehend them better than those who discuss them without this training?

## 4. Method

### 4.1 Participants

The participants for this study were 98 Iranian adult EFL students (55 females and 43 males) who were studying English at a private language institute in Tehran. They were all university students with an average age of 27. Their English language proficiency measured by the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) ranged from 410-440. The participants were members of four intact classes taught by two experienced teachers. There were three experimental and one control groups.

### 4.2 Instrument

The main instrument used in this study was a reading comprehension test based on two expository reading passages selected from *Cambridge Preparation for the TOEFL Test* by Gear and Gear (1996). The test consisted of 15 multiple-choice items of five various types: main idea questions (2), inference-making (2), pronoun reference (3), stated details (5), and unstated details (3). The first passage was followed by 7 and the second by 8 comprehension questions. Before starting the experiment, the items were all pretested, which revealed that they had acceptable facility and discrimination indices. Moreover, the reliability coefficient of the test, calculated through Kuder-

Richardson 21 formula, turned out to be an acceptable index, namely .79. To ensure the participants' lack of prior familiarity with the reading passages, a survey was conducted before starting the experiment, which indicated that the participants had not previously seen either of the two passages.

### 4.3 Procedure

The study required the participants in the control group (CG, n=23) to read the unmodified version of the texts and answer the related comprehension questions. Similarly, the participants in the first experimental group (EG1, n=26) read the same unmodified texts and answered the same comprehension questions. However, before being exposed to the comprehension questions, they were asked to write four open-ended comprehension questions of their own (two items for each text). Then they were asked to make self-selected dyads and answer the questions in pairs. Each pair was allowed to work on four questions, two contributed by each participant from both passages.

Like the participants in the first two groups, the participants in the second experimental group (EG2, n=25) read the unmodified texts and had an opportunity to discuss them through their own questions. However, they received some training in Questioning the Author (QtA) technique. According to Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, and Kucan (1997), QtA "is an approach for text-based instruction that is designed to facilitate building understanding of text ideas" (p.5). One session before the experiment, the participants in EG2 received some training in how they should approach a text while reading it through asking the right type of questions under the teacher's supervision. Some typical questions students should often raise while questioning the author, according to Beck et al. (1997), are as follows:

- What does the author mean here?
- Did the author explain this clearly?
- Does this make sense with what the author told us before?
- How does this connect with what the author told us before?
- Does the author tell us why?

As Beck et al. (1997) contend, when learners learn to challenge an author, they learn to challenge and be challenged by one another, too. It is the attempt to understand the text, not the activity of arguing ideas, which is of substantial importance.

Finally, the participants in the third experimental group (EG3, n=24) were asked to read the simplified versions of the same texts and answer the same questions. The two texts generally underwent the process of lexical simplification whereby difficult words were replaced by easier ones. A typical example of how one of the texts was simplified appears below:

#### The unmodified text

A Japanese construction company plans to build a huge independent city-state, akin to the legendary Atlantis, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The city, dubbed, "Marinnation," would have about one million inhabitants, two airports, and possibly even a spaceport. Marinnation, if built, would be a separate country but could serve as a home for international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank.

#### The simplified text

A Japanese construction company plans to build a *very large* independent city-state, *similar* to the *well-known* Atlantis, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The city, *named*, "Marinnation," would have about one million inhabitants, two airports, and possibly even a spaceport. *If Marinnation were built*, it would be a separate country but could serve as a home for international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank.

The participants in EG1 and EG2 were encouraged to speak in English for as long as they wished. In none of the four groups were the participants faced with a time limit. They were allowed to remain on task for as long as they wished. The average time they spent on the assigned task for each group is as follows: CG (18 minutes), EG1 (22

minutes), EG2 (24 minutes), and EG3 (17). One last point to mention is that the researcher had a non-participatory attendance in EG1 and EG2, listening to some of the pairs and making sporadic notes.

## 5. Results

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for all the four groups.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics for control and experimental groups**

| Groups | $n$ | $M$ | SD |
|--------|-----|-----|-----|
| EG1 | 26 | 11.57 | 1.30 |
| EG2 | 25 | 13.12 | 1.39 |
| EG3 | 24 | 10.16 | 1.27 |
| CG | 23 | 8.78 | 1.31 |

The result of a one-way ANOVA indicated that there is a statistically significant difference between the groups, $F (3, 94) = 47.82$, $p = .001$. Table 2 represents the related statistics.

**Table 2 One-way ANOVA for reading comprehension scores**

| Source | $df$ | SS | MS | F | Sig |
|--------|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Between groups | 3 | 250.67 | 83.55 | 47.82 | .001 |
| Within groups | 94 | 164.23 | 1.74 | | |

$p<.05$

In order to pinpoint the difference between the groups, a post-hoc Scheffe test was used. Table 3 displays the differences between the groups.

**Table 3. Mean differences between the groups**

| Between group comparisons | | *Mean difference* | Sig. |
|---------------------------|------|-------------------|------|
| | EG2 | 1.54 | .001 |
| EG1 | EG3 | 1.41 | .004 |
| | CG | 2.70 | .001 |
| EG2 | EG3 | 2.95 | .001 |
| | CG | 4.33 | .001 |
| EG3 | CG | 1.38 | .007 |

$p<.05$

As Table 3 shows, the participants who discussed the texts through QtA technique (EG2) significantly outperformed the participants in all the other three groups. Similarly, the participants who discussed the texts without QtA (EG1) significantly performed better than the participants in EG3 and CG, namely those who read the simplified and unmodified texts without any interaction. Meanwhile, there was a significant difference between the mean scores of those who read the simplified texts (EG3) and those who read the unmodified texts with no opportunity for interaction (CG). The findings, all in all, indicate that the opportunity for interaction through QtA had the most significant impact on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners.

## 6. Discussion

Based on the findings of this study, simplification improved reading comprehension of EFL learners. This is consistent with the findings of previous studies (Baleghizadeh, 2010, forthcoming; Oh, 2001; Van den Branden, 2000), which similarly reported a positive effect for the role of simplification on reading comprehension. A possible explanation for this is related to the proficiency level of the participants. The participants in the present study were at a lower-intermediate level of English language proficiency and hence were not competent enough to tackle authentic reading materials without support from the text (e.g., through simplified content) or from a partner (e.g., through peer interaction). It is probably because of this reason that simplification facilitated reading comprehension of the participants in this study. Thus, the first research question was answered in the positive.

The primary goal of this study, however, was to explore the effect of peer interaction prompted by student-generated questions on reading comprehension of EFL students. The results revealed that the participants who discussed the reading passages with a partner based on their own questions significantly outperformed the participants in EG3 and CG on the reading comprehension test. This indicates the important role of peer interaction in facilitating reading comprehension. Therefore, the second and the third research questions were answered in the positive, too.

The interesting finding of the study, however, is concerned with the fourth research question which sought to explore whether learners who discussed texts through receiving training in asking the right questions would comprehend them better than those who discussed them without this training. The answer to this question was also a positive. This suggests that training in QtA significantly improved reading comprehension of the participants compared to those who did not receive this training.

One possible explanation for the better performance of the participants in EG1 and EG2 compared to their peers in EG3 and CG is that they were encouraged to ask their own questions about the texts. About three decades ago, Whitaker (1983) argued that student-initiated interaction is a much-wanted thing in language classes and an effective way to promote it is to encourage learners to make their own reading comprehension questions. Teacher-led reading comprehension questions do not create authentic communication in the class because they tend to have a testing rather than a teaching orientation. Besides, these questions do not carry an information gap in that the teacher already has the answer to all of them. Thus, according to Whitaker (1983), " it is the learner who must ask questions, look for answers, and then ask more questions, benefitting at the same time from questions and answers offered by others" (p.331). These student-initiated questions result in fruitful classroom discussions which in turn aid comprehension of the reading texts.

Another possible explanation for the outperformance of the participants in EG1 and EG2 compared to their peers in EG3 and CG is that negotiated interaction plays a major role in input comprehensibility. Earlier, it was mentioned that the interactional devices such as confirmation checks and clarification requests make input comprehensible. The following extract from one of the pairs in EG1 shows how the meaning of "Marinnation" becomes clear to both learners:

S1: What's Marinnation mean?
S2: I am not sure I didn't find in this dictionary [referring to the dictionary in her cell phone].
S1: Maybe we can guess… it's a nation, a nation… but what's that Marinnation?
S2: Is it a nation in sea? Like in submarine, because marine means sea, water.
S1: You are right. So it is city they making… the Japanese people making this city in ocean.

As we can see, the process of negotiation for meaning begins with a question on the meaning of "Marinnation." The first student suggests that they can find its definition through guessing. The second student makes her conjecture and hence tries to get the first student' approval through a confirmation check. At the end, it seems that both are happy with the meaning they have arrived at.

These negotiations for meaning, which frequently occurred between the participants, have certainly helped the learners in EG1 and EG2 better understand the given input. That is why they had a significantly better comprehension of the texts compared to the participants in CG, who were deprived of the opportunity for interaction and the participants in EG1, who were exposed to the simplified texts as a compensation for the absence of

interaction. This indicates that negotiated interaction has a more profound impact on reading comprehension than merely simplifying the input.

Given these circumstances, the most important finding of the present study is then related to the significant difference between the performance of the participants in EG1 and EG2 on the reading comprehension test. This difference becomes more prominent given that the participants in both groups had an opportunity for peer interaction through generating their own questions. It is perhaps training in QtA technique that accounts for this difference. As mentioned before, prior to the experiment the participants in EG2 received some training in asking the right questions while reading a text. Although in a true QtA lesson, the teacher initiates the queries as the learners go through a text segment by segment, the participants in this study were encouraged to ask the same questions that are likely to be asked by the teacher in a typical QtA lesson. These questions, a number of which were mentioned before, help readers construct meaning as they go through a text. A quick comparison between the following questions raised by the participants in EG1 and EG2 indicates a sharp difference between them.

Typical questions made by EG1 participants

1.  What is the meaning of "akin to" in the first line?
2.  What kind of nation is Marinnation?
3.  What kind of city is a city-state?
4.  How can this city be an independent city?

Typical questions made by EG2 participants

5.  Why is this city compared with Atlantis?
6.  Why should this city need a spaceport?
7.  Does the author tell us people from which countries will live there?
8.  What other organizations, except the UN and the World Bank can be located in this city?

As we can see, questions 1-4 are mostly concerned with the meaning of unknown vocabulary, while questions 5-8 address more profound issues and delve more into the depth of the text. This higher quality accounts for the effectiveness of the training given to the participants in the second experimental group. These questions coupled with the discussions that followed helped the participants in EG2 to act on the information in the text and construct the intended meaning. While the participants in EG1 also had an opportunity to generate a set of questions and discuss the texts through them, the quality of their questions did not allow for a deeper level processing of the information in the given texts and thus did not improve their reading comprehension as well as what happened to the participants in EG2.

## 7. Conclusion

The findings of the present study suggest that engaging learners in meaningful interaction with authentic texts through generating their own questions is a more effective way of facilitating reading comprehension than exposing them to simplified texts. Besides, training learners in asking the right questions through effective questioning techniques such as QtA is more effective in improving their reading comprehension than simply encouraging them to make questions without giving them any training.

The very proposal of encouraging learners to discuss texts through their own questions instead of exposing them to traditional reading lessons offers a number of pedagogical advantages. The first advantage is that it provides learners with an anxiety-free leaning experience. In a traditional reading lesson, the teacher often raises a number of so-called comprehension questions which, more often than not, are memory questions which require learners to retrieve information from the reading material. Obviously, helping learners build meaning rather than recall factual information from the given passages is a better way of supporting them both cognitively and affectively. Secondly, it maximizes learner-learner interaction which, according to the Interaction Hypothesis, is a crucial factor for promoting second language acquisition. While most traditional reading classes follow product-oriented lessons

shaped by teacher-learner interactions, the discussion-based approach offered here results in process-oriented lessons with numerous opportunities for learner-learner interaction. Thirdly, it promotes the use of authentic materials. The findings of the study point out that it is possible to help lower-intermediate learners understand authentic materials without distorting them, simply by promoting negotiated interaction among learners through their own proposed questions. Finally, in order to further promote reading comprehension through negotiated interaction, learners need training in generating effective questions.

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