

Empowering Iranian EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension Using the Tenets of Genre Analysis

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Abstract: *This study was an attempt to compare genre-based approach to teaching reading with traditional approaches. To this end, 80 female EFL learners were selected through administering the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT). The participants were randomly assigned to an experimental group and a control group. A reading pretest was administered to the whole population as the pretest. Ten reading passages were taught using the tenets of genre based instruction, while the same reading passages were taught to the participants in the control group traditionally. After 10 sessions of instruction when all the passages were taught, the participants sat for a posttest. The research hypothesis according to which using genre-based approach to teaching reading comprehension does not significantly improve reading ability of Iranian EFL learners was rejected at 0.05 level of significance. The outcome of this study can be used by English language teachers to consider the importance of a genre-based instruction.*

Keywords: *Genre-Based Instruction (GBI), Reading comprehension, Iranian EFL learners, Reading comprehension, Genre analysis*

I. Introduction

One of the main purposes of any language course is instructing reading skills to the students. Reading comprehension is one of the crucial skills fundamental for any language learner including the high school students. Accordingly, the students need to improve their reading comprehension in order to further their studies in higher education or many projects that the teachers ask them. So far, a number of methodologies have been introduced in teaching English language in general and reading comprehension in particular. Among various approaches in teaching reading comprehension (e.g. critical reading, critical discourse analysis, skill model, etc.) genre analysis seems to be prominent. Review of literature shows that implementing a genre-based instruction in teaching reading skill influences the reading abilities of the students positively (e.g. Alidib, 2004; Shishehsaz, 2006).

Genre analysis refers to "a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre" (Swales, 1990. P. 58). In other words, genre means "the regularities of staged, goal oriented social processes" (Martin, 1993) in which "the typification of social and rhetorical action" (Miller, 1984, p. 159) were recognized. In fact, the main purposes of genre are given to the "shared purpose rather than on similarities of form or some other criteria" (Swales, 1990, p.46). Bhatia (1993) argued that the quintessence of a genre "is primarily characterized by the communicative purpose(s) that it is intended to fulfill" (p. 13). He emphasized that

(The) communicative purpose(s) determine the structure of the genre; should the purpose(s) change in a significant way, the genre would be different. Bhatia continues his elaboration with the observation that 'communicative purpose is a fairly reliable criterion to identify and distinguish sub-genres' (Bhatia, 1993, p. 14).

Genre-based approach, also called genre-based instruction (GBI), is a current trend to teaching language skills including reading (Wennerstrom, 2003). According to Osman (2004) some distinct characteristics of GBI include the teaching of specific genres commonly required of students in the academe, and the overt teaching of the language patterns and social conventions of these genres which heighten students' awareness of the structure of these genres and subsequently enhance language skill. There have been studies conducted that prove the efficacy of GBI. For instance, Swami (2008) evaluated the effectiveness of GBI and found out that learners' exposure to the approach lead to acquisition of knowledge and awareness of the convention of the genres which consequently help enhance their confidence and develop their positive attitude towards language learning. It seems that genre familiarity and reading comprehension have a close relationship. Hence, this study utilized an innovative model to improve the English reading comprehension of the Iranian high school students.

Iranian EFL learners, specifically at high school level, mostly have problem in dealing with reading passages. So it is the teacher art to provide good support and to choose the best way to teach reading. One of the major problems is that the EFL teachers usually fail to apply an appropriate method to teach reading. Despite the demand for proficient EFL readers it seems that the outcome of the Iranian high school graduates is not sufficient in terms of reading ability and except some top students the rest of the graduate students are not proficient enough in dealing with texts.

Improved reading comprehension skills can positively impact many facets of students' academic performance. Students who have effectively read and understood reading assignments are better prepared for class, leading to improved class participation and more accurate and complete notes. Performance on exams and quizzes may be greatly improved as students become more proficient and effective readers. Students' interest and motivation in a subject is often fostered when one understands the reading assignments. In addition, as students gain proficiency in reading, self-esteem improves. After describing the shortcomings of teaching reading to Iranian high school students, the researcher conducted the present study to shed light on some of the reading problems associated with different approaches to teaching reading.

Therefore, the present study was administered to fill this gap in the literature by reporting on a study which compares genre analysis approach to teaching reading to Iranian high school students with traditional approaches to teaching reading. In fact, many theories and methods have so far been planted in reading classes to make the learners capable of mastering this macro skill; still many high school students lack enough proficiency to enrich themselves in this case. To this end, the following research hypothesis was formulated:

H0: Using genre-based approach to teaching reading comprehension does not significantly improve reading ability of Iranian EFL learners.

II. Review of Related Literature

In the following section a glance is taken to the existing literature on genre-based instruction and reading along with other skills. Haria and Midgette (2014) made an investigation to examine the effect of genre-based instruction on reading comprehension strategy of the students. To this end, seven fifth-grade students with reading difficulties were selected as the subjects of their study who were instructed in terms of identifying, summarizing, and analyzing the argumentative texts. The results of their study revealed improvement on the students' proficiency in terms of identification of argumentative elements and summarization of arguments.

Rozimela (2014) is a researcher who investigated the relationship between genre awareness and reading comprehension of EFL students. Thirty four students were the subjects of his study. The subjects were asked to recognize the genres of 10 different texts from five diverse genres as well as to answer a 60-item test which examined their knowledge about genres and an 80-item test on reading comprehension of the exposed texts. His study illustrated that there is a significant relationship between genre awareness and reading comprehension of EFL students. Furthermore, the results of his study showed that the students with higher genre awareness significantly outperformed on reading comprehension.

Sadeghi, Taghi-Hassani and Hemmati (2013) aimed to investigate the effects of genre-based instruction on ESP learners' reading comprehension. The participants of the study included 116 junior and senior B.S students (both males and females) at Islamic Azad University of Kurdistan, majoring in biology. Participants were randomly assigned into 2 groups of control and experimental. The instructors taught the experimental group (genre-group) based on the genre and the control group (non-genre-group) based on the traditional method of teaching ESP, prevailing in Iranian universities. To meet the aim of the study, the instructors administered one 30-item proficiency test of English and two 30-item standard tests of English reading comprehension to the participants. The results of the reading comprehension test, analyzed through a t-test and independent samples test suggested teaching based on genre had a significant role in enhancing ESP learners' reading comprehension ability and the descriptive and inferential statistics showed learners improved significantly in reading comprehension compared with that of non-genre-group.

Shabani Minaabad and Fallahe Khoshkholgh (2012) attempted to scrutinize the effect of genre-based pedagogy on English for specific purpose learners' reading comprehension as well as the interaction between their reading comprehension achievement and their general English proficiency. To examine the corresponding hypotheses, a sample of 150 BA students attending English for specific purpose classes in the field of computer engineering was selected. On the basis of the subjects' scores on a standard GEP test (i.e. a 1961 version of Michigan test), those subjects who scored between 50-100 on the Michigan test were assigned to high proficiency level and those subjects who scored between 0-50 were considered to low proficiency level. Then each level again randomly divided into an experimental group and a control group. The instructional procedures went on six sessions before the posttest was administered. Due to the specific nature of the research questions, a factorial design was considered to be appropriate. Thereby, a two-way ANOVA was selected for the analysis of the results. The investigation reveals that genre-based pedagogy has a significant effect on English for specific

purpose learners' reading comprehension and proves the interaction between English for specific purpose learners' reading comprehension achievement and their general English proficiency.

Qi and Rui-ying(2004) reported on an experimental study to evaluate the effects of genre-based reading instruction on Chinese learners in an EFL context. An experimental group consisting of 40 students took the genre-based reading course, which lasted for two months, 3 hours a week. Another group of 40 students attended the traditional reading course in which no explicit genre-based instruction was given, but students were assigned the same materials to read in class. Both classes were taught by the same teacher for the same amount of time. A comparison of the results of both student groups in the pretest and posttest of the reading course reveals that the students in the experimental group improved noticeably in terms of reading speed and their understanding of genre features (the structure, style and communicative purpose of the genres); however, their comprehension of the content was similar to the controlled group. The article concludes by indicating that genre-based instruction was an effective approach to improve students' reading speed and overall understanding of the discourse.

Khatibi (2014) examined the effect of genre-based tasks on EFL learners' speaking performance and probed whether genre-based tasks may empower EFL learners to perform better on speaking tests. He also explored whether the effect of genre-based tasks on speaking ability of EFL learners varied across different age groups, i.e. teenagers (13-16 years old) and young adults (24-27 years old). To this end, some generic based consciousness-raising tasks (CRT) were adapted from the model proposed by Benedict (2006) to develop control of a genre used as the treatment procedures. Two different speaking tests of different genres (e.g. recount, report, review, etc.), used as pretest and posttest, were administered to 120 senior university students majoring in English language translation. The results indicated that consciousness-raising tasks significantly affected EFL learners' speaking performance. However, the effect of generic-based CRTs did not vary across different age groups. Overall, the findings provided empirical support for the facilitative effect of generic-based consciousness-raising tasks on speaking performance of EFL learners.

III. Methodology

Participants

From among Iranian high school students studying in Isfahan high schools, 80 females (all girls with no woman) were selected through administering the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT).The participants were all in grade three and their age ranged between15-17. Their mother tongue was Persian and in order to control other factors, they were chosen from the students taught by the same teacher. All participants' field of study was mathematics.

Instruments

A corpus consisting of 10 authentic reading comprehension passages which were retrieved from <http://www.readworks.org/>, the Nelson test, a reading test as pre and posttest, and a model of genre-based approach, were utilized.

Procedures

The participants were randomly assigned to an experimental and a control group. At the outset of the study, in order to choose and make sure of the homogeneity of these participants in terms of their general language proficiency, the OQPT was run among the student population studying at high schools in Isfahan. In order to make sure of the homogeneity of the participants in terms of their reading comprehension, a reading test was run among them.

The treatment for experimental group was as follow: first, the teachers activated students' background knowledge about the main idea of each passage, by clarifying the main idea of the passage and by identifying their different sections they helped students to get the conceptual knowledge of the texts. In fact, different aspects of the genre of the exposed materials (collocations, genre types, lexical and grammatical features as well as the similarities and differences among the exposed texts, were discussed in the experimental group).

For the control group, the instructional procedures were different. For this group, the usual method of reading instruction used in Iranian language classes was practiced. To this end, the mentioned corpus was presented without highlighting the hierarchical and generic structure of the text. The passages were introduced in three phases of pre reading, while reading and post reading stages. Each of the passages from the corpus was introduced to the students without any special background about the previous or forward moves. These activities were followed by teaching the meaning of words, explaining the structural points where needed and translating different parts without any attempt to establish coherence between different parts of the passage. Both groups underwent a course of 10 session, one for each passage, during five weeks. In fact, the study was conducted in 12 sessions, with one session for the reading pretest and one for the reading posttest. After all the passages were taught, the participants sat foe a posttest.

IV. Results

In order to find out if the participants of the two groups were homogeneous in terms of their reading performance, an independent sample t-test was run between the pretest scores of experimental and control groups, the results of which are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest scores	Exp.	40	52.1250	8.12779	1.28512
	Ctl.	40	51.2000	6.32537	1.00013

As the results in Table 4.3 show, the mean score of the experimental group is 52.12, and that of the control group is 51.20. This shows a mean difference of .88 which seems not to be significant. However, to ensure the lack of significance of the mean difference, an independent samples t-test was run the results of which are presented in Table 2.

		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
Pretest scores	Equal variances assumed	1.781	.186	.568	78	.572	.92500	1.62843	-2.31695	4.16695
	Equal variances not assumed			.568	73.563	.572	.92500	1.62843	-2.32003	4.17003

Based on the results given in Table 2, the level of significance is .572 which is higher than the identified level of significance (.572 > .05). This way it could be concluded that there was no significant difference between the performance of experimental and control group at the beginning of the study. The participants in experimental group were exposed to reading texts, through the tenets of genre-bases approach. After the treatment was conducted, the participants sat for a reading posttest, and then the results were compared. In order to find out which statistical procedure suits the analysis, at first the posttest scores of experimental group were exposed to tests of normality of distribution. Table 3 illustrates the results of distribution normality of the experimental group in post-test. Then, a paired samples t-test was run between the pre and posttest scores of the experimental group. The results are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Exp. Pretest	52.1250	40	8.12779	1.28512
	Exp. Posttest	67.5000	40	16.06397	2.53994

As it can be seen in Table 3, the mean difference of the participants in experimental group in pre and posttest is 15.38, with the mean score of pretest being 52.12 and that of posttest being 67.50. The difference between the two groups is considered to be statistically significant. Figure 1 shows the differences in pictorial format.

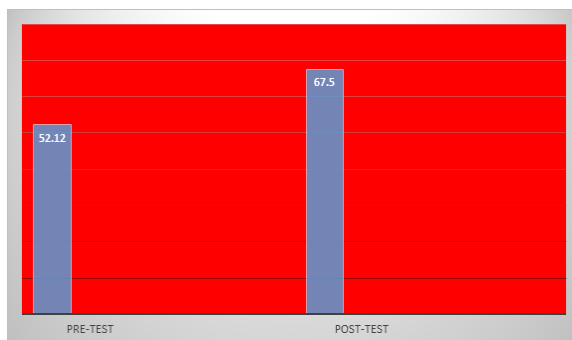


Figure 1. The Mean Difference between the Performance of the Experimental Group in Pre and Posttests

The difference between the performances of the two groups is crystal clear in Figure 1. The second column, representing the posttest is taller than the first one. However, to be more objective for this claim a *paired samples t-test* was run on the mean scores of the experimental pre and posttest scores. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4.
The Results of Paired Samples t-Test of Experimental Group in Pre and Posttest

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Exp. pretest Posttest	-1.53750E1	17.56554	2.77736	-20.99273	-9.75727	-5.536	39	.000

The significance level in Table 4 is .000 which is smaller than the identified level of significance .05 (.000<.05). This expresses the fact that the difference between the performance of the experimental group in post and pretest is statistically significant. This leads to the rejection of the first null hypothesis of the research. Differently stated, when tenets of genre based approach are planted in reading classes, this leads to more desirable outcomes.

V. Conclusion and Discussion

During the last twenty years, reading has attracted much attention. Generally, reading has been perceived as the most needed skill in students' higher academic pursuit (Jordan, 1997, p.145), and this is true of Iranian students. Flower dew and Swales (1994, as cited in Hyon, 1996), primarily outlined the genre approach with focus on the formal distinctiveness of genres in order to help students gain understanding of the communicative purposes and linguistic features of texts that they are required to write in their professional discourses, while these experts paid less attention to the specific roles of content and their social environments (p. 695). They regarded genres as devices for examining and teaching the written texts that students needed to master in specific settings.

Therefore, an assigned genre seems to serve as an influential tool for both the learning and teaching of reading for both students and teachers. Furthermore, the genre approach encourages students to participate in the world around them, to comprehend reading as a tool that they can utilize, and to realize how readers manage content to promote logical organization. It also allows students to become more flexible in their thinking and eventually to realize how authors organize their reading comprehension. These debates shed more light on the significance of reading skills. Thus, it is hoped that the present study resolves some of the above-mentioned controversies related to reading comprehension of EFL learners.

In so far as the question of the study is concerned, the results of an independent samples t-test showed that there was a significant difference between the performance of the participants of the experimental group and the control group in terms of reading comprehension, when genre-based was applied to teach reading.

The reason can be found in the advantages presented by Hayland (2004) who believes that genre-based instruction makes it clear what is to be learned to facilitate the acquisition of reading comprehension. Furthermore, Hayl and (2004) also believes that provides a coherent framework for focusing on both language and contexts. In addition, genre-basedensures that course objectives and content are derived from students' needs. Another reason for that may be due to the fact that genre-based gives teacher a central role in scaffolding student learning and creativity, and this approach provides access to the patterns and possibilities of variation in valued texts. The above mentioned arguments support the effect of genre-based teaching of reading from different dimensions. In short, as the goal of reading a text is to do something with the information, the results of the present study revealed that genre-based teaching of reading has a significant and positive impact on promoting EFL learners reading comprehension ability.

The results of the present research are in line with the study conducted by Haria and Midgette (2014) who made an investigation to examine the effect of genre-based instruction on reading comprehension strategy of the students. The results of their study revealed improvement on the students' proficiency in terms of identification of argumentative elements and summarization of arguments. In addition, the results of this study lend support to the study by Rozimela (2014). In that study the researchers tried to find out the relationship between genre awareness and reading comprehension of EFL students. His study illustrated that there is a significant relationship between genre awareness and reading comprehension of EFL students. Furthermore, the results of his study showed that the students with higher genre awareness significantly outperformed on reading comprehension.

In addition, this study is in the same line with the study by Sadeghi, Taghi Hassani and Hemmati (2013) who aimed to investigate the effects of genre-based instruction on ESP learners' reading comprehension. The results of the reading comprehension test, analyzed through a t-test and independent samples test suggested teaching based on genre had a significant role in enhancing EFL learners' reading comprehension ability and the descriptive and inferential statistics showed learners improved significantly in reading comprehension compared with that of non-genre-group.

Finally, the results of the present thesis support the findings of Shabani Minaabad and Fallahe Khoshkholgh's (2012) research in which they attempted to scrutinize the effect of genre-based pedagogy on English for specific purpose learners' reading comprehension as well as the interaction between their reading comprehension achievement and their general English proficiency. The investigation reveals that genre-based pedagogy has a significant effect on English for specific purpose learners' reading comprehension and proves the interaction between English for specific purpose learners' reading comprehension achievement and their general English proficiency.

On the other hand, against this study, some proponents have indicated that the genre approach is more suitable for learners at beginning or intermediate levels of proficiency in a second language rather than those at advanced levels, in that it releases students from deep anxieties about their reading tasks. When people learn something new, they commonly want to find some cases that they can refer to or consider as samples. There is no doubt that reading tasks can be more demanding than other language skills, so students at low level of proficiency absolutely need something that they can rely on since they have little exposure to English reading.

In addition, the findings of this study are against some ideas, for instance it is said that despite genres' beneficial roles, there are two demerits about the genre approach. One is that it neglects the skills required to produce content, and the other concern is that it ignores learners' self-sufficiency (Byram, 2004, p. 236). Finally, Bawarshi (2000) said that, at its best, genre based approach helps learners to identify and interpret literary texts, while at its worst; it interferes with the learners' creativity (p. 343).

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