

The Impact of Drama on Iranian EFL Young Learners' Reading Comprehension Performance

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ABSTRACT

This paper intended to consider reading comprehension learning among EFL young learners through the techniques of drama. The objective of the study was to examine to what extent drama activities could develop reading comprehension ability of Iranian EFL young learners. The methodology was quasi-experimental and the population of the research was 102 eighth-grade female students from Shohadaye Enghelab high school in the year 2015-2016, among whom, 44 participants were finally chosen. They were randomly assigned into two groups (control group and experimental group). In experimental group students underwent drama activities in reading classes; however, in the control group, students were taught reading comprehension in the conventional way. Having assigned them into the control and experimental groups, the researcher ran a Pre-test and a Post-test. In order to evaluate the results, an independent T-test was administered. The results proved that the application of drama techniques can have a great impact on Iranian EFL young learners' comprehension ability.

Keywords: Drama, EFL learners, Reading Comprehension

1. Introduction

Reading skill is an essential skill and probably the most important skill for individuals to master in academic environment and also to be successful in life. Reading also keeps them informed, up to date, and thinking; however, most of the time, learners especially young learners, have problems in grasping the meaning of the text. It is considered as an important issue among EFL young learners when they encounter the reading materials. Some studies have been carried out on this issue to examine how EFL learners understand reading comprehension well. In order for learners to be good in reading comprehension, they need to utilize techniques and activities that facilitate reading comprehension ability of EFL young learners. Among these techniques and activities, drama has recently become the focus of attention in literature curriculum in many countries according to Urian (2000). However, it's so important to comprehend that drama in education system or in language learning does not mean a classical play or theater performance on the stage in front of audience. According to Munther (2013), drama was an appealing teaching strategy which encourages cooperation, collaboration, self-control, goal-oriented learning as well as emotional intelligence skills. Moreover, Wessels (1987) believed that using drama activities bring students to life by putting imaginations, emotions and feelings of learners

into the process of learning. He also outlined that students learn through direct experience. So drama makes a good chance for learners to catch the learning materials through the experience. Desialova (2009) claimed that drama makes constant demands on a person's imagination and it develops the learner's ability to think more effectively. These days, techniques of drama in education takes on great significant and according to some researchers such as Schneider and Jackson (2000), drama is a potentially powerful instrument for instruction and learning. Drama also provides specific opportunities for literacy development according to Kempe and Nicholson (2007). Furthermore, there is strong relationship between drama and reading comprehension. Tortello (2004) claimed that reading comprehension is a process that helps learners to predict and decode the meaning embedded in the text through the drama activities. During drama activity learners not only read what it is in the text but also live in it by imagination that lead to better predicting and decoding the meaning the text but also to a better comprehension of the text. There's no doubt that drama creates an good opportunity to better comprehend reading material and also help learners with low confidence and low ability to overcome the fear of making mistakes in comprehending the text. On the other hand, drama can provide motivation for EFL young learners to start learning. According to Phillips (2003) and Hillyard (2010) drama can make entertainment, fun and motivation and can provide special chances for use of language in context and is also useful in teaching and learning cross-curricular content. Furthermore, drama helps learners to improve their verbal interpretation of reading text according to Hoyt (1992).

Despite all the above-mentioned and the many other studies that have taken place so far to develop the most skillful techniques in learning and an instruction of reading comprehension and also the fact of drama as a valuable learning means, this study attempted to consider the effect of using drama on learning reading comprehension among EFL young learners.

1.1 Statement of problem

In the history of education, reading skill plays a major role in language learning classes. However, many EFL learners struggle with this skill during their learning languages in reading classes but unfortunately many of them are poor learners specially young learners with low-knowledge and low-confidence. They just read each word and even each sentence but unfortunately they are weak at comprehending the meaning of the text as whole. In order to remove the problems of EFL young learners in reading classes, using drama activities is one of the most effective means of helping learners to overcome their problems in grasping the meaning of whole text. Phillips (2003) and Hillyard (2010) stressed that drama can make entertainment, game, and motivation and also it provides the good chances for the use of languages in context. Besides, according to Tortello (2004) during a drama activity learners try to predicate and decode the meaning that is embedded in the text. Thus, the purpose of current study was to facilitate reading comprehension ability through drama activities. More generally, this study attempted to show the effect of using drama on improving reading comprehension of EFL young learners. Regarding the focus on drama activities and reading comprehension, the following null hypothesis is posed:

Drama does not lead to the improvement of EFL young learners' reading comprehension.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Reading Comprehension

Reading skill is undoubtedly a prerequisite for lifelong learning in order to be successful in academic performance and also personal life. As Holden (2004) outlined that reading was a crucial gateway to personal development, social economical and civic life. And also, Lyon (1997) stated that reading allows individuals to learn about other people, science, history, social studies, mathematics, the language arts, and the other content subjects that must be mastered in school. While reading skill is a fundamental part of an individual's personal and educational growth, it is the concept of comprehension that maybe even more significant. Furthermore, Goldenberg (2011) and Loew (1984) stated that the main goal for reading is comprehension and everything else is a means to this end. So reading comprehension is a key to success in all stage of education. Moreover, according to Anderson (2012), reading comprehension was viewed to be the core language skill to build the development of all other language skills and sub skills. Beside, Numan (2003) defined reading comprehension as a fluent process that combines information from the text with existing information to reach a meaning. Veeravagu (2010) also defined reading comprehension as a thinking process by which a reader select facts, information, or ideas from printed materials; determines the meanings the writer intended to transmit; decide how they relate to previous knowledge; and judge their appropriateness and worth for meeting the learner's own objective.

2.2 Drama and Language Learning

Nowadays, techniques of drama in education system are considered useful and according to some researchers such as Schneider and Jackson (2000) drama was a potentially powerful instrument for instruction and learning. Makita (1995) also believed that drama activities are valuable classroom techniques that encourage learners to participate actively in the learning process. Moreover, there are some studies in favor of benefits of drama in foreign language learning for example Brumfit (1991), Holden (1981), O'Neil (1985), Duff and Maley (2001), and also Phillips (2003). Booth (1985) also claimed that drama was a beneficial learning tool that provided opportunity to develop more effective learning. However, it's so important to understand that drama in education system or in language learning does not mean a classical play or theater performance on the stage in front of audience according to Wessels (1987) and also Schejbal (2006). And according to McCaslin (1990), the aim of drama in education system was understanding rather than playmaking, although a play may be made in the process or attitudes rather than characters were the main concern as the focus was on process rather than the product. Furthermore, Dougill (1987) and Taylor (2000) stated that drama techniques can satisfy primary needs of language learning in that they can create motivation, enhance confidence, and provide context in learning a language.

2.3 Types of Drama Techniques in Education System

Using drama techniques is of great value to education system. In this case, Schneider and Jackson (2000) outlined that drama is the most effective means for instruction and learning. Taylor (2000) and Dougill (1987) also believed that drama techniques can satisfy primary needs

of language learning in that they can create motivation, increase confidence, and provide context in learning a language. There are different kinds of drama activities utilized in education system that are included: drama games, simulation, improvisation, mime, frozen image building, script writing, and role play.

2.3.1 Drama games

Drama games such as ice-breakers, energizers, and brain-teasers are usually used as introductory or concluding activities in short time to bring learners in to the classroom. And According to Davies (1990), drama games can serve as a natural introduction to dramatic activities and also as preparation for role-play, improvisation, and other drama experience. The aim of these activities is to create motivation which will draw learners into meaningful learning. It is necessary to choose an appropriate time and games and also integrate them into the regular syllabus and curriculum. However, because of the limitations of the syllabus, games often cannot be used, as much as they should be. So, it may be challenging for teachers to try to add some games in the classroom in order to increase learners' proficiency of the target language (Deesri, 2002).

2.3.2 Simulation

Jones (1980) defined simulation as a case study where students become participants in an experience. The pupils have responsibilities, functions, and roles within a structured situation involving problem solving. In generally, it held to be a structured set of circumstances that mirror real life and in which participants act as instructed. And also this activities provides a specific situation within which learners can practice different communication skills such as expressing opinion, convincing others, arguing idea, group-problem solving, analyzing situations and so on, (Smith, 1984). Jones (1982) also stated that participants must step inside the function mentally in order to fulfill their responsibilities in the different situation.

2.3.3 Improvisation

Landy (1982) defined improvisation as an unrehearsed, unscripted, spontaneous set of actions in response to different directions from a teacher. This activity provided opportunities for students to not only improve their language communication skills, but also to improve their confidence, which lead to the improvement of positive self-concept (Maples, 2007). Athiemoolam (2004) also believed that the aim of the improvisation in L2 class was not to entertain learners but to provide a medium of self-expression for learners. In generally, improvisational exercises provide three main goals: learners' pronunciation develops, proper use of a grammatical structure is reinforced, and vocabulary practice is improved. It may be important to share with learners these functions in order to engage them in speaking and to increase their self-confidence so they faced obstacle without fear of making mistake (Florea, 2011).

2.3.4 Mime or Pantomime

According to Dougill (1987), mime was a non-verbal representation of an idea or story through bodily movement, gesture, and expression. It emphasizes the paralinguistic features of

communication. From point of view of the teachers, miming was a good method how to integrate even those students whose language abilities are not the best and in most of the activities want to keep back (Hillova, 2008). Moreover, Savignon (1983) claimed that this activity helped students become comfortable with the thought of performing in front of other students in peers or groups without concern for language mistake.

2.3.5 Frozen image building

According to Jarayseh (2010), it was a technique in drama education where participants firstly create frozen pictures which are later developed into animated situation involving a series of interviews with the characters incorporated in the respective image. Athimoolam (2004) believed that this technique was useful in EFL classroom because it enabled learners to work with other members as a team to make their images. He also claimed that EFL learners definitely achieve more confidence when they encouraged to share ideas and to work in groups.

2.3.6 Script writing

Davis (1990) defined scriptwriting as an activity in which learners write the text with their own words to dramatize. This activity can be done individually, in pairs, or in groups. It helps learners not only focus on learning new vocabulary but also focus on learning specific grammar feature as well as specific pronunciation. It also focuses on writing process. Furthermore, scriptwriting effectively integrates all the basic language skills. Porcaro (2001) claimed that scriptwriting provides an opportunity to integrate with other basic language skills such as reading, listening and speaking in EFL classroom. It provides a chance for thoughtful expression and exercise of imagination. This activity also involves participation by all students of the class and is quite informative and entertaining.

2.3.7 Role play

Role-play is the most well-known among teachers. There are some studies in favor of benefits of role play in language instruction for example, Huang (2008) believed that using the role-play in classroom give more opportunities to interact with the other members of group and also it helped them to improve different language skills such as listening, speaking and understanding the text. Holt and Kysilka (2006) also highlighted that role-players had clear understanding of reactions, values, feelings, and attitudes of the person in the same. That is, role-players are simply needed to act out the other roles as they think how other roles may behave. Furthermore, Elagriogoras (2010) claimed that role-play can be used for a wide variety of purposes. Frequently, role-play are used to provide an opportunity to practice the language for particular conditions, but it can also be used to practice particular areas of grammar, sets of vocabulary, functional language and even features of pronunciation. Moreover, Mollazamani and Fathi Ashtiani (2008) demonstrated in their study that the using role-play activities among EFL learners specially adolescent learners increase self-concept of learners. Role-play activities also provide an enjoyable situation in EFL classroom that lead more cooperation among students as well as better learning. In this way, Holt and Kysilka (2006) claimed that these activities can be fun and lead to better understanding of the task. They also believed that role-play activities lead to team works activities to more effective learning because these activities use a learner-

learner interactional pattern, they help EFL students to understand the importance of cooperation and to have an interest in learning.

2.4 Drama and Reading Comprehension

Since reading comprehension is a key to success in all stages of education, it must be fostered by effective methods so drama activities used in education system as an effective method to teach reading comprehension in recent years. Some studies demonstrated the strong relationship between drama and reading comprehension for example DuPont (1989) stated that drama was an effective instructional strategy rather than traditional instruction to improving reading comprehension skill. Furthermore, Herring and Smith (1993), McMaster (1998), and King (1981) claimed that drama provided learners with prior knowledge and general reading skills and most importantly, with more positive attitudes toward learning and motivation for reading. Moreover, Rose, Parks, Androes and McMahan (2000), outlined that using drama activities in the classroom enabled learners to comprehend the text and to increased their reading abilities. In addition, Kelner and Flynn (2006) stated that the relationship between drama and reading comprehension was a strong one. Other studies showed that drama helped to develop reading skill as well as other skills like (Booth, 1985; Bolton, 1983; Pleydell & Brown, 1999; Fennessey, 2006; Kornfeld & Leyden, 2005; McMaster, 1998; Jackson & Schneider, 2000). Tortello (2004) also claimed that reading comprehension was a process that helped learners to predict and decoded the meaning embedded in the text through the drama activities.

2.5 Reading Comprehension, Drama Techniques and EFL Learner

Certainly, the ability to read and the ability to comprehend the text are crucial to success in becoming good and fluent learners. According to Grab (1991) reading is an essential skill and probably the most important skill for EFL learners to master in academic environment. Regarding the importance of reading comprehension, it should be referred that it is especially the basic goal for EFL learners to attain an understanding of reading materials, enabling them to think about and react to what they read (Tierney, 2005). In addition, there are some studies showed that the application of drama techniques in education system can be useful for EFL learners. As Liu (2000) studied the application of drama in language learning to study both learners' and teachers' perspectives. Katz (2000) also affirmed that when students are involved with drama they develop a higher order thinking skills such as: inventing, generating, speculating, deducing, analyzing, selecting, refining and judging. Furthermore, Fleming (2006) added that drama was a learner-center approach so it permitted students to become active learners in learning process. Beside, Helderbrand (2003) outlined that drama techniques help pupils learn new vocabulary and expression in correct situation. Helderbrand (2003) also claimed that Drama techniques included activities which the students can learn the language and have fun at the same time, as well as, freely integrate their opinions and experience for expressing their ideas.

3. Research Methodology

The design which was used in present research was quasi-experimental design and the population of this study was 102 female students who were eighth-grade of junior secondary high

school students from Shohadaye Enghelab high school in Tehran, Iran. They were randomly selected from three classes and their aged ranged between 13 and 14. In order to perform the main goal of present study Oxford placement test was administered to determine their level of proficiency and also in order to harmonize the students. Based on the results of the test, the students who scored one standard deviation above the mean on the normal distribution were selected as the main subjects of the present study. As many as 44 students were ultimately selected to be included in this research. They were then classified randomly into control group and experimental group. Each group included 22 students. In experimental group students were exposed to drama activities in reading classes; however, in control group students were taught reading comprehension in the traditional way.

3.1 Instruments

Before the beginning of the treatment, it was necessary to make sure that the participants of the study were homogenous in their proficiency level. To accomplish the purpose of the present study two measuring research instruments were used: 1. Oxford placement test (OPT test). The researcher ensured its reliability through pilot-testing done with a group of 20. The reliability index was 0.82. 2. Key English test (KET test) was administered as parallel test before and after the treatment. 3. Reading comprehension texts were extracted from course book of students. Three EFL experts were discussed and they all verified their appropriateness. In addition, their reliability of the test was calculated on the basis of Alpha Cronbach and it came to .76.

3.2 Procedure

This study was conducted for a period of three months (12 weeks) in an environment where students received English classes (reading comprehension) for 45 minutes each week. All of the five reading passages were taught to both of groups. The passages were taught to the experimental group through some drama activities. The same process was followed for the control group through the traditional methods in education system. In order to show the effect of the two different methods of instructions on the learners' reading comprehension development, the test scores of the two groups were compared as pretest and the test scores obtained after the treatment as posttest. The data were analyzed using SPSS software.

3.2.1 Control Group Class

The teaching method utilized for the control group was based on the explanations and directions which existed in the textbook. The cases in the control group utilized ordinary common method of reading skill, which is instruction of reading comprehension was based on using mother tongue language or translation. On the other hand, learners in this group were allowed to use L1 in order to better comprehend the passages.

3.2.2 Experimental Group Class

The instruction method was used for the experimental group was based on drama activities. The following steps are the sample of this class.

- As warm-up activity teacher utilized some pictures and questions that was relevant to the topic and also some drama games such as ice-breakers to attracted the attention of

students to the topic.

- As pre-reading activity, new vocabularies and useful expressions were presented. Mime or pantomime activities were employed to assist students more in understanding the meaning of the new words and expressions. That is, teacher prepared flashcard from new vocabularies and useful expressions then shared them among the member of students group and students in each group played pantomime until the others guessed the meaning of new words and expressions.
- The passage was read by the students in a group and also script writing was created by them; that is, they made plan for creating the scene of the story and the different character of story then divided the functional roles and tried to practiced the passages. All the time of instruction, the teacher monitored them and tried to guide them.
- At the end of the class, one of the group students performed the-role play in front of other students.

Using drama activities not only provided the enjoyable situations in which students catch the meaning of the text easily but also bridged the gap between course-book text and natural use of the language. It bridged the gap between the classroom and real life situations by providing insights into how to handle tricky situation (Davies, 1990).

3.3 Data Analysis

Having collected the results, SPSS software version 20 was used for analyzing the data. In order to interpret the results of the tests exploited, the difference between the mean scores of the post-test and pre-test of the control group and experimental group were compared so as to determine if there exists any statistically significant difference. And in this study, the scores were analyzed based on the independent T-test.

4. Results

4.1 Assumption of Normality of Data

An assessment of the normality of data is a prerequisite for many statistical test because normal data is underlying assumption in parametric testing .Therefore this test was used to assure the normality of the data. Table 4.1 displays the normality of the test.

Table 4.1 : Test of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
pretest	.220	22	.007	.913	22	.055
posttest	.239	22	.002	.872	22	.008
Pretest	.186	22	.045	.919	22	.072
Posttest	.201	22	.021	.870	22	.008

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Having been ascertained that the data was normal, we embarked on parametric procedures in data analysis.

4.2 Investigating the Null Hypothesis

To investigate the null hypothesis of this study regarding the possible significant impact of drama on reading comprehension ability among EFL young learners, an independent sample t-test was run to measure the effect of drama on reading comprehension ability. In this respect the performance of students between the control and experimental group was compared and as it was expected before in the pre-test stage of study no significant difference between the two groups was observed. Table 4.2 and 4.3 display independent sample test of pre-test.

Table 4.2 : Independent Sample Test of Pre-test

		Group statistics			
Group		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score PRE	control	22	23.0000	9.45163	2.01509
	experimental	22	23.4091	9.97931	2.12760

Table 4.3 : Independent Sample Test of Pre-test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper	
Score PRE	Equal variances assumed	.225	.637	-.140	42	.890	-.40909	2.93040	-6.32289	5.50470
	Equal variances not assumed			-.140	41.877	.890	-.40909	2.93040	-6.32340	5.50522

According to figures in this table, $t=-0.140$, $df=42$, $p>0.05$, no significant difference between the two groups was observed. However, in the post-test data analysis, the results showed that with the inclusion of drama in the experimental group, there appears to be a significant difference between the group means in the post test stage. The table 4.4 and 4.5 displays the independent sample test of post-test.

Table 4.4 : Independent Sample Test of Post-test

Group statistics					
	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score POST	control	22	.0000	.00000	.00000
	experimental	22	32.8182	8.55590	1.82412

Table 4.5: Independent Samples Test of Post-test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper	
Score POST	Equal variances assumed	78.165	.000	-	42	.000	-32.81818	1.82412	-36.49941	-29.13695
	Equal variances not assumed			-	21.000	.000	-32.81818	1.82412	-36.61166	-29.02471

According to figures in this table, $t=-17.99$, $df=42$, $p<0.05$, there is a significant difference between the means of control and experimental group in the post-test stage. Therefore, the null hypothesis (drama does not lead to the improvement of EFL young learners' reading comprehension) is rejected.

4.3 Discussion

The findings of present research were in line with the results of many studies concerning the valuable use of drama techniques in improving language learning especially reading comprehension ability. For example, Schneider and Jackson (2000) claimed that drama is a valuable means for instruction and learning. He also believed that Drama activities are useful in the development of reading and writing as well as listening and speaking. Similarly, Kempe and Nicholson (2007) outlined that drama provides a good chance for literacy development. Furthermore, Kelner and Flynn (2006) claimed that there was a strong relationship between drama and reading comprehension. DuPont (1989) also stated that drama was an effective instruction means rather than traditional instruction means to improving reading comprehension skill. Similarly, Munther (2013) stated that drama was an appealing teaching strategy which encourages cooperation, collaboration, self-control, goal-oriented learning as well as emotional intelligence skills. In addition, Anna (2011) outlined that using drama activities inside the classroom has changed the role of teachers. That is the class becomes more of learner-center rather than teacher-center one. When teachers use drama techniques in the classroom, they become a facilitator rather than an authority or source of knowledge.

5. Conclusion

The present study intended to consider reading comprehension learning among EFL young learners through the techniques of drama. The main aim of this study was to examine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the application of drama activities versus the traditional techniques in reading classes in order to improving the reading comprehension ability of Iranian EFL young learners. The participants' performance revealed that drama techniques are able to develop reading comprehension ability versus tradition method. In conclusion, drama techniques in education system will be expected to replace any traditional method in order to remove the problem of young learners in understanding of reading text. In other words, drama activities were effective for the enhancement of reading comprehension ability among EFL young learners.

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