The Effect of Interactive Read-alouds on Language Learners' Development of Writing Skill

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The aim of the current study was to investigate the effect of interactive read-alouds on Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' development of writing skill. To attain such a goal, forty-six high-school students were selected and sampled as the experimental (n=23) and control (n=23) groups. The writing section of Key English Test (KET) was used as the pretest to assess participants' entry-level writing ability. Reading was taught to the experimental group using interactive read-aloud technique while the control group received conventional silent reading instruction through a three-phase cycle of pre-reading, reading, and post-reading. Writing was taught to both groups through a seven-phase process of pre-writing, writing, response-providing, revising, editing, post-writing, and evaluating. After the treatment, the writing section of KET was used as the posttest to explore both groups' improvement in writing. The data were analyzed by a one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). The result revealed a significant difference between the experimental and control groups' writing ability after controlling for the entry-level writing in favor of the experimental group. The findings of the study underscore the application of integrated skills pedagogical paradigm in language instruction and support the proposition that oracy and literacy are indispensably interrelated and have complementary role in language acquisition.

Key words: Reading, Aloud, Interactive, Writing, EFL

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is an essential skill for both first and second language learning. While reading in one's first language (L1) constructs literacy skill, it plays a crucial role for EFL learners as the source of comprehensible input (Eskey, 2005). Reading is viewed as one of the most important language skills as it not only opens doors to understanding other people's ideas and perspectives, but also improves readers' imagination and critical thinking skills.

Reasons to get students read in English classes vary. Primarily, "extensive exposure to linguistically comprehensible written texts can enhance the process of language acquisition" (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 273) and leads to a better learning outcome. Further, reading is a good model and material for writing; it functions as a motivator for in-class oral discussion about a certain topic; and is a meaningful context for presenting new words and grammatical structures (Cunningworth, 1995). Also, reading promotes independent and self-directed language learning as it is a key component of lifelong learning (Carrell & Grabe, 2002; Dreyer & Nel, 2003). It is suggested that learning English is a natural by-product of reading and the process of learning enhances if learners read comprehensible English texts (Barnett, 1989; Nuttall, 1996). Therefore, one main goal of teaching reading in English language teaching (ELT) is

helping learners enjoy reading and gain automaticity and independence for reading unfamiliar and authentic texts.

Coincidental with the development of psychological perspectives, the way the printed and aural data are processed has inspired heated debates among language educationists and researchers during the last decades. The journey from behaviorism and cognitivism to functionalism and interactionism has had a huge effect on the development of different types of approaches and strategies to teach receptive skills in EFL classes. As for reading, at first reading comprehension was viewed to be a passive skill or a process that basically involves decoding linguistic elements, and comprehension was equal to the efficient accumulation of these basic lexical and structural units. However, more active role for readers in processing the written text has been proposed in recent years by the emergence of sociocultural views towards language and language learning. In this framework, the dynamic interaction between the reader and the text is underscored and meaning construction takes place when the reader utilizes his/her background knowledge and experience of the topic as well as the structural and lexical clues of the text. As a result, meaning does not exist in the text, but is created and resides in the mind of the reader.

It is suggested that with children or language learners who are expanding their vocabulary stocks and literacy

skills, the process of interactive reading be done orally. Interactive reading-aloud is one line of research dealing with collaborative learning within the framework of social constructivism (Powell & Kalina, 2009; Brown, 2007). It is simply defined as "storybook reading in which children are actively involved, asking and answering questions and are making predictions rather than passively listening" (Powell, & Kalina, 2009, p. 2). In the process of reading-aloud students are first encouraged to read and then they are provided with the feedback in the process of reading and conversing with the teacher or peers. The teacher and the class act as a catalyst by helping students gain or activate the necessary background knowledge, remember or learn important words or structures, deploying different types of reading strategies especially asking and answering questions, and arousing their interest and motivation to read and finish a text.

Reading stories together in an interactive way makes the reading process more attractive and motivating for students. Also, integrating literature into the cycle of teaching makes students interested in the foreign culture and increases their linguistic awareness. The reasons for reading stories to students is abundant: increasing the interest and motivation to read, building listening skills and strategies, improving students' imagination and critical thinking, expanding vocabulary stock, creating an enjoyable learning atmosphere in the classroom, and changing passive readers to active partners of an interesting conversation. Benefits of stories in language classes are evident in the literature as well. Reading and listening to stories is an effective teaching tool to improve teacher effectiveness and the quality of teaching (McDrury & Alterio, 2003) and can help students overcome their problems with understanding difficult concepts (Sadik, 2008). Telling or being told stories helps students to gain better communication skills and develop their listening and reading comprehension while enjoying the class time (Huffaker, 2004). Integrating stories into the curriculum can promote students' concentration (Mostafazadeh, 2010) and motivation (Groce, 2004), and lower their learning anxiety (Rahimi & Soleymani, 2015).

While there is an almost rich review of literature on the role of interactive read-alouds in teaching language arts, and improving oracy and motivation in L1 education, there is a dearth of research on the role of this technique in improving learners' language skills in EFL setting. The purpose of the current study is thus to integrate interactive read-alouds into teaching writing to lower-intermediate language learners through reading stories and examine the effect of such instruction on the development of their writing skill. The study is specifically designed to find an effective and joyful way to make teaching writing as a process less laborious for language teachers and less tense and more attractive for foreign language learners. The main research question of the present study is:

Does interactive reading-aloud have any significant effect on the development of language learns' writing?

Reading-while-listening

Reading and listening are called the receptive skills of language as both involve similar cognitive processes initiated by visual and/or auditory stimuli (Otto & Richard, 1970) and ending with comprehension/understanding of a message. The principles of information processing, involvement of cognitive layers of the brain, applying decoding strategies, and reconstructing message are almost the same in both skills.

The very first step of both reading and listening comprehension is decoding the message by performing bottom-up processing of linguistic information, and to focus on every details of the language input. This data-driven, text-based, and "stimulus-driven" (Howard, 1983, p. 291) type of information processing is usually contrasted with top-down, meaning-based and "conceptually-driven" (Howard, 1983, p. 292) processing of information. Language learners are required to have certain amount of topic familiarity to be integrated with the input in order to make sense of what they are processing. The background knowledge or schema is "a structure in semantic memory that specifies the general or expected arrangement of a body of information" (Caroll, 2008, p. 176). Schemata are created in human's memory based on their previous experiences with the world and people and are constantly made or modified by new experiences. Activating an appropriate proportion of schemata helps people to not only understand the text faster and more effectively but to predict what exists in the rest of the message. Schemata construction and automation has been suggested to considerably affect the cognitive load of learning tasks and help language learners do familiar tasks more fluidly with less effort (Sweller, Van Merrienboer, & Paas, 2019).

Due to these advantages, many researchers have overemphasized the priority of top-down processing over bottom-up processing particularly in cognitive psychology. However, it is noteworthy to mention that comprehension depends on the integration of both bottom-up and top-down processes as when the knowledge of the listeners or readers is not sufficient on one level, they rely on the information available at another level to compensate what they cannot process (Peterson, 2001). Furthermore, relying on one of these processes separately would hinder comprehension or lead to misunderstanding.

In spite of the above-mentioned similarities between reading and listening comprehension, certain differences exist between the two skills. Full details of such differences are described by Olejink (1987) as follows:

First, in reading there is a written code which must be translated into a verbal code which in turn must be processed as information; whereas, in listening, auditory stimuli are already present in a somewhat familiar verbal code. Second, in listening, the auditor has the aid of a speaker's intonation and timing, whereas a reader has no such aids. Third, in listening, the auditor may have to adjust to a speaker's dialect before he can understand the verbal code; this is not a problem for the reader. Fourth, unlike reading, a lisener cannot go back to recheck what he has heard; he must rely solely on his memory. Fifth, a listener does not have control over the rate of presentation. With written stimuli, a reader can adapt his rate to the difficulty or unfamiliarity of the message he is processing, but, because a spoken message is ongoing, a

listener cannot. Finally, a listener cannot skim or preview the message he is to hear to discover if it suits his puprose; he must expose himself to the entire message, whereas a reader can selectivey concentrate on those sections of print which are most suited to his puprose (p. 278).

Due to the relationship between reading and listening, the experts' attention has been drawn to methods of teaching reading with listening such as story-reading and interactive read-alouds. Helping learners to read and listen simultaneously in a meaningful way is one of the main benefits of reading-while-listening (Day & Bamford, 1998).

Interactive reading-aloud is a form of reading-while-listening in which learners actively interact with the teacher or peers through asking and answering questions (Ouellette, 2006). Interactive reading-aloud gives an opportunity to teachers and students to interact with each other in the process of reading that is conventionally done silently and individually. The students are engaged in meaning construction and exploration of how reading process takes place (Barrentine,1996). In this process, teacher reads a story from the printed text, while sometimes s/he stops to ask questions, answer students' questions, or give explanations that help students remember what happened in the story, predict what may come next, or associate a time that something similar to that event happened to them (Paul, 2011).

Read-aloud helps students construct the required knowledge for successful reading and develop their vocabulary and comprehension (Press et al., 2011). It is "an effective way to introduce students to the joy of reading and the art of listening … while developing their vocabularies, experiential backgrounds, and their concepts of print and story" (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004, pp. 8-9). One advantage of teaching in this way for teachers is that they can show students how reading strategies such as predicating, visualization, and making judgments can be applied in reading a text (Scharlach, 2008) and how the written and spoken language are different (Hedrick & Pearish, 2003). Also, teaching reading by read-alouds helps learners focus on longer chunks of language (Amer, 1997), enjoy both reading and listening, optimize their cognitive processing, and understand the message faster and sooner with less cognitive load. In doing so, students are engaged in an ongoing dialogue with others, when they can speak out their insights, understandings and misunderstandings; and express any questions they have about the text topic and meaning, while the teacher clarifies ambiguities with his/her way of expression, facial gesture, tone of voice, and interaction with students.

Reading and Writing

Under the influence of communicative language teaching, research on teaching language skills has focused on integrated instruction where four macro language skills are taught integratively to promote meaningful use of language in communication. This approach is also reflected in the way instructional materials are designed and presented in the form of meaning-focused input and output where activities of four macro skills are appropriately interwoven (Nation, 2008).

As for reading and writing, the two skills entail a common core of knowledge and similar cognitive processing (Koon, 2008), "mutually reinforce each other and, therefore, promote learning when they are integrated in classroom activities" (Giesen, 2001, p. 5). Comprehensible and meaningful input provided in reading materials can influence the way meaningful output is created through writing process by retrieving information once processed (Krashen, 1984; Nation & Macalister, 2010). Research on teaching the two skills together indicates that "reading and writing instruction can be usefully combined" (Shanahan, 2006, p. 177) and writing could be improved by extra readings (Koon, 2008) as there is interplay between the achievement levels of reading and writing skill (Stotsky, 1984). Based on Travers (1990, pp. 59-60) readers and writers share five kinds of knowledge when they compose including information knowledge (knowledge of the world, the schemata, the construction system), structural knowledge (the structure of the discourse), transactional knowledge (knowledge of communication), aesthetic knowledge, and process knowledge (knowledge of strategy deployment). It is also suggested that the quantity and quality of reading before writing can influence the way learners write (Giesen, 2001) suggesting that the degree of comprehension while reading leads to more coherent and organized texts (Travers, 1990, p. 61). A few instructional models such as read-like-a-writer approach (Spandel, 1996) have combined reading and writing in a way that large quantities of written texts are presented to students to aid them to write about a certain topic and make them more successful writers. In this way they become aware of the underlying components of writing process, write more confidently about a specific topic, and overcome their fears and anxieties of writing in a foreign language.

METHOD

Participants

Forty-six grade 10 high-school students participated in the study. They were all female and ranged in age between 15 to 16. The participants were randomly assigned into experimental (n=23) and control (n=23) groups.

Instrument

Parts 6-9 of Key English Test (KET) were used as the pre- and posttests. Parts 6-8 include 20 items and demand a combination of reading and writing skills and Part 9 is a test of continuous writing. The details of the focus of each part of the test are as follows (KET Content and Marking, p. 12):

Part 6 Reading and writing down words (focus on vocabulary and spelling).
Part 7 Reading and writing down words (focus on structure and vocabulary).
Part 8 Reading and writing down words (focus on content).
Part 9 Reading and writing a short message (focus on communication of message, appropriacy, accuracy, vocabulary).

Based on KET scoring guideline, one mark is given for each correct answer in Parts 6-8. There are five marks for Part 9 and the written material is corrected based on criteria such as the clarity of the communicated message and errors in spelling or grammar. To estimate the reliability of Parts 6-8, KR20 was used and the reliability index of the test was found to be 0.92. Inter-rater reliability for Part 9 was found to be .89.

The Materials

As interactive reading aloud instruction is based on story-telling, 10 interesting stories from children's literature were selected. The readability indices of the texts were calculated and the texts that were up to 25% above the current level of students' reading ability were included in the experiment. The texts were reviewed by two English teachers for appropriacy of the topic and content.

Procedure

Both control and experimental groups participated in KET that assessed their entry-level writing ability prior to the study. The experimental group received interactive reading-aloud treatment according to Fisher et al.'s lesson plan (2004) in ten 45-minute sessions. The treatment was based on a three-phase cycle of dialogic reading, role-play and discussion. The steps are as follows:

1. The teacher starts with fluent oral reading of the texts in the classroom.
2. The teacher animates new words, expressions, and the events in the whole process of reading-aloud.
3. The teacher pauses in some parts of the reading-aloud and asks critical questions from the learners. She helps the students to interact with each other focusing on the text and the questions.
4. The students connect this kind of reading-aloud to independent reading and writing.

The control group received conventional silent reading instruction consisting of pre-reading, silent-reading and post-reading. The reading starts with a preparation section where the teacher introduces the topic of the passage and gives some helps on vocabulary and grammar. Then the students read the texts silently for the gist of meaning. At the end, the teacher asks some comprehension questions.

Writing was taught to both groups through a seven-phase process of pre-writing, writing, response-providing, revising, editing, post-writing, and evaluating (Weigle, 2014). Phases of the writing process are depicted in Table 1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to answer the research question of the study and investigate the effect of interactive reading-alouds on participants' development of writing, a one-way Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used. Participants' scores on writing pretest were used as the covariate in this analysis.

As Table 2 shows, the result of ANCOVA revealed a significant difference between two groups in writing posttest [$F_{(1, 43)} = 20.1$; $p=.000$; partial eta squared=.319]. The result of descriptive statistics (Table 3) revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the posttest, indicating that interactive reading aloud instruction has caused a higher level of writing ability among the experimental group in comparison to the conventional reading instruction.

The finding corroborates evidence from other studies on the relationship between listening and reading from one hand, and reading and writing from another. It is suggested that for elementary and pre-intermediate students who just learn to read and write, listening can be an important help for developing language and communication skills. Students who are not good at reading prefer to learn by listening rather than by reading and skillful readers usually prefer reading to listening when they learn new concepts (Clark, 1977). When students are trained to comprehend by listening to certain types of genres, the learned skills and strategies will transfer to reading (Sticht, 1972). This is referred to as transferring of comprehension skills meaning that "one's ability to listen, then, can enhance one's ability to read, which, in turn, can enhance one's ability to revise

Table 1. Phases of the writing process
(Adapted from California State University, Stanislaus, n.d, as cited in Weigle, 2014, p. 227)

Phase	Definition	Examples of teaching and learning activities
Pre-writing	Structured activities to provide motivation, content, fluency, language practice	Structured language practice, readings, films, discussions, brainstorming, webbing, outlining
Writing	First draft	Focus on content, getting ideas on paper
Response	Reaction of a reader or listener	Peer review, partners or small groups, teacher conferences, written feedback
Revising	Reseeing or rethinking content; second draft	Recognizing, adding details, adding support for arguments
Editing	Refinement and attention to writing conventions, including grammar and vocabulary; third draft	Checklists, grammar logs, exercises, proofreading practice
Post-writing	What students and teachers do with finished pieces	Display, share online, compile class writing into a booklet
Evaluating	How teachers and/or students assess student writing	Rubrics, conferences, self-evaluation, portfolios

Table 2. The result of ANCOVA

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean square	*F*	*Sig*.	Partial ES
Corrected model	752.9	2	376.46	17.5	0.000	0.449
Intercept	851.0	1	851.09	39.6	0.000	0.479
Writing pretest	48.58	1	48.587	2.26	0.140	0.050
Group	433.1	1	433.10	20.1	0.000*	0.319
Error	924.0	43	21.489			
Total	3014.	46				
Corrected total	1676.	45				

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of writing posttest

Group	Mean	SD
Control group	1.4783	1.855
Experimental group	9.3043	6.384

which, finally, has significant implications for the production of coherent discourse" (Clark, 1977, pp. 87-88). This improvement would then be reflected in both speaking and writing products.

The finding of the study shows how oral and written language skills are interrelated and can have mutual effects on each other in improving literacy. More specifically, however, this finding underscores the fact that reading and writing can be taught integratively. "Reading and writing are intimately connected and .... one cannot easily be taught without the other" (Weigle, 2014, p. 226). However, it should be noted that if good reading/writing skills are going to be developed, writing instruction cannot be replaced by reading instruction and vice-versa (Shanahan, 2006). As a result, in EFL classes where teachers do not have enough time to spend on teaching writing (both mechanics and process), combining writing with reading can be a helpful teaching method. Further, as students become more interested to write when their teachers use indirect methods of writing (Hirvela, 2004), the tedious job of writing process can be eased by listening to stories via the medium of reading texts. Research on writing shows that going through the process of writing from planning to submitting the final product is very difficult for EFL learners and most of the time they develop negative attitudes towards writing classes (Rahimi & Miri, 2015). As the finding of this study shows, integrating learner-centered and interactive techniques into writing instruction can increase students' motivation and ability to write. It is known that writing and reading skills are "complementary elements of literacy rather than separate, discrete skills" (Weigle, 2014, p. 226) and the problems students have with writing can be traced back to the problems they have with reading (Peck, 2005). In order to integrate reading in writing instruction and help language learners write better, the teachers can engage students in active understanding of the text and its structure by reflecting and discussion (Peck, 2005). One way to do that, as the finding of this research showed, is through interactive reading-alouds. Another important point to be considered here is the effect of story-reading and listen-

ing on students' improvement of writing skill. Spandel and Stiggins (1996) believe that apart from its aesthetic value, exposing students to literature influences their writing quality by reading and loving others' work before they start to compose their own texts. Reading good literature can impact students' writing skill and the writing tasks teachers expect from their students depends on the type of models the teacher has provided them with as "the writing classroom is built on the foundation of literature" (Spandel & Stiggins, 1996, p. 10).

CONCLUSIONS

The current study examined the impact of interactive read-alouds on EFL students' writing. The findings revealed that teaching reading with read-while-listen can have a significant effect on the development of students' writing ability. This finding bears valuable implications for EFL materials developers to incorporate story reading into the curriculum and let students enjoy the whole process of reading while their reading/writing/listening abilities are developing. It also suggests to EFL teachers to change the boring and silent atmosphere of teaching reading to an interactive and energetic process by utilizing interactive reading aloud instruction. Mingling storytelling and listening with reading and writing will make the language class an enjoyable and unforgettable experience for students that will lead to more durable learning. In addition, integrating interesting and appropriate topics of discussion (here stories/narrations of printed texts) based on which students can develop their writing skills, may reduce negative attitudes of writing process among EFL learners and help them become more skillful writers.

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