



Examining Academic EFL Learners' Awareness of Textuality

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Abstract

The present study sought to investigate the effects of enhancing Iranian academic EFL learners' awareness of textuality of a text on their L2 reading comprehension. To this end, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered to 120 Iranian academic EFL female learners to determine their proficiency level. Then the features of textuality of a text were introduced to two groups of experimental and control at the elementary and intermediate proficiency levels (30 members in each experimental group) while practicing reading comprehension during an academic course for three months. A reading comprehension test was conducted at the end of the 18th session. The results of Independent Sample t-test indicated statistically significant differences between the participants' reading comprehension scores in the experimental group and those in the control group. Regarding proficiency levels, the results also showed that the proficiency level had no statistically significant role in the learners' textuality awareness.

Key words: textuality, text, perception of textuality, awareness/consciousness, proficiency level

INTRODUCTION

According to Grabe (1991), reading is one of the most important skills in academic success, especially in second and/or foreign language education. Alderson (1984) considers reading in English as an essential component for almost all graduate programs. Baker and Brown (1984) consider the structure important for comprehension; they argue it is easier to comprehend well-structured text that presents information clearly and logically than poorly structured text in which key pieces of information may be separated from the text or may be only indirectly related.

Knowing how a text is organized influences the comprehension of the text. According to Carrell (1984), texts with specific logical patterns of organization improve reading comprehension. Carrell (1984) also showed that the kind of organization of a text had a significant effect in improving the amount of information that students recalled. Carrell (1991) furthermore states that the awareness of text structure is the same as the

awareness of reading strategies. To him, this awareness influences the quality of information recalled as a function of text structure.

Reading comprehension is an established requirement for all university students. In fact, one of the main objectives of teaching English at the university level is to enable students to get information from the original sources in their fields of study. In order to reach this goal, researchers have always been concerned with identifying the steps followed on the part of the reader to extract the meaning. Lotfipour (2007, p. 27) proposes that when learners are assisted "to learn effective reading strategies through handling their texts with more awareness on the textuality of the text", they will comprehend the texts better. In spite of the fact that several studies on different reading components can be found in the literature in general, and in Iran context in particular, there has been little attempt, so far, on investigating the effects of consciousness raising of textuality of a text on reading comprehension, and more specifically on finding out whether there exists any relationship between learners' proficiency levels and awareness of textuality of a text. Therefore, since the notion of awareness of textuality of a text and reading comprehension as well as its relationship with proficiency levels is still a new research area in Iran, the current research, as complementary to the previous studies in this field, attempts to the feasibility of helping Iranian academic EFL students to become more fluent readers through discovering the textuality of the text.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Research on reading now focuses on the effective reading strategies that increase students' comprehension. Of the two types of reading, namely intensive and extensive reading, intensive reading according to Day and Bamford (1998) is widely more practiced than extensive reading. Carrell (1985) states that "the research in native English reading has shown that first language reading can be facilitated by explicit teaching of various aspects of text structure" (p. 1). He conducted a controlled training study designed to answer the related question for second language reading whether we can facilitate English as a Second Language (ESL) reading by explicit teaching of text structure.

Definition and Features of the Text

Halliday (1978) defines text as a semantic unit containing specific textual components, these textual components make the text internally cohesive and functioning. Ifversen (2003) also defines text at the semantic level as constituting "a certain unity of meaning, which contains sequences of sentences (other unities are morphemes, lexemes, syntagma and sentences)" (p. 60). Sinclair (2004) puts that "Text is often described as a long string of sentences, and this encourages the practice of drawing links from one bit of the text to another" (p. 13).

Crane (2009) concludes what makes any text meaningful and coherent has been termed texture which is the "basis for unity and semantic interdependence within text and a text without texture would just be a group of isolated sentences with no relationship to

one another" (p. 131). Eggins (2004, p. 85) refers to text as "sequential implicativeness" which proposes that language follows a linear sequence where one line of text follows another with each line being linked or related to the previous line. This linear progression of text creates a context for meaning.

The structure of the text has been identified to have a crucial role. Voss and Silfies (1996) emphasized the importance of structural aspects of a text when the reader has little knowledge about the content of the text. New Zealand Council for Educational Research (2010) asserts that the ability to visualize the features of a text type, and how those features are arranged, is vital to the construction of meaning while reading. In other words, understanding texts at a much deeper level or understanding how writers construct meaning through the features they choose to use and the way they arrange those features occurs on the part of the reader. They consider this understanding as fundamental to reading comprehension.

The belief that the ability to identify and state the main idea is central to meaning construction is generally agreed by researchers and theorists (Van den Broek, Lynch, Naslund, Ievers-Landis, & Verduin, 2003). Therefore, it is no wonder as Graves (1986) states that learning to identify the main idea has long been central to the elementary school reading curriculum and beyond. Moreover, "getting the main idea" according to Fialding and Pearson (1994) has been regarded as a litmus test of successful reading comprehension and, therefore, taught as a major reading strategy to bridge the gap between less able readers and more able readers. In other words, the ability to identify the main idea delineated between strong and weak readers.

Wang (2009) viewed the main idea on two hierarchical levels of global and local in which the global main idea referred to the central idea of a multiple paragraphs, expository text, and the local main idea was defined as the most important point about the topic of an individual paragraph. The local main idea was differentiated in terms of visibility to the reader. The explicit main idea was stated in the paragraph, hence visible to the reader; the implicit main idea was suggested in the paragraph, hence less visible to the reader. He, further, in curricular instructional implications on the main idea, referring to the crucial influence of the text structure on the global main idea, claims that college reading instruction should make the students sensitive to the text structure to trace the global main idea from local main ideas.

Wang (2009) maintains that text genre was another factor that tended to influence the interpretation of study results about the main idea. Graesser, McNamara, & Louwerse (2003) state that in an expository text, the text structure is crucial to revealing the author's thread of ideas, so that the connections between important points are realized through the text structure.

Cohesion, to be the first standard of textuality as claimed by De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) in the handout of King Saud University, has been defined in a number of ways. Structure in text is provided by grammar; therefore, cohesion is considered to be outside of the structure. Parvaz and Salmani-Nodoushan (2006) in the review of

literature part refer to it as "a set of meaning relations that exist within the text. These relations are not of the kind that links the components of a sentence and they differ from a sentential structure. The discovery of these meaning relations is crucial to its interpretation. Therefore, cohesion connects a string of sentences to form a text rather than a series of unrelated statements.

Text Structure and Teaching Reading Comprehension

Englert, Stewart, and Hiebert (1988) state that "a factor that affects students' ability to comprehend and compose expository text is their awareness of text structures" (p. 143). According to Armbruster and Armstrong (1993), "explicit teaching about structure enables students to differentiate among common structures and to identify the important information in a text in a coherent, organized way" (p. 41). Williams (2005) on the relationship between the text structure and reading comprehension states that when students are not familiar with the types of text structures which are found in their expository textbooks, they would have some problems comprehending the text. Dymock (2005) also points out that to make students skilled readers who use a variety of strategies to comprehend written text, comprehension strategies should be thought explicitly. Dymock (2005) sees one of the reasons for the students not being able to comprehend the expository text as not seeing the basic structure of text on the part of the students. Pressley and Allington (2014) concluded that students need direct instruction in how to go about comprehending more complex expository text structures. Finally, Williams, Stafford, Lauer, Hall, and Pollini (2009) on the positive effects of instructing the text structure by referring to the results of Reutzel, Smith, and Fawson (2005) instructional study which was designed with the purpose of comparing different approaches to the teaching of comprehension strategies to second graders, found that the approach which led to better comprehension of science instructional text was the one that included attention to text structure; and therefore, supporting the potential effectiveness of a focus on text structure. To sum up, the present study aims at answering the following questions:

1. Do reading comprehension scores relate to the instruction of textuality of a text?
2. To what extent do EFL learners in different proficiency levels benefit equally from the textuality of the text?

METHOD

Participants

The participants of the study were 120 academic EFL learners from Sheikhbahae University in Isfahan, Iran. They were selected based on convenience sampling method. Sixty students formed the control group and 60 others the experimental group who received treatment based on the features of textuality of a text (Table 1). Sixty students were in the elementary group (30 students in the experimental group and 30 in the control one) and sixty in the intermediate one (30 in each group of control and

experimental). Participants were all females with Persian as their native language. Their ages varied between 18 and 24.

Table 1. The General Scheme of the Participants' Groups and Number

Female Academic EFL Learners		Number	Total
Experimental group	Elementary	30	60
	Intermediate	30	
Control group	Elementary	30	60
	Intermediate	30	
Total			120

Instrumentation

In this research study, three instruments were used for collecting quantitative data. The first one was the *Quick Placement Test* version 1, a type of *Oxford Placement Test (OPT)* to determine the proficiency levels of the participants. Another instrument used in the study was eleven selected passages from *Select Readings-Intermediate* by Lee and Gundersen (2001) in order to assess the reading comprehension skills of the participants. Finally, the third instrument used was the *Nelson-Denny Reading Test* as an index of the standard test for reading comprehension test scores.

Quick Placement Test

Quick Placement Test was used to place the participants. According to Allen (2004), the OPT is a highly economical and easy to administer the test, which can be scored objectively and provides consistently meaningful scores from level 1 (beginner) upwards. Its level chart shows level relationships which represent broad statistical correlations. Therefore, it offers a very useful general guide as to where learners are on a number of widely recognized scales of overall language proficiency.

Nelson-Denny Reading Test Passages

Nelson-Denny Reading Test as a standard test for the reading comprehension test was used to assess the consistency to which the results of the teacher-made reading comprehension go.

Reading Passages

The other instrument that was used in this study was a battery of reading comprehension questions from *Select Readings-Intermediate* by Lee and Gundersen (2001). This book was chosen because it is one of the familiar and frequently used reading sources by the teachers in language schools and reading courses and universities in Iran. This series as claimed by the author can be used in a reading course to build reading skills as well as in a conversation course as a springboard to discussion based on the reading topics. It is designed for high school, college, and university students. One of the other positive features of the series is that the books have been compiled for learners of different proficiency levels.

Data Collection Procedures

The main aim of the researcher was to introduce the features of textuality of the text to the learners to see the effects, if any, on their reading comprehension. It should be mentioned that the techniques toward identifying these features were presented in a systematic way. In addition, the opportunities were provided for the learners to practice the techniques to help the learners consolidate these techniques. The learners were also required to complete the tasks provided after reading the texts. Class time was mainly spent on skill building.

In order to teach the textuality of the text, some strategies were used. These strategies could help the learner notice and see both the principal and supportive synapses and as a result, perceive the textuality of a text. To make EFL learners more independent and self – regulatory, the instructor raised their awareness about locating the main verb of any *t*-unit in the text, the type of VF (Verb Frame) it belongs to, the six Verb Frames, introduced by Lotfipour (2007), and number and type of satellite elements it requires, locating the head word as well as the pre- / post- modifying elements of these satellite elements, identifying the inter-sentential and intra-sentential connectors, the themes, and the topic sentences. The learners' consciousness about the following structures was raised: modals, the first verb in double-verb constructions, verbs in 'that' clauses, tag questions, 'it + be + adjective' constructions.

Since one of the aims followed by the universities is to introduce the organization of the paragraph to the adult language learners, textual/ rhetorical structures were also introduced. They consist of the 'theme' of a T-unit, how changes in the theme can affect the meaning, the topic sentence, and supportive sentences in a paragraph, as well as the organization of paragraphs in a section. In introducing the organization of paragraphs, the outline of the texts was presented to the learners as well. As many reading selections follow an outline, the learners were introduced to the general format of the outline. Since the reading selections provided for the learners followed simple outlines, the learners were able to summarize them easily. The techniques for practicing main ideas were as follows:

1. The learners were required to read each paragraph provided for them quickly and circle its main idea.
2. The learners were given either the topic sentences to locate the related paragraphs in the reading selection or a list of topic sentences to choose from for a specified paragraph.

Since one of the most important skills for students to learn is the art of reading faster, the researcher worked on improving reading speed as well. After introducing most features of the textuality of the text, the instructor paired the students and had them

face each other. The instructor had one learner set the time for the other while they read. She had the learners concentrate on just the number of MVs as a clue for the number of T-units. The learners pointed out the number of T-units, main verbs, and then the topic sentences and supporting sentences in each paragraph to their partner as quickly as possible. They had to explain to their partners why they chose a sentence as a topic sentence. This way, they could recognize the topic sentences, even if the texts were difficult to understand since the point was not to understand everything but get the main idea.

In order to determine the proficiency level of the learners, the learners were required to take the OPT test which took 30 minutes and had 60 items. To identify the learners' reading comprehension, after 10 weeks of instruction of the features of textuality of a text to the experimental group, the comprehension test was administered. Students were asked to read the texts and answer the questions. On average, three questions were answered about texts after reading each text. A mark was attributed for each correct answer. The maximum score for this battery of test was 60 points. One point was awarded for cohesion (logical sequencing) and one point for coherence (compatible with the text that had been read) to texts compliant with the above-mentioned criteria. An extra point was awarded to the summary that was presented in text format. Another question requested that a less relevant detail or aspect of the text be identified. The objective was to investigate whether the respondents were able to select elements of the text according to predefined criteria. This ability is also revealing of the level of comprehension proficiency. The total performance of the participants was calculated by summing the points obtained for the questions. A pilot study was done with 40 EFL learners who were selected randomly. Moreover, the average time estimated according to their returning of the answer sheets was about 60 minutes. The calculated validity of the test was reported to be $r = 0.826$. The instructions needed for answering the questions were given to students during real class time. The data were collected during the fall and winter semesters, 2009 -2010, and it took nearly four months to complete data collection.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16. In this study, the results of reading comprehension tests for two groups of control and experimental were compared. The sample sizes were 60. In both groups, half of the participants were in elementary proficiency level and half of them were in intermediate proficiency level. As for the data analysis, in relation to the first question, descriptive statistics was used to show the frequencies and percentages. For the second research question, a *t*-test was used to see whether students' comprehension scores differ according to their consciousness of the textuality of a text.

RESULTS

To answer the first question, descriptive statistics of the scores obtained by the participants of both groups of control and experimental on the first reading comprehension test was applied. The Quantitative data analyses performed involved

the following statistical procedures: At first, in order to investigate whether the data are normal and to determine the type of the test, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test (K-S) was used. All the significant values of each group in the study (Elementary1 = .221, Intermediate1 = .148, Elementary2 = .959 and Intermediate2 = .168) were greater than 0.05. Therefore, we are sure the data were normal; the statistical tests were decided on and implemented (Independent Sample *t*-test).

It should be pointed out that in order to investigate the null hypotheses of the study, the two proficiency levels of elementary and intermediate were dealt with separately. Then the findings were compared. To statistically analyze the data, two steps were taken: Step 1: First, the descriptive and inferential statistics of both groups of control and experimental at the elementary and intermediate levels for the first reading comprehension test are presented.

The descriptive and inferential statistics of both groups of control and experimental at the elementary level for the first reading comprehension test show that the mean score and standard deviation of the first reading comprehension test were 26.75 and 6.957, respectively, for the control group and $M = 33.33$ and $SD = 7.372$ for the experimental one. The mean in the control group is lower. The standard deviation in control group indicates less deviation than that of the experimental group.

The same procedure was used for both groups of control and experimental at the intermediate proficiency level to be compared. The means of control and experimental groups were 24.99 and 39.39 respectively. The standard deviation of the control group was $SD = 8.034$ and it was reported as $SD = 6.289$ for the experimental group.

For elementary group, we can see that the mean in the control group is lower and the standard deviation in control group is less than that of the experimental group. In intermediate group, we can see that the mean in the control group is lower and the standard deviation in the experimental group is less than that of the control group.

In order to investigate the first null hypothesis (H_0 : There is no significant difference between the means of both groups of control and experimental), Independent Sample *t*-Test is used. Before administering this test, Levene's Test for Equality of Variances of two groups of control and experimental is used. The related information is shown in table 2.

Table 2. Elementary Independent Samples Test

		<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i> (2- tailed	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Elementary1	Equal variances assumed	.154	.696	3.559	58	.001	6.588	1.851	2.883	10.292
	Equal variances not assumed			3.559	57.806	.001	6.588	1.851	2.883	10.292

Independent Samples Test shows that the variances of the groups are equal. *P*-value obtained from the *t*-test ($p = .001$) is indicative of the fact that the difference between the participants' reading comprehension scores in the groups of control and experimental at the elementary level is significant and we can see that the mean of experimental group is higher than control; therefore the first null hypothesis is rejected for the elementary level. In the following table (Table 3), the inferential statistics is presented for the intermediate level.

Table 3. Intermediate Independent Samples Test

		<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Differenc e	Std. Error Differenc e	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Intermediate 1	Equal variance s assumed	1.36 0	.24 8	7.73 1	58	.000	14.400	1.863	10.67 1	18.12 9
	Equal variance s not assumed			7.73 1	54.84 1	.000	14.400	1.863	10.66 7	18.13 3

Statistically speaking, the results presented in Table 3 above show that the difference between scores of the learners in the first reading comprehension test is statistically significant between the control and experimental groups at the intermediate level ($p = .000$). This difference at mean is about $M = 14.40$. Therefore, we can say that the mean of the experimental group is higher than control.

Since the first reading comprehension test was teacher-made and hence mostly focused on the features of textuality of a text, the results were compared based on the scores of a standard reading comprehension test named *Nelson-Denny Reading Test*. The results of the second test are presented in the following tables. Considering the learners' awareness of the features of textuality of the text, the researcher conducted *Nelson-Denny Reading Test* in order to assess the learners' general reading comprehension on a standard test. Then all the above procedures were repeated for the data obtained from the standard test as Step 2.

Step 2: The number of the participants in each group was 30. The mean of the experimental group ($M = 36.23$) is greater than that of the control group ($M = 27.97$) at the elementary level.

In addition, the standard deviation of the experimental group's scores is greater than that of the control one.

Table 4. Elementary Independent Samples Test

		<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed)	Mean Differenc e	<i>Std. Error</i> Differenc e	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Elementary 2	Equal variance s assumed	1.66 4	.20 2	4.60 0	58	.000	8.267	1.797	4.669	11.86 4
	Equal variance s not assumed			4.60 0	51.66 1	.000	8.267	1.797	4.660	11.87 4

As shown in Table 4, the statistical results show that the difference between the participants' scores at the elementary level in two groups of control and experimental was statistically significant because the *p* value was lower than .05 ($p = .000$).

At the intermediate level also, the same results were obtained. Mean and Standard Deviation in the experimental group were greater than those of the control group (Means of control and experimental were respectively $M = 28.60$ and $M = 36.53$). The standard deviation of the control group was $SD = 4.591$ and it was reported as $SD = 8.080$ for the experimental group at the intermediate level for the standard test.

Moreover, by rejecting the H_0 based on Table 5 ($p = .000$), it is concluded that there is a statistically significant difference between the means of the participants' scores in both control and experimental groups at the intermediate proficiency level.

Table 5. Intermediate Independent Samples Test

		<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed)	Mean Differenc e	<i>Std. Error</i> Differenc e	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Intermediate 2	Equal variance s assumed	4.59 5	.03 6	4.67 6	58	.000	7.933	1.697	4.537	11.33 0
	Equal variance s not assumed			4.67 6	45.95 5	.000	7.933	1.697	4.518	11.34 9

In order to determine the extent to which the scores on the first reading comprehension test conducted by the teacher were associated with the scores of the standard test, the correlation coefficient was calculated. The following table shows the coefficient of correlation between the two sets of scores.

Table 6. Correlations of the Scores of Two Tests

		method 1	method 2
method 1	Pearson Correlation	1	.650
	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>		.000
	<i>N</i>	120	120
method 2	Pearson Correlation	.650	1
	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>	.000	
	<i>N</i>	120	120

Table 6 shows the correlation between the two sets of scores was 0.650 ($r = .65$). This means that the two tests were positively correlated.

DISCUSSION

The results of the statistical analyses revealed that textual awareness has a significant effect on enhancing EFL learners' reading comprehension since the participants in the experimental groups significantly outperformed the participants in the control groups. Therefore, the hypothesis of the study was rejected.

Acquiring a reading ability in children begins years before they enter the educational system. It enhances by the educational years in school and universities by the assistance of their instructors (Farrell, 2008). However, related to learning how to read in a second or foreign language, Farrell believes that this experience would be very different. There would be some considerable differences between learning how to read in the first and the second or foreign language. In the face of the fact that reading needs some necessary skills, such as, text recognition, grammar knowledge, and sufficient vocabulary knowledge, some scholars believe that reading is a complicated process which involves a series of cognitive actions that work together to create meaning. Consequently, giving awareness on how to use their cognitive abilities is to assist them in improving their reading ability (Namjoo & Marzban, 2012).

The results of the current study are in line with the previous studies that have been conducted in this realm. Although most of the researchers believe that the students need a vast knowledge of vocabulary and grammar to have better reading comprehension and summarizing capability, some of them consider that awareness of the text structure has a significant effect on improving EFL learners' reading comprehension (Namjoo & Marzban, 2012). This vantage point is confirmed by the results of the current study since the participants could significantly improve their reading comprehension ability by acquiring the awareness of the text structure.

Zarrati, Nambiar, and Maasum (2014) investigated the effects of text structure awareness in promoting strategic reading among EFL readers. They stated that metacognitive awareness of text structure and overt teachings of textual features facilitate students' reading comprehension. These results are also in consistent with the findings of the present study. The process of comprehending the reading by the participants was facilitated by improving their textual awareness. Therefore, it can be

noted that in order to instruct EFL learners to have suitable reading comprehension, improving their textual awareness is necessary and EFL instructors must take this issue into account.

CONCLUSION

This study was carried out to investigate the effect of awareness of textuality of a text on academic EFL learners' reading comprehension performance. With regard to the first research question, that is, whether the performance of the language learners differed when they were explicitly instructed the features of textuality of a text, the results of the study suggest that the instruction of textuality of a text affects performance on reading comprehension, at least when elementary and intermediate language learners are involved. According to the results of the study, it can be claimed that the majority of Iranian EFL academic learners in the sample showed that the students' awareness of text structure has a positive effect on their comprehension of texts. Specifically, students in elementary and intermediate English proficiency levels whose linguistics knowledge is low are likely to slump their reading comprehension when they are introduced to the features of the textuality. These results point to the possibility that the decline in reading performance observed among undergraduates may be explained, at least in part, by deficits in the reader's knowledge relevant to the structure of the texts. In connection to the second research question, namely, whether learners learning English in different proficiency levels benefit equally from the textuality of a text, the result indicated that the proficiency factor had no effect on the performance of the students, at least when the elementary and intermediate language learners are involved.

Based on these findings, we can maintain that students might become more proficient in the identification and application for meaning in English through familiarity with the textuality to find the semantic pattern in the text. By providing additional insights into the relationships between a variety of these reader-based differences and into the effects of awareness of the textuality of the text variable, it is hoped that this study's results contribute to the understanding of the L2 reading process. It is further hoped that the findings related to text will encourage the early and frequent instruction of textuality of a text rather than the grammaticality of a sentence.

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