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The Effect of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) on the Iranian Intermediate ESP Learners' Reading Comprehension

Mohammad Bagher Shabani^{a,*}, Arad Ghasemi^b^a Imam Khomeini International University, Qazvin, 34149-16818, Iran^b Ilam University, Ilam, -Iran

Abstract

The present study investigated the impact of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) on reading comprehension of the Iranian intermediate ESP learners. There were two groups of thirty participants in the current research: a control group (CBLT) and an experimental group (TBLT). They were chosen randomly from the students of Islamic Azad University majoring in accounting. The subjects were given a reading comprehension pre-test (reading section of TOEFL) in order to make them homogeneous regarding EFL reading comprehension at the outset. Then, in group A, reading comprehension was taught to the subjects based on the principles of TBLT. However, in group B, reading comprehension was taught to the students through CBLT. The researcher used independent samples t-test and paired samples t-test to analyze the collected data. The data analysis using paired samples t-test showed that teaching reading comprehension in both group was influential. The data analysis using independent samples t-test revealed that the subjects in TBLT group performed better on the reading comprehension post-test than CBLT group. It means that TBLT has been more effective than CBLT in teaching reading comprehension to Iranian ESP learners. Some justifications for this priority were discussed in the final section of the paper.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: shabani_m_b@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

The ability to communicate with other people from other countries has obsessed man's mind during the history. So, a lot of methods and approaches have been used for foreign language teaching. Until the middle of the 20th century, Grammar-Translation method was dominant. Then, due to paradigm changes in psychology and linguistics, a scientific revolution occurred in the language teaching and many different methods like Audiolingualism, Silent Way, and Whole Approach were proposed each of which paid attention to different skills. Then, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged in 1980.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) claims that the goal of language teaching is to develop "Communicative Competence" in learners and pays attention to all of the four skills (Richards and Rodgers, 2001; Brown, 2007). Brown (2007, p. 241) stated that "CLT is best understood as an approach, not a method" and many other new methods have been derived from it. Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and Competency-Based Language Teaching are three of the most important methodologies which have been derived from CLT. Richards and Rodgers, For example, have asserted that: "TBLT is a logical development of CLT" (2001, p. 223). Tasks are the basic and core units of planning and instruction in TBLT (Ellis, 2000). CBLT is also a subdivision of CLT which focuses on integrating the teaching of language and subject matter simultaneously. One of the most important phenomena of language learning-teaching process is to make students reach the intended language level in a shorter time and in a better way. So, the practice of content-based English language teaching has been gaining importance during the past two decades. In content-based language teaching, mostly called English for Specific Purposes (ESP), knowing the English language needs of the students and preparing the curriculum of the course according to these needs are of vital importance.

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), when it comes to the reading skill in a foreign language, the ample research shows it is gaining increasing importance. Therefore, the instruction in reading in general and in ESP reading, in particular, is assuming a more crucial role. The present study intended to investigate whether Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) can enhance and improve the Iranian intermediate ESP learners' reading comprehension and if so, which of the two methodologies can be more effective in teaching reading skill.

1.1. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to investigate whether teaching reading through Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) has any effect on the reading comprehension of Iranian intermediate ESP learners. In addition, the present research investigated to see if there is any significant difference between the two methodologies used in teaching reading to the Iranian ESP learners.

1.2. Research Questions

This study tried to answer the following two research questions:

1. Does teaching reading comprehension through Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) have a significant effect on the Iranian intermediate ESP learners' reading comprehension?
2. Does teaching reading comprehension through Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) have a significant effect on the Iranian intermediate ESP learners' reading comprehension?
3. Is there any significant difference in the reading comprehension of Iranian intermediate ESP learners taught through Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT)?

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The participants of the current study were chosen randomly from Ilam Azad University students who attended the ESP classes. The students were majoring in accounting. First, 120 participants at this university were chosen on

the basis of random sampling. To achieve homogeneity between the two groups, TOEFL (Deborah, 2005) was administrated and 60 of the learners were chosen based on their scores. These students were 36 male and 24 female students. Then these selected participants were assigned randomly into two groups of 30. The age range of the participants was also controlled since all students were 20 to 25 years old. It should also be mentioned that the subjects at the above mentioned university were from different socio-economical and educational strata with different mother tongues.

2.2. Instrumentation

In order to determine the effect of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) vs. Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) on the reading comprehension of Iranian intermediate ESP learners, students took a TOEFL at the beginning of the study, the purpose of which was to achieve homogeneity between the two groups. TOEFL test is a standardized, reliable and valid test, which is known all over the world. Regarding the scores on the TOEFL test, most of these selected learners could be assumed to be intermediate. This pre-test contained the reading section of the TOEFL test and it contained 50 items. But the scores were calculated out of 100. Results of the pre-test were also used to homogenising the groups. After the treatment, again a version of TOEFL was administered in order to check the effectiveness of the two teaching methodologies on the reading comprehension of Iranian ESP learners. The researcher used SPSS program to process the gathered data by pre-test and post-test.

2.3. Procedure

This study was conducted from March to May 2009 and was carried on once a week for twelve sessions at Ilam Azad University. After selecting the students and assigning them into two homogeneous groups, the researcher (who was actually the instructor too) applied Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in group 1 and Content-Based Approach (CBA) in group 2. In class 1, a reading passage was taught based on TBLT and the class time was divided into three phases: pre-task, task cycle and post-task. In pre-task phase, the researcher tried to activate the EFL learners' schemata related to the text and motivated the participants to read the passage. During-task phase, the students were engaged in completing different kinds of tasks, and in post-task phase, they gave a report through, for instance, repeating the tasks and practicing some formal and linguistic features of the text.

In the content-based class (class 2), the syllabus was organized around themes or topics related to accounting. Here, the students read authentic materials and all the exercises and class activities were designed around the reading text. The researcher used realia, pictures and technological aids, as much as possible, to strengthen the learning of the subject matter. The treatment was given for 12 sessions. This procedure was carried on for the whole semester. Texts used during the study were from the main accounting books, accessible in bookstores in Iran: English for the students of Accounting (1996, last edition in 2008); written by Dr. Aghvami and published by SAMT publications. After this period, a reading post-test was given to the two groups to compare their reading improvement.

2.4. Data analysis

After running pre tests and post tests in both groups, the scores were collected by the researcher. The scores received through running pre test showed a score range of 20 to 95 out of 100. Since the test used in this study was the reading section of TOEFL, and because, in TOEFL, individuals' levels of proficiency are specified based on the scores they obtain, the researcher selected 60 of the students whose scores were between $\pm 1SD$.

After the required data were collected, in order to find if the teaching of reading through each of the two methodologies had any significant effect on the Iranian intermediate ESP learners' reading skill, t-test was applied. The mean scores of both groups were analyzed through an independent samples t-test. Tables 4.2 and 4.8 in chapter 4 show the analysis of the data after running an independent samples t-test. The researcher also used matched t-test to compare and analyze the performances of the individuals on pre test and post test. Tables 4.4 and 4.6 show the results of running matched t-test in GA and GB.

There were two groups in the current study and the students were randomly selected and assigned into two groups of equal size: an experimental group and a control group. Also, this study used a pre-test before the treatment

and a post-test at the end of the study. Generally, the design of the study is quasi experimental. See the following table:

Table 3.1. The distribution of participants in two groups

Methodology	N	
Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)	30	Experimental Group (GA)
Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT)	30	Control Group (GB)

The schematic representation of the design and the procedures of the present study are also given here:

Group A: T1 (Random) – TBLT – T2

Group B: T1 (Random) – CBLT – T2

One of the main significance of the present investigation is related to promoting the position and quality of ESP courses in Iran.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Pre-test results for the two groups

There were two equal-sized groups in this study; a TBLT group (GA) and a CBLT group (GB). In the first group (GA), reading comprehension was taught to the Iranian intermediate ESP learners based on Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and in the second group (GB) Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) was used for reading comprehension to the Iranian intermediate ESP learners. The descriptive statistics for the performances of each of the two groups on the pre-test have been given in the following table.

Table 4.1. Paired Samples Statistics on the pre-test

Groups	Methodology	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Mean	N
GA	TBLT	8.21	1.50	52.23	30
GB	CBLT	7.80	1.42	51.20	30

In order to see if there was any significant difference between the two groups at the outset, an independent T-test running SPSS program was used. The results of T-test are presented in table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2. Independent Samples t-Test for the performance of GA and GB on the pre-test

	Groups		t	Sig.
	GA	GB		
Pre-test	52.23	51.20	.676	.422

Note: *P<.05

As it is clear from Table 4.2, the observed t value at $p < .05$ with 58 degrees of freedom is .676 (sig. 422). By referring to the t-table, we cannot reject the supposed null hypothesis. It can be said that there is not any significant difference between the performances of the two groups at the beginning of the study. This means that the two groups indeed belonged to the same population when this study started.

3.2. Pretest/Posttest Results for the Two Groups

After giving different treatments to the two groups of the study, that is reading comprehension was taught through task-based language teaching (TBLT) in GA and through content-based language teaching (CBLT) in GB, a reading comprehension post-test was given to the two groups. In order to find if teaching reading through each of the two methodologies had any significant effect on the Iranian intermediate ESP learners' reading skill, the learners' scores on both pre-test and post-test were compared for each group by using matched t-tests .

3.3. Pretest/Posttest Results for TBLT Group: GA

The descriptive statistics for the performances of the task-based group is given in the following table. As you can see, the mean score for the pre-test is 52.23 with a standard deviation of 8.21, but the mean score for the post-test is 67.16 with a standard deviation of 8.27. Therefore, an observed difference between the performances of the task-based group from the post-test to the pre-test can be seen. Nevertheless, the question is if such a difference is statistically significant or not?

Table 4.3. Paired Samples Statistics, TBLT pre-test/post-test results

GA	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	N
Pre-test	52.23	8.21	1.50	30
Post-test	67.16	8.27	1.51	30

Accordingly, the matched T-test was used to check the significance of such a difference. The results of running the matched T-test presented in Table 4.4. The obtained value for T with 29 degrees of freedom at p<.05 level of significance is 6.76. Because this obtained value is greater than the critical value for T ($t_{critical} = 2.00$), therefore, such a difference between the performances of the TBLT Group on the post-test and on the pre-test is statistically significant. This shows that the task-based group’s reading comprehension has improved due to the methodology of teaching reading comprehension.

Table 4.4. Paired Samples t-test for TBLT group

	Tests			
	Pre-test	Post-test	t	Sig.
GA	52.23	67.16	6.76*	.000

Note: *P<.05

3.4. Pretest/Posttest Results for CBLT Group: GB

The descriptive statistics for the performances of GB that is content-based group is given in table 4.5. As you can see in the table, the mean score for the pre-test is 51.20 with a standard deviation of 7.80, while the mean score for the post-test with a standard deviation of 10.85 is 59. 80. Again, an observed difference can be seen between the performances of G2 on the post-test and pre-test.

Table 4.5. Paired Samples Statistics, CBLT pre-test/post-test results

GB	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	N
Pre-test	51.20	7.80	1.42	30
Post-test	59.80	10.85	1.98	30

Here, the obtained value for T is 3.16 (sig. .004, $p < .05$). Consequently, we can see that content-based language teaching has been effective in teaching reading comprehension to Iranian ESP learners and the students' reading ability has improved (See Table 4.6).

Table 4.6. Paired Samples t-test for CBLT group

Tests				
	Pre-test	Post-test	t	Sig.
GA	51.20	59.80	10.85	.004

Note: * $P < .05$

So, the first null hypothesis of the study was rejected and it was concluded that both TBLT and CBLT were effective in teaching reading comprehension to Iranian ESP learners.

3.5. Post-test Results for the Two Groups

The main question of the current study is to check if TBLT or CBLT is more effective in teaching reading comprehension to Iranian ESP learners. As it can be seen, the two groups' reading comprehension has been improved irrespective of the methodology for teaching reading comprehension. In order to answer this question, the post-test scores for the two groups were compared using an independent T-test. The descriptive statistics for performances of the two groups on the post-test shown in the following table.

Table 4.7. Paired samples statistics on the post-test

Methodology	Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	N
TBLT	GA	67.16	8.27	1.51	30
CBLT	GB	59.80	10.85	1.98	30

As you can see the mean score for the TBLT Group is 67.16 and the mean score for the CBLT group on the post-test is 59.80. Therefore, there is an observed difference between the performances of the two groups on the post-test in favor of the task-based group. Figure 4.2 illustrates the difference between the performances of the two groups on the post-test.

However, in order to check if such a difference is statistically significant or not, an independent T-test was used. Table 4.8 shows the results of running this T-test.

Table 4.8. Independent Samples t-Test for the performance of GA and GB on the post-test

Groups				
	GA	GB	t	Sig.
Post-test	67.16	59.80	4.27	.002

Note: * $P < .05$

As it is clear from the table, the T-value for t is 4.27 (sig. .002). Therefore, the second research hypothesis of the

study can be rejected and it can be concluded that GA has outperformed GB. That is those students in the task-based groups have performed better than those students in the content-based group. Accordingly, it can be concluded that task-based language teaching has been more effective than content-based language teaching in teaching reading comprehension to Iranian ESP learners.

4. Conclusions

As it was observed in the previous chapter, those Iranian intermediate ESP learners who were taught reading comprehension through task-based language teaching (TBLT) outperformed those learners who were taught reading comprehension through Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT). Such a result can be justified by considering some outstanding characteristics about the nature of task based language teaching and its effectiveness in EFL contexts.

First, TBLT is a meaning-centred methodology, i.e. it develops learners' communicative competence by focusing on the meaning. Thus, TBLT encourages the learner to understand the written text with an unconscious and peripheral focus on the form of the language. According to Ellis (2003), such meaningfulness in TBLT provides an authentic, purposeful and intentional background for comprehending and using language and it is encouraging for the EFL learners. Such meaningfulness also helps the language learners to lower the affective factors and the anxiety encountered with during learning.

Second, In TBLT there is a very helpful pre-task phase in which the teacher tries to activate the learners' background knowledge and the related schemata by engaging the learners in completing tasks similar to those which should be worked out during the task phase itself. In comparison with other methods for teaching reading comprehension including CBLT, TBLT has a more effective, authentic, meaningful and purposeful pre reading phase. In addition, the pre-reading phase in TBLT is more elaborate and complete. Furthermore, a peculiar feature of pre-task phase in TBLT which embodies the pre-reading phase in reading comprehension skill is a kind of a task which should be completed by the students. In fact, we have a minimized TBLT approach even in the first phase. In contrast, in other methodologies adopted for teaching reading comprehension there is a very simple list of questions or maybe some figures or photos for pre-reading activators.

Third, In CBLT the focus is on the content and the students are only concerned with mere information or the subject matter which has been put on the paper. Here, students are not concerned about the language. And what is important for the teacher is the secondary function of the language, which is the transactional function. Nevertheless, in TBLT, both the learning and the manipulation of the language are considered. And the tasks are at the service of the communication of meaning through language. Here, students are encouraged by other peers to use the subject matter and to manipulate it in order to complete a task.

Fourth, the superiority of TBLT is the planning and report stages which are done by the students during the task phase. The cooperative nature of planning and report stages help students get feedback from the members of a Task-Based group. Of course, the students in TBLT groups receive feedback from the teacher. However, in the CBLT group the students work individually on the exercises and do not receive any feedback from their peers and the only authority for judging the accuracy of exercises is the teacher. Therefore, existence of such a feedback can be claimed to provide a more relaxing and less threatening condition for learning a foreign language.

Finally, in TBLT methodology, there is a post-task phase or a language-focus phase during which the teacher deductively teaches complicated formal aspects of language such as difficult structures, vocabulary and other problematic points in reading text. Accordingly, the formal instruction of language is also considered by TBLT methodology. The existence, the place and the time of such a language-focused phase belongs only to TBLT and such a stage cannot be seen as long as CBLT is concerned.

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