



The effect of collaborative practice on EFL learners' reading comprehension

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Abstract

This study investigates the effect of collaborative practice on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension. Reading comprehension is a crucial skill for language learners, yet many Iranian students struggle with understanding texts effectively. Collaborative practice, an approach based on social interaction and cooperative learning, has been proposed as an effective strategy to enhance comprehension. This quasi-experimental study involved 78 Iranian high school students from Shahid Bahonar High School in Khaje, East Azarbaijan, Iran. Participants were divided into an experimental group, which received collaborative reading instruction, and a control group, which followed traditional reading instruction. Pre-test and post-test scores were analyzed using independent samples t-tests. The findings indicate that the experimental group outperformed the control group in reading comprehension, suggesting that collaborative practice significantly enhances learners' ability to understand and interpret English texts. The study provides pedagogical implications for EFL instructors seeking to incorporate collaborative learning into their reading instruction.

Keywords: Collaborative practice, reading comprehension, Iranian EFL learners, cooperative learning, language acquisition

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1. INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill in language learning, essential for academic success and effective communication. It enables learners to process, interpret, and analyze written texts, fostering a deeper understanding of language structures and meaning. However, many Iranian EFL learners struggle to comprehend complex texts because of cognitive and affective barriers, such as limited vocabulary, weak inferencing skills, and lack of motivation (Davoudi & Yousefi, 2015). Traditional reading instruction in Iranian EFL classrooms predominantly emphasizes individual reading strategies, which, while beneficial, may not fully address these challenges or equip learners with the skills needed to navigate complex texts effectively.

Collaborative reading practice, grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, holds that learning is a socially mediated process in which interaction and peer engagement are crucial to cognitive development. This approach fosters a cooperative learning environment in which students actively construct meaning through discussion, questioning, and shared problem-solving. Research shows that collaborative reading strategies enhance comprehension by encouraging deeper cognitive processing, promoting critical thinking, and increasing student motivation (Djiwandono, 2018). Furthermore, collaboration enables learners to support one another by offering explanations, clarifications, and alternative perspectives that contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of texts.

Despite its proven effectiveness, collaborative reading remains underused in Iranian EFL classrooms. Many teachers continue to rely on conventional reading instruction methods, often because of time constraints, large class sizes, or unfamiliarity with collaborative techniques. However, integrating structured collaborative reading activities, such as reciprocal teaching, literature circles, and jigsaw reading, can provide learners with meaningful opportunities to enhance their comprehension skills in an interactive and engaging way.

This study examines the impact of collaborative reading strategies on the reading comprehension of Iranian high school students. Specifically, it seeks to determine whether students who engage in collaborative reading activities show significant gains in comprehension compared with those receiving traditional reading instruction. By investigating the potential benefits of collaborative practice, this research aims to offer insights into effective pedagogical strategies that can bridge comprehension gaps and foster a more interactive, student-centered learning environment in Iranian EFL classrooms.

2. Literature Review

The study is grounded in the sociocultural theory of learning, which holds that social interaction is crucial to cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). Collaborative learning enables learners to engage in meaningful dialogue, negotiate meaning, and collectively build comprehension skills. Previous studies have shown that collaborative strategies, such as peer discussion and cooperative reading tasks, enhance reading comprehension. Grabe (1991) highlights the role of interactive reading in improving retention and comprehension. Similarly, studies by Beasley (1990) and Dole & Liang (2006) emphasize that cooperative learning techniques lead to deeper text processing and improved engagement.

Palincsar and Brown (1984) introduced reciprocal teaching as an effective method for enhancing comprehension through guided dialogue. Slavin (2014) demonstrated that structured cooperative learning significantly improves student engagement and academic achievement. Additionally, Ghaith (2018) found that collaborative reading activities foster not only comprehension but also learner autonomy and

motivation in EFL contexts. Despite the benefits of collaborative learning, its application in Iranian EFL contexts remains limited due to teacher-centered methodologies and a focus on rote memorization (Ahmadpour, Bagherzadeh, & Valipur, 2014). This study seeks to bridge this gap by implementing and evaluating a structured collaborative reading approach.

2. METHOD AND MATERIALS

The study included 78 EFL students (ages 16-18) from Shahid Bahonar High School in Khaje, East Azarbaijan, Iran. Participants were selected using convenience sampling. All students were in 12th grade and fulfilling their diploma requirements.

A quasi-experimental design was used, consisting of two groups:

- Experimental Group (n = 39): Received collaborative reading instruction.
- Control Group (n = 39): Followed traditional reading instruction.

Both groups took a pre-test before the intervention and a post-test afterward. The study lasted for eight weeks. Instruments for data collection included Nelson Language Proficiency Test for checking participants' homogeneity, Reading Comprehension Pre-Test to measure baseline comprehension levels, and Reading Comprehension Post-Test to assess improvements after the intervention.

A pre-test was administered to both groups to compare their reading comprehension skills before the treatment phase. After the pre-test, the experimental group engaged in collaborative reading tasks, including peer discussions, reciprocal teaching, and group analysis. The control group, by contrast, received teacher-led reading instruction using a traditional approach.

After the treatment phase, to compare the group performance, post-test of reading comprehension was conducted to evaluate changes in reading comprehension.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 21. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare pre-test and post-test scores. Table 1 illustrates the groups' performance on both tests. As shown, prior to the treatment, the experimental group had a mean of 12.5 and the control group had a mean of 12.4. After the treatment phase, both groups showed an increase in their means, 19.4 and 14.7, respectively.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Reading Comprehension Scores

Group	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)
Experimental Group	12.5 (2.0)	19.4 (2.3)
Control Group	12.4 (2.1)	14.7 (2.0)

Independent samples t-tests revealed a statistically significant improvement in the experimental group's reading comprehension scores. These results suggest that collaborative practice significantly enhances reading comprehension compared to traditional instruction.

Table 2

Independent Samples T-Test Results

Group	t-value	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Experimental Group	10.4	77	0.000*
Control Group	3.8	77	0.000*

$p < 0.05$

These results suggest that collaborative practice significantly enhances reading comprehension compared to traditional instruction.

3. CONCLUSION

The study's findings confirm that collaborative practice positively affects Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension. The experimental group showed substantial improvement in post-test scores, underscoring the effectiveness of peer-based learning strategies. Collaborative practice fosters deeper engagement with texts, enhances critical thinking, and enables learners to draw on shared knowledge and perspectives.

EFL teachers should integrate collaborative reading tasks into their instruction to foster interactive learning. Cooperative strategies, such as reciprocal teaching and peer discussions, can improve comprehension and learner engagement.

Future studies should examine the long-term effects of collaborative reading and its impact on other language skills, such as writing and speaking. Additionally, research could investigate how digital collaborative tools enhance EFL reading comprehension.

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