

## The Impact of Self-Selected Reading on L2 Reading Comprehension Ability of Iranian EFL Learners

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### Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the effect of self-selected reading on Iranian intermediate male EFL students' L2 reading comprehension. Seventy-two Iranian male intermediate students, selected through convenience sampling method were randomly assigned to two (experimental and control) groups. The quick Oxford Placement Test was administered to choose the intermediate level sample. To ensure the homogeneity of the participants in terms of reading comprehension, the reading section of the TOEFL® Junior™ Standard Test (2012) was conducted. Also, the same test was used as the posttest to measure the students' reading comprehension. Data was analyzed using Independent-samples T-tests as well as paired sample tests. The results indicated that the students in the experimental group that received the self-selected reading material had statistically significant difference in their pre and posttest reading comprehension scores. However, the students in the control group that received the teacher selected reading material showed a small difference, but not statistically difference in pre and posttest reading comprehension scores. It was concluded that instructing reading comprehension using the self-selected reading material resulted in a better understanding of the reading texts.

**Keywords:** L2 reading comprehension, self-selected material, engagement

### INTRODUCTION

The ability to effectively read is a key to success of students who are learning a foreign language. In traditional foreign language teaching, reading received much more attention in comparison to listening, speaking and writing because it was believed that reading highly intellectual and sophisticated texts in the target language could improve

the capability of students to learn it. That is why even nowadays; reading is the mainstay of EFL instruction in many countries.

Carrell (2003) argued that the most part of the material needed to be known in academic context is in written mode; that is why reading is highly crucial and effective reading is needed to master long term learning goals for the students about their academic purposes. There is no doubt that mastering reading comprehension helps students to progress better in a foreign language learning context since it provides them with the sufficient input which guarantees their success. As Tompkins (2009) stated, "Comprehension is a creative process and demands special attention since a number of facets should be taken into consideration if EFL students want to make satisfactory progress in their reading skill" (p. 216).

The primary goal in the act of reading is comprehension or constructing meaning from the text which can be regarded as the most adolescents' struggle (Beers, 2003; Graves, 2008; Radcliff, Cavalry, Hand & Franke, 2008). Similarly, the Comprehension Hypothesis (Krashen, 1983) argues that students in several areas in second language acquisition including beginning and intermediate language learning progress better in classes that supply more "comprehensible input." Also, Krashen (1983) has presented strong evidence that comprehension is the means by which we learn to read.

Rodriguez and Lira (1998) argued that if students are allowed to select reading materials by themselves, it will lead to an increase in their motivation and as a result will improve reading skills. This implies that self-selection gives the chance to students to develop their interest and motivation in reading and makes them positively engaged in reading. Rasinski (1988) also explained that to make the students excited about reading and have a lifelong reader, the interest and choice of students should be taken as an integral part of reading instruction program. Similarly, Follos (2007) stated that in the case of reading task in which the materials are selected by the learners, motivation and reading skills would be improved.

Also, Mercurio (2005) argued that students will find the teacher selected reading material uninteresting or un-engaging, thus they often choose not to read them. This often leads to a negative feeling about reading. One middle school student stated, "When they force you to read stuff you don't want to read, it becomes a big annoying chore" (Mercurio, 2005, p. 130).

In a study done by Gambrell (1996), a strong correlation was reported between book choices and developing intrinsic motivation. Also, Bruckman (2009) believed that if students select the books related to their personal life, they could make connections to the characters which will lead to meaningful experience creation.

One of the important advantages of self-selected reading is that it "sets a supportive tone for the instructional session" (Allen, 2007, p. 6). This means that by self-selected active reading, the students can choose and read familiar stories or books that are at their independent reading levels, and thus gradually improve the level of their reading comprehension.

Regarding the importance of self-selected and independent reading, Stairs and Burgos (2010) explained that “independent, self-selected reading” is widely supported in the empirical and practitioner-oriented literature. Also Apple (1986) describes numerous strategies for implementing independent reading. Power, Wilhelm, and Chandler (1997) published several essays on the importance of students’ choice for reading, and Atwell (2007) contends that students’ independent reading texts can be effective in making skilled, habitual, critical readers.

In academic settings, reading is assumed to be the central means for learning new information and gaining access to alternative explanations and interpretations. Being skilled in reading helps students to understand the individual sentences and the organizational structure of a piece of writing. This, in turn, contributes to a better comprehension of ideas presented on the page. Teaching students to read with a purpose can be challenging. It may take time to help students establish a purpose before starting any reading. According to Bruckman (2009), the more motivation the students have to read, the more the time they will spend. Thus, the educators should find the ways to make the students spend more on reading.

## **THIS STUDY**

Taking the findings on the self-selected reading impact into consideration, it seems that investigating the effect of self-selected reading on students’ reading comprehension capability demands much attention. However, little work has been done on self-selected reading impact in the case of Iranian learners’ reading comprehension. Therefore, this study was designed to fill in the gap of literature in this regard.

The main objective of the present study was to investigate the effect of self-selected reading material on Iranian intermediate male EFL students’ reading comprehension. To achieve the objective of the study the following research question was addressed by the researcher:

- Is there any statistically significant difference between L2 reading comprehension ability of the group selecting the materials themselves (experimental group) and the group in which the teacher selected the materials (control group)?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The participants were a group of 80 out of 96 Iranian male intermediate learners of English language (with a mean age of 18.8 years) in Rasht Navy Specialties training department/English language school who were selected through the quick placement test.

## **Instruments**

The quick placement test published by Oxford university press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (2001) was selected as the placement test and the reading section of the TOEFL® Junior™ Standard Test (2012) was used as the pre-test administered to assess the reading comprehension level of both experimental and control groups.

## **Procedure**

All the students of experimental group were asked to write about their interesting subjects on a paper. They chose ten topics based on their interests. The researchers selected series of texts based on students' interests from different sources. To avoid the impact of extraneous variables, materials of the same level for both groups were selected.

The students of the control group did not receive self-selected materials but read the teacher-selected book. The book suggested by the researcher for them was "Inside reading Book 2", written by Zewier (2009). The first five chapters of the book were planned to be presented in ten sessions for the control group. Each unit consisted of two reading comprehension tasks and a vocabulary activity. They received normal reading class instructions.

The quick placement test published by Oxford university press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (2001) was administrated as the placement test among the participants. The placement test was an authentic version and consisted of 60 questions. Only the first part of this test (40 questions) was used. This first part is divided into two sections in which the first section consists of two close tests (20 questions) and the second section consisted of 20 multiple choice vocabulary tests.

All the 96 participants took this test at the same time on the same day in 30 minutes. Based on the scoring procedure, suggested by the test designers 80 participants who scored 30-35 out of 40 were admitted in the study. Of course 8 students either didn't do the post-test or dropped out over the treatment course. So, the data were gathered from 72 participants.

Once the placement test was done, the reading section of the TOEFL® Junior™ Standard Test (2012) was used as the pre-test administered to assess the reading comprehension level of both experimental and control groups. The test consisted of 42 reading comprehension questions and the time limit was 40 minutes.

The same reading comprehension test was administrated as the post-test at the end of the treatment to both control and experimental group to evaluate their improvement.

## **RESULTS**

An Independent-samples T-test was run to see whether there was any significant difference between the reading comprehension of the participants in both experimental

and control group prior to imposing the treatment on the experimental group. Table 1 presents group statistics in the Independent-samples T-test in which the mean in experimental was 14.75 (SD = 2.09), and for the control group was 14.55, (SD = 2.0).

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of the two groups on the placement test

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental group	40	14.7500	2.09088	.33060
Control group	40	14.5500	2.02485	.32016

As it was shown in the table 2, there is no significant difference between the participants in both groups on their pre-test scores ( $t(78) = 0.435$ ,  $p = .665 > 0.05$ ), so the results confirmed the homogeneity of the groups in terms of their reading comprehension.

**Table 2.** Independent Samples Test

Levene's Test for E of V		t-test for Equality of Means							
F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of D		
							Lower	Upper	
.168	.683	.435	78	.665	.20000	.46021	-.71621	1.11621	
			.435	77.920	.665	.20000	.46021	-.71623	1.11623

The main objective in this study was to determine whether there was any statistically significant difference between reading comprehension of the group selecting the materials themselves (experimental group) and the group which went through teacher selected materials (control group). After ten weeks of treatment, all the students were asked to take TOEFL® Junior™ Standard Test (reading section only).

One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test was conducted to check the normality of distribution in the post-test scores. Table 3 shows that that the significant value is 0.259 which is indicative of the normality of distribution.

**Table 3.** Normality test result

Normal Parameters <sup>a,b</sup>	Mean	14.6500
	Std. Deviation	2.04754
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.113
	Positive	.065
	Negative	-.113
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		1.010
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.259

a. Test distribution is Normal.

b. Calculated from data.

According to table 4 the total number of the control group participants (N) was 40 in the pre-test and 36 in the post-test. The minimum score for pre-test was 10.00 while the

minimum score for post-test was 11.00. The maximum score was 17.5 and 18.00 on the pre and post-test respectively.

**Table 4.** Descriptive statistics of the data in pre and posttest for the control group

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Variance	
Control pretest	40	7.50	10.00	17.50	14.5500	.32016	2.02485	4.100
Control posttest	36	7.00	11.00	18.00	15.1806	.31380	1.88283	3.545

The mean score for the pretest and posttest of the control group has been shown to be 14.5 and 15.18 respectively. The Standard Deviation was 2.02 for the pretest and 1.8 for the posttest.

Table 5 presents the descriptive statistics of the experimental group performance on pre and posttests.

**Table 5.** Descriptive statistics of the data in pre and posttest for the Experimental group

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Variance	
Experimental pretest	40	9.00	10.00	19.00	14.7500	.33060	2.09088	4.372
Experimental posttest	36	5.00	15.00	20.00	17.5972	.21714	1.30285	1.697

As could be seen in table (5), the minimum for the pretest was 10.00, but this value was 15.00 for the posttest. Also, the maximum score for post-test was 19.00 while this value for pre-test was 20.00. For the standard deviation obtained for the experimental group, there sounds to be more variability among the pretest scores than the posttest scores. This may indicate that the participants' posttest scores become more homogenous after presenting the treatment.

Table 6 presents the descriptive statistics of the obtained data in experimental and control groups after treatment. The minimum posttest score in the control and experimental groups were 11 and 15 respectively. The maximum score in the control group was 18, whereas the maximum score in the case of the experimental group was 20.

**Table 6.** Descriptive statistics of the obtained data in experimental and control groups after treatment

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Variance
Control posttest	36	7.00	11.00	18.00	15.1806	1.88283	3.545
Experimental posttest	36	5.00	15.00	20.00	17.5972	1.30285	1.697

The mean score for the posttest of the control group and experimental group have been 15.18 (SD=1.88) and 17.59 (SD=1.30) respectively.

Another independent-samples t-test was run to compare the experimental and control group students' score on the reading comprehension posttest. Table 7 represents the

group statistics and mean differences in the mean of pretest and post test scores in Experimental and Control groups.

**Table 7.** Differences in the mean of pre and posttest scores in the experimental and control groups

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	Ex group	40	14.7500	2.09088	.33060
	Control group	40	14.5500	2.02485	.32016
Posttest	Ex group	36	16.8649	1.73064	.28452
	Control group	36	15.1806	1.88283	.31380
Mean Difference	Ex group	2.1149			
	Control group	1.3706			

\*. The mean scores' differences are computed through post-test scores subtracted from pre-test scores.

**Table 8.** Independent samples T test

F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
.425	.517	3.981	71	.000	1.68431	.42309	.84069	2.52792
		3.976	70.124	.000	1.68431	.42358	.83953	2.52909

Table 7 reveals that there was a significant difference in the mean score differences of the experimental ( $M = 2.1149$ ) and the control group ( $M = 1.3706$ ); according to table (8), ( $t(71) = 3.981$ ,  $p = .000 < 0.05$ ). So, self-selected reading proved to have a positive effect on the reading comprehension ability of the other participants. This shows that there are statistically significant differences between the experimental group and their counterparts in the control one in favor of the experimental group in the total score and this means the suggested program had a good effect on improving the reading skill of the experimental group.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between the post-test reading comprehension scores of experimental and control groups. There was a small difference but not statistically significant difference in pre and posttest reading comprehension scores of the control group. However, a statistically significant difference was found when comparing the pre and posttest reading comprehension score of the experimental group who were taught the self-selected reading material.

Thus, the findings which are in line with those of Ecklund and Lamon (2008) suggest that to have the chance in selecting the reading material leads in students' motivation and reading ability improvement. If the students have different reading materials, they will enjoy the freedom of exploring topics and will be more interested in reading (Ecklund & Lamon, 2008). Therefore, the students' attitude will be more positive

toward reading which in turn will create more engagement and more time allocation to read.

Additionally, the findings are consistent with those of Krashen (1995). As he alleged, to get the students more hooked on reading, they should be provided with a collection of materials they like to read, in fact the large collection of comprehensible input via self-selected reading material can foster the process of reading comprehension ability improvement.

As Grabe (2009) declared, the way the students become good readers is through reading a lot. Thus, one can claim that to make the students as good readers, not only a comprehensive approach to reading instruction is needed but also the students need to have plenty of opportunities to read. Actually, the students should be made more engaged, so that they would spend much more time to read.

Actually, the result of this study confirms the claim that one of the most widely documented benefits from self-selected reading material is the enhancement of reading comprehension ability as well as motivation and positive attitude toward reading which is in line with Grabe (2009) findings.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

Self-selected reading, the practice of reading large amounts of texts for extended periods of time, should be a central component of any course with the goal of building academic reading abilities. The self-selected reading of level-appropriate texts is the single best overall activity that students can engage in to improve their reading abilities, though by itself it is not sufficient for an effective reading program. The point is simple. According to Grabe and Stoller (1997) "One does not become a good reader unless one reads a lot" (p.198).

The findings of the present study regarding the effectiveness of self-selected reading material held important implications for teachers especially when teachers face problems such as the following:

- Sometimes there are limited resources such as school libraries.
- In some cases, schools have resources but they do not include books that interest students or they do not allow students to check out books to be read at home.
- There are cases in which teachers do not believe that reading large amounts of level-appropriate texts is an appropriate goal for academic reading development.
- Some teachers would like to involve their students in extensive reading but do not know how to incorporate it into their lessons.

Teachers should invite students to share interests with classmates. All class activities should be related to course goals to which students have been introduced. As Grabe (2009) asserted, "All reading tasks should have lead-in that develop initial interest" (p.192). Thus, teachers need to notice how to extend the students' interests and the self-selected reading material can be one of the best ways to do so. Also, teachers need to

select texts and adapt activities with students' reading abilities while considering the inherent difficulties of the reading.

Finally, teachers need to look for ways to help students encounter "flow" in their reading. Flow is a concept that describes optimal experiences. People encounter flow when they are engaged fully in activities consistent with their growing skills. Commonly, the tasks have well-defined goals, the means for determining success are clearly understood, and the achievement of success is not easy but is possible.

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