The Effect of the Instruction of Discourse Markers on Iranian EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

Discourse markers` instruction is currently receiving an increasing amount of attention in foreign language learning. The current quasi-experimental study was an attempt to determine the impact of discourse markers` instruction on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL junior high school female students. To do so, a total of 45 female junior high school students were selected randomly from Nasl-e-Payam Shahed Junior High School in Urmia. Having homogenized by pretest, participants were assigned into either experimental or control group. Then, the experimental group received treatment regarding discourse markers; however, control group only approached the traditional teaching method. Following ten sessions for both groups, all subjects participated in a posttest. Finally, the statistical analysis of the collected data confirmed that experimental group outperformed control group on reading comprehension test. To sum up, the findings of this study revealed that discourse markers` instruction has a significant effect on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL junior high school female students. The present study has implications for teaching grammar that learners' improvement in reading comprehension could be enhanced through discourse markers` instruction.

Keywords: Discourse markers, grammar, reading comprehension, syntax

Introduction

Nowadays English plays the role of lingua franca in worldwide relation (Mohseni & Gholestani, 2015). Therefore, by increasing people who speak or learn English, it is essential to conduct research in various skills of this language (Sadeghi, & Javanmardi, 2015). Among four skills of language, reading skill is one of the essential factors in language learning that should be taken into account. Furthermore, in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) country like Iran that English has little or no role in EFL learners` lives, English texts are the most important source of input. Reading is one of the fresh areas for research every time.

Reading has always been a fresh topic for research considering different aspects such as reading strategies and their effects on language skills (Al-Darayseh, 2014; Kashef, Damavand, & Viyani, 2012; Kashef etal, 2012; Khalaji & Vafaeeseresht, 2012; Khezrlou, 2012; Mehrpour, Sadighi, & Bagheri, 2012; Ravari, 2014; Soleimani & Hajghani, 2013). According to Schmitt (2010), interest in L2 reading research has increased in the past 15 years. Part of this interest is due to the fact that reading abilities are important for academic learning, and that L2 reading represents the primary way for learning beyond the classroom. He continues that "without doubt, L2 reading research and instruction will grow in importance in the coming decade." (p. 215).

Brown (2007, p. 357) mentions that with Keneth Goodman`s (1970) research, L2 specialists began to investigate on language reading. As to know what reading is, it`s better to define reading from the scholars` point of view. Schmitt (2010) believes that "a definition of reading requires some recognition that a reader engages in processing at the phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and discourse levels, and also engages in goal setting, text-summary building, interpretive elaborating from knowledge resources, monitoring and assessment of goal achievement, adjusting processing to enhance comprehension and repairing comprehension processing as needed." (p. 216).

Students, according to Chastain (1988) should be aware of their comprehension level while reading; also they should learn how to create meaning by asking appropriate questions (p. 227). One important factor which should be taken into account in reading is the context of reading. According to Ziahosseiny (2011), written texts are heavily dependent on context which encodes a high degree of shared knowledge between the reader and the writer. Also, Cook (2008) argues that "reading, like speaking, occurs in a context rather than in isolation. The meaning of a text is not found in the sentences themselves, but is derived from the previous knowledge stored in the reader`s mind and the processes through the reader tackles it." (p. 121).

In addition, according to Gee (2011), every language has its own distinctive grammar (p. 50). Grammar is a branch of linguistic, as Gee (2011) states, that holds an important place in second and foreign language teaching and learning. Teaching grammar means to represent how language works. In this way, it provides the learners with an improvement in language learning process and increases their comprehension of the language. Grammar is the most unique aspect of language (Cook, 2008, p. 18). Youle`s (1996) statement about grammar is that all words of a language "can only be combined in a limited number of patterns." (p .87). Therefore, "we need a way of describing the structure of phrases and sentences which will account for all of the grammatical sequences and rule out all the ungrammatical sequences. Providing such an account involves us in the study of grammar." (p. 87). Paltridge (2012) argues that in recent years discussions of grammar have moved from sentence-based perspective to a discourse-based perspective. He argues that linguists such as Halliday and Hasan have worked on discourse grammar from cohesive and unity of text perspective (p. 113). Discourse grammar, according to Schmitt (2010), means the "analysis of the functional roles of grammatical structures in discourse. Here we are using discourse to mean the organization of language at a level above the sentence." (p. 23). Meanwhile, readers` background knowledge of discourse affects their reading comprehension. Schmitt (2012) insists that beyond the background knowledge of the text content, empirical research has confirmed that texts have rhetorical organizational patterns and that readers` background knowledge of text structure and discourse cues affect their second or foreign language (p. 225). The role of grammar in second and foreign language reading comprehension has been explored by many scholars (Akbari, 2014; Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011; Mart, 2013; Tütüniş, 2012; Zhang, 2012).

Furthermore, grammar is traditionally subdivided into interrelated parts of study – morphology and syntax together (Radford, 2004). Radford (2004) mentions that morphology refers to the study of how words are formed out of smaller units (called morpheme). On the other hand, syntax, as Radford (2004) claims, refers to the study of sentence structure, i.e., the study of the way in which phrases as well as sentences are structured out of words. More precisely, syntax is the study of the nature of grammatical operations by which the words are combined together to form the overall sentence structure (p. 1). All human languages have syntactic structure which

means that a language does not just consist of words, but that the words group together to form phrases and sentences (Tallerman, 1998, pp. 22-23).

Considering the primary purpose of the current study which was to investigate the effect of discourse markers` instruction on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL junior high school female students, this study was supposed to answer the following question:

1- How does discourse markers` instruction affect reading comprehension of Iranian EFL junior high school female students?

Method

Design

This study has incorporated a quasi-experimental research design, including a pretest, treatment, and a posttest. The design of the present study is illustrated as the following table:

Table 2

Design of the Study

Groups	Pretest	Treatment	Posttest
Control Group	01	-	01
Experimental Group	01	X	01

As it is depicted in Table 2, students in one class formed experimental group and received treatment, whereas another group served as a control group. However, the control group did not receive any treatment. The data for this study was of a quantitative one which was collected through the pretest and posttest.

Participants

In the present study, 45 participants were selected from Shahed Nasl-e-Payam Junior High School in Urmia, West Azarbaijan. Participants` age was between 15 and 16. All participants were Iranian third grade junior high school female students and were native speakers of Turkish. They were selected and then divided into two groups based on their scores on pretest, one as control group and the other one as the experimental group. The sample distribution is shown in Table 1 as below:

Table 1

Sample Distribution

	Frequency	Percentage
Control Group	23	51.11
Experimental Group	22	48.88

As Table 1 shows, control group represented 51.11% of the sample, while experimental group represented 48.88%.

Assessments and Measures

Two different instruments, including a pretest and a posttest were employed in the current study which covered reading comprehension. Posttest and pretest were parallel which included 20 reading comprehension items. The questions type was multiple-choice with four alternatives with only one correct response for each item. The pretest and posttest items were selected from ILI books. The allotted time for both pretest and posttest was 60 minutes. For each of the total pretest and posttest performance, scores were tabulated out of 20. Therefore, for each correct response 1 point and for each wrong response 0 point was considered. Moreover, for each unanswered item 0 point was taken into account.

Procedure

This quasi-experimental study took place within three months from Esfand to Ordibehesht. It was conducted in the second term of 1394-1395 (2016). The design of the study was sequenced into three separate stages - pretest, treatment, and posttest - in order to answer the formulated research questions of the study. Pretest was administered in the first session. Posttest took place in the following class session after ten sessions for the treatment. Accordingly, the whole procedure took twelve 60-minutes class sessions. Among the third grade students of the above mentioned school, only 45 were selected for the study. Participants were assured that their scores on pretest and posttest would not be part of their final term score in order to reduce the researcher`s (the teacher herself) affective filter such as anxiety. Since the researcher was the teacher herself, both pretest and posttest were held in the absence of the researcher by the researcher`s colleagues to avoid the interference in the results of the study.

After collecting the numerical values of the pretest and analyzing them, participants were then divided into one control group and one experimental group based on the mean scores of the pretest. Both groups were held two sessions a week on Mondays and Wednesdays. Students in experimental group received the treatment, i.e., they were introduced with discourse markers of what they were, different types of discourse markers, how and when to use them during a series of reading period. The treatment proceeded for ten sessions. After ten sessions for each group, all subjects participated in posttest and the results of data analysis obtained from posttest applied to investigate the effect of discourse markers` instruction on reading comprehension.

Results

Analysis Prior to the Experiment

In order to check the normality of distribution of scores, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality was conducted for each group. Furthermore, to achieve the goal that all participants of groups were at the same level of comprehension ability, a pretest was conducted. The descriptive statistics on pretest is illustrated in Table 3 as follows:

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics on Pretest

Groups	N	Mean	S. D	Minimum	Maximum

Experimental Group	22	6.15	2.30	1	10
Control Group	23	7.18	2.29	2	10

Table 3 reveals that the mean scores of experimental group and control group came to be 6.15 and 7.18, respectively.

Data Analysis

As mentioned before, the primary purpose of the this study was to investigate the effect of teaching of discourse markers on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL junior high school female students. In other words, the results of the study would determine whether teaching discourse markers would enhance reading comprehension of Iranian EFL junior high school female students. For this purpose, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and Independent T-test were run to measure the reading comprehension differences between the groups' data on posttest as follows:

Table 4

Kolmogorov-Smirnov Tests of Normality for Posttest Data

Groups	K-S Indexes	
Experimental Group	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	.62
	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.83
Control Group	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	.86
	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.45

As Table 4 shows, the significance level of Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistics is higher than $\alpha=.05$. Therefore, the probability of violation of normality is rejected hence the distribution of the sample was normal. The statistical analysis of data is presented in the following tables and graph.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics on Posttest data

Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental Group	9.3636	.90214	.19234
Control Group	7.3478	2.24841	.46883

As the above table (Table 5) shows, there is a difference in the mean scores of the two groups. Statistically, it seems that the participants in experimental group (M= 9.36) outperformed the participants in the control group (M= 7.34). The mean scores difference is shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1

Mean Score of Participants in Posttest
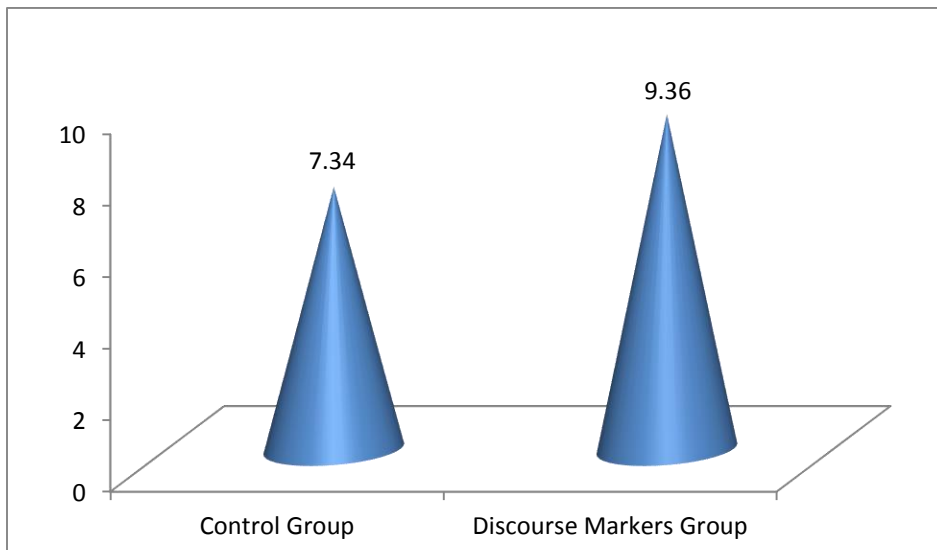
As the above figure depicts, there is a difference in the amount of mean scores of participants in experimental group and the control group. To explore this statistically, the researcher used independent t-test to find out whether this difference is statistically significant which is shown in the following table.

Table 6

Independent T-test on Scores of Posttest of Experimental Group and Control Group

Levene's test for Test Equality of Variance		T-test for Equality of Means				
F	sig	t	Sig. (2-tailed)	Df	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
.77	.38	11.91	.001	43	2.01	.51514

The above table contains statistical data which shows that mean scores of post data were different on posttests, t = 11.91, p = 0.001 (p < 0.05). To put in a nut shell, the obtained result of

the above Independent T-test revealed that discourse markers instruction has a significant influence on the improvement of reading comprehension of Iranian EFL junior high school female students.

Discussion

The research question of this study explored whether instruction of discourse markers affect reading comprehension of Iranian EFL junior high school female students. With regard to the results of data analysis, the study demonstrated that there is a significant difference between control group and experimental group. As a result, the findings of this study confirmed that instruction of discourse markers in Iranian EFL context improves learners` reading comprehension. These obtained results are compatible to the most of studies in this domain. The findings of this study are in line with those reported by Martinez (2009), Ang (2014), and Al-Qahtani (2015) who confirmed that the awareness of discourse markers affects EFL learners` reading comprehension. However the findings of the present study contrast with those of Behnam and Yaghchi (2013) who confirmed that the absence or presence of discourse markers may have no effect on the representation of coherent information needed for reading comprehension.

Conclusion

The present study was designed to explore the effect of discourse markers` instruction on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL junior high school female students. The results of this study revealed that experimental group performed better than the control group. The implementation of discourse markers` instruction in the current study reached to some conclusion. Students of this study improved significantly in reading comprehension. They also found that syntactic knowledge, considering knowledge of discourse markers, was useful in reading comprehension. In addition, they learned how to construct meaning from the text. The findings were crucial in providing information about the function and use of discourse markers in reading comprehension of EFL learners. According to the findings of this study, discourse markers` instruction affects reading comprehension of Iranian EFL junior high school female students.

The findings of this study offer some implications for EFL teachers, curriculum designers, EFL learners, and EFL researchers. EFL teachers are recommended to improve reading instructions for learners in order to enhance their reading comprehension, i.e., they are recommended to be aware of discourse markers` role in reading comprehension and introduce them to their students through an effective instruction in pre, while, and post reading activities. Furthermore, the results of this study demonstrated that learners can improve their reading comprehension better in team learning in which teachers provide help to students. In addition, policy makers and syllabus designers are recommended to offer EFL teachers training courses to enhance their professional knowledge and their reading performance. Also, they may use the results of the current study in order to design reading tasks based on discourse markers. Last but not the least, EFL researchers may find the results of this study interesting to pursue in the future.

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